

*Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*

By Michelle M. Wright. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. 280pp.

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In *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*, Michelle Wright echoes Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic. This concept argues that diasporic countercultures play central roles in re-examinations of western discourses of belonging, subjectivity, modernity, and nation. However, Wright revises Gilroy's patriarchal Black Atlantic model by bringing gender and sexuality forward. Wright contends that black female subjects play crucial roles in constitutions of black diasporic identities.

An additional difference between Gilroy and Wright consists of their forays into the analysis of the formation of black subjectivity. While Gilroy argues that black diasporic populations share slave trade histories, Wright investigates a particular theoretical methodology concerning the constructions of blackness as an abject social category vis-à-vis whiteness. Wright reveals how modern western discourses of white subjects were dependent on the construction of black "Others." At the center of European Enlightenment discourses, advocated by such prominent figures as Thomas Jefferson, G. W. F. Hegel, and Count Arthur de Gobineau lies preordained roles of blackness as a racial "Other." The earliest revisions of these Eurocentric formulations of blackness, Wright argues, can be found in the works of black male intellectuals, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Aime Césaire, and Frantz Fanon. While these black male intellectuals provide alternative discourses of black agency by deploying the negation of their negation (10), their counter-discourses are still problematic because they are trapped in similar logical processes used by Western Enlightenment discourses, namely, dialectical reasoning. Wright asserts that Du Bois, Césaire, and Fanon share hetero-patriarchal assumptions with their western counterparts

by creating black male subjects at the expense of a black female “Other.”

Wright’s alternative model of subject formation can be found in her in-depth analyses of black female poets Carolyn Rodgers and Audre Lorde. Rodgers and Lorde develop a dialogic model of black subject construction in their collections of poems, including *How I Got Ovah* and *The Black Unicorn*. Wright states that Rodgers and Lorde’s dialogic paradigm is demonstrated in the trope of the Black mother. This trope operates within the frame of a mother and daughter dyad, revealing ways subjectivities can be inter-subjective. Therefore, subjectivity cannot be produced dialectically. Wright argues, “Dialogic discourse is achieved through the mother’s conflated position as speaking for both herself and her children – as well as through her children” (143).

It is of great importance to observe that this dialogic model of black subject formation signals a more inclusive diasporic identity. Wright avers that “the concept of diasporic unity . . . bases itself on a dialogic model, in which difference is recognized as a necessary reality for putting unity into praxis and as a source of strength and where homogeneity is revealed as an oppressive and disabling myth” (133–4). By appreciating the dialogic model developed by creative black female poets, Wright successfully fills the gendered lacuna in Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* arguments.