Review: The Atlantic without Africa

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Paul Williams

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This academic profile of the black British theorist and critic Paul Gilroy forms part of the Routledge Critical Thinkers series. Currently comprising close to forty titles, and including writers and thinkers ranging from Hannah Arendt and Roland Barthes to Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, F.R. Leavis and GayatriChakravorty Spivak, the volumes in the series place each key theorist in his or her historical and intellectual context while providing an accessible overview of the scholar's work. The corpus of each author is positioned within its specific cultural and critical background, and from this framework a detailed analysis of the themes, influences, and implications of their major works is engaged, with particular attention to identifying the impact and implications of their major ideas.

Professor Paul Gilroy, an internationally-known scholar of black and diasporic thought, criticism and culture, is Professor of American and English Literature at King's College, London, having previously been Giddens Professor of Social Theory at the London School of Economics (2005-2012), Chair of the Department of African

American Studies and Charlotte Marian Saden Professor of African American Studies and Sociology at Yale (1999-2005) and Professor of Cultural Studies and Sociology at Goldsmiths College (1995-1999). Among his best-known and most influential works are *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987), *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (1993), *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), *Between Camps: Nations, Culture and the Allure of Race* (2000; also published as *Against Race* in the United States), *After Empire: Multiculture or Postcolonial Melancholia* (2004; published as *Postcolonial Melancholia* in the United States), *Black Britain - A Photographic History* (2007), and *Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (2010).

Paul Gilroy's best-known book is without a doubt *The Black Atlantic*, in which he uses the cultural transfers and exchanges wrought by the transatlantic slave trade to highlight the influence of "routes" on black identity. This approach allows Gilroy to inscribe the concept of the Black Atlantic as a space of transnational cultural construction, such that communities who descended from those subjected to the Atlantic slave trade are made the core of a concept of diasporic peoples that views them as sharing more similarities than differences. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Taken as a whole, this volume by Williams provides an excellent overview and analysis of the key aspects of Gilroy's thought and argumentation. Prior to the extended textual analysis, two prefatory chapters, entitled "Why Gilroy" and "Gilroy's Influences," situate the author and critic both with regard to the current and continuing prevalence of racialized thinking in the categorization of human groups, highlighting the ways in which the conflation of racial difference and processes of identification is essentially the product of racial oppression. In the former, also, Williams justifies the idea of a book that takes Gilroy's ideas as its subject by correctly pointing to his intellectual stature, to "his contribution to academic fields in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries." He goes on to cite his unassailable impact "across a wide spectrum of scholarly disciplines, most obviously in black studies, cultural studies, critical theory, sociology and literary studies" (3). Given the many fields in and across which the range and depth of Gilroy's work obliges critics to

take his work into account – whether or not one agrees with his stated positions – there is no doubt in Williams' mind that, in terms of both the scale of his output and the substance of his analyses, Gilroy qualifies as a major critical force. In "Gilroy's Influences," Williams clarifies the formative role played by culture and upbringing as well as to the shaping force of movements like Negritude. Gilroy's youth and adolescence in a presciently diverse postwar North London, and his subsequent formative exposure to the late Stuart Hall and the burgeoning Cultural Studies movement are given pride of place as his perspectives on and attitudes to race take shape in a swiftly-changing postwar Britain. With its range of theoretical positions and cultural approaches, including feminism, racism, education, history, leisure, and welfare, Cultural Studies joined with Hall's transatlantic perspective to engage the complex interaction between cultural practice and academic research.

As an introductory chapter to the essential tenets of Gilroy's thought, Chapter I provides a survey of the principles of "raciology" and of "race thinking," approaches that tend to produce what Gilroy calls a sort of "ethnic absolutism" – whence the chapter derives its title – whereby even though ethnicity here is clearly differentiated from race, any appropriation of its conformist practices would in turn tend to lead to biologized compartmentalization. Similarly, Gilroy is opposed to the forms of race thinking condoned and practiced by Marcus Garvey's UNIA, in large part because "it trades on fallacious notions of biological race" (33). And within the context of recent British politics, one also finds Gilroy opposed to what he calls "The New Racism," in which "riots were read as an expression of black cultural identity" (35). By "contrast[ing] the lawlessness of black communities against the law-abidingness of white Britain, constructing them as mutually exclusive cultures" the "casual language and assumptions of politicians, activists and the press" (36) worked to embed a series of essentialist assumptions regarding the "natural" tendencies of black British culture, while denying the "irrevocably heterogeneous origins" of national British culture (38).

In chapter 2, entitled "Civilizationism," Williams shows how Gilroy critiques the language that emerged out of the attacks of 11 September 2001 in America, specifically the ways in which this language presented the so-called "War on Terror" as "a battle

between two mutually exclusive cultures" (43). As a critical conjoining of racialized characterizations and trace elements recalling the heights of European imperialism, Gilroy sees a virtual recurrence of the philanthropic argumentation that framed a range of African imperialisms, an unabashedly essentialist approach whose countervailing discourse is the supposed superiority of "Western" civilization. Both essentialisms are summarily rejected. In Chapter 3, "Race is Ordinary," Williams analyzes Gilroy's take on "conviviality," the "'rubbing up next to each other" of cultural groups,' especially in Britain's big cities (49). Drawing on a far-reaching analysis of space, Gilroy's point here is that leisure activities and other consumption activities become increasingly, if not prohibitively expensive for the poorer classes as a by-product of "the privatization of space and culture in London" (54). Here, the end result of these deliberate distillations of conviviality is a form of "corporate multiculturalism"; not at all to be confused with its uninflected form, this last insists on enforcing "a blueprint that society must conform to […] and actually locks people into their racial compartments" (56). An integral, if often unacknowledged part of this process, particularly visible in the simplified and direct world of advertising, is the insistence that cultural difference(s), while presumptively equal, remain separate from each other, thereby foreclosing "the history of cultural cross-pollination whereby *all* nations and cultures have absorbed some kind of 'foreign' influence" (57).

Chapter 4, entitled "Postcolonial Melancholia in the UK," examines a set of ideas put forward by Gilroy in his book *Postcolonial Melancholia,* published as *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* in the UK. This book was published in 2004, and so jumps ahead, chronologically speaking, beyond Gilroy's best-known work, *The Black Atlantic*, published in 1993, but its argumentation is thematically linked to the idea of conviviality outlined above. Here, Gilroy broadens the idea of conviviality and applies its tenets to an analysis of the national psychological mindset of the UK from a global perspective. As Williams explains, the dismantling of Britain's empire in the wake of the Second World War, and the concomitant diminution of British sway and influence in the world, have engendered an inability to face up to the resulting lack of

international standing. As a result, for Gilroy, "Britain clings to the Second World War as a defining moment of national identity in an act of compensation for the absent Empire" (61). This sense of bereavement is what undergirds Gilroy's reading of a pervasive melancholia that afflicts the country on a national scale, such that "national glorification" of select historical moments serves to contest the belief that the country is "sliding into mediocrity" (65). Drawing on key aspects of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Williams explains the importance within this theoretical framework of repressing the loss of the love object, resulting in "remembering the national past in fragmented form;" in the final analysis, it is the country's attachment to its lost imperial greatness that determines the aim of "this highly selective act of memory," and its goal is to "maintain the grandiose identity of the nation" (65), an end paradoxically accomplished through increasingly banal and self-destructive acts of conviviality, like binge drinking and the production and performance of satires grounded in cultural insensitivity.

Chapter 5 brings us to the first of three analyses of what is arguably Gilroy's best-known work, *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Indeed, the extent to which Williams has divided his reading of this seminal text into several constituent and thematic parts is a testament to the far-reaching effects of Gilroy's (re)location of the black Atlantic as a privileged if unheralded site of ethnocultural exchange. Subtitled "A Counterculture of Modernity," the chapter concentrates on "the slaves and their descendants around the Atlantic," examining common features of their shared culture, exchanged over time and across political borders in a form of cultural continuity that is "a consequence of their shared history of enslavement and racism" (73). Two of the key influences on Gilroy here are W.E.B. DuBois and C.L.R. James; Gilroy extends and deepens key aspects of their argumentation, highlighting how DuBois's theory of "double consciousness" is a feature of blackness in the New World, and James's principle that slavery and its corollaries were the unacknowledged basis for the Industrial revolution, the Enlightenment, and Marx's critique of Western capitalism. The chapter also features cutout boxes of varying length, providing key background and analysis of the terms modernity, modernism, and postmodernism, and showing how they are related as well as how

they are distinct from one another. The chapter concludes with a salient summary of they central ways in which the African diaspora was positioned as a result of slavery, colonialism, and racism, to inscribe a counterculture to modernity as a result of their paradoxical, dual position at both center and periphery.

In Chapter 6, subtitled "The politics of vernacular culture," Williams builds on the preceding analysis by highlighting performance and performance culture as the bedrock of a counterculture whose most pervasive form is that of music. Gilroy grounds this thesis in the refusal of an innate racial essence, opting instead for the position that "racial differences are not unchangeable but open to "endless play." In a critical gesture, Williams inserts Gilroy into contemporary theoretical debates as he posits this approach as "a variant of postmodern thinking," whereby race is "the product of unstable texts." This series of positionings allows him then to inscribe the "key mode through which racial identity is transmitted and historically preserved: performance," a conjoining of history and culture that recognizes slavery and its attendant terrors as "the *essential precondition* for black vernacular culture" (88; emphasis in the original). Key performative techniques and strategies are discussed, including the sound system, audience-specific antiphony (call and response), and a range of musical forms, including "spirituals, ragtime, blues, jazz, soul, funk, reggae and hip-hop" (94) that together epitomize what Gilroy calls "the politics of fulfillment" (95). The six "typical characteristics of black vernacular culture's codes" (93) that Gilroy identifies – drawn on the past and elaborated in and focused on the present – highlight the core principle of cultural exchange that emerges from the praxes of transportation, confrontation and exclusion that mark the transatlantic black experience. Together, they "keep the memory of slavery alive" (93) even as they "express a critique of modernity" (94).

Chapter 8 completes the third installment of this Black Atlantic survey. Through its subtitle "diaspora and the transnational study of visual culture", Williams shows the ways in which Gilroy's core principle of transatlantic cultural exchange operates through a range of cultural practices shared by different groups of black people. By assessing the applicability of Gilroy's work to the category

of diaspora and the field of visual culture, Williams demonstrates how transnational and diasporic cultural production mediate the construction of "a sense of identity and belonging" (113). In this new schema, thematic and structural similarities between communities are stressed, leading to the formation of new cultural and political entities. Here, the performative acts of "black cultural practitioners" from a variety of contexts are conjoined as a result of "their collective history of slavery and oppression." What emerges from this reading is not only the fact that movement is stressed over origin, but the extent to which the principle and praxis of cultural exchange are not only paramount, but produce new cultural artifacts in an intriguing iteration of Edouard Glissant's theory of creolization; "Travelers and migrants brought different cultures into contact with each other, and new cultures were produced out of this intermixture […] these migrations inspired political movements" (114). From this extended intermingling of cultures and influences, what ultimately becomes clear is that inscriptions and expressions of black culture are not – and indeed cannot be — the property of a single nation.

The chapter that precedes this final installment, entitled "Iconization," looks briefly at Gilroy's assessment of the role of raciological images in contemporary society. His reading of such phenomena as the commercial success of black figures within today's pop culture is an interesting one. Concentrating on commercial visual culture, Gilroy reads "the presentation of blackness as hyperphysicality and bodily spectacle" as a form of exploitation that "transform[s] African-American performers into fixed, static racial icons" (103). This bleak vision ultimately "sees black people as physically superior specimens but not thinking subjects" (104), so that the reinscription of the superficial essentialisms by and through which black people were re-presented seem, at bottom, barely to have moved.

As Williams shows, Gilroy's goal has been to shift the contexts and boundaries of most discussions of race so that they take place in a more "politically astute and ethnically sensitive manner" (3). In doing so, his influence on the fields of critical race studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies, to name only a few, has been both profound and pervasive. Certainly *The Black Atlantic* remains far

and away his best-known and most influential work; indeed, it is almost impossible for any scholar or teacher of the history of Atlantic colonialism, slavery and resistance not to refer to it in some way or other. Yet, at the same time, it is important to note that all are not convinced, and many of the unconvinced are scholars of, or from, the African continent. Indeed, in the Introduction to a recent special issue of the journal *Research in African Literatures* entitled "Africa and the Black Atlantic," Yogita Goyal points out that "But while Gilroy rightly critiques Afrocentric frameworks of return to Africa, he fails to provide any alternative way of thinking about Africa and offers little guidance as to how to extend his particular model to Africa" (v-vi). But such approaches are by no means new; almost twenty years ago, a 1996 special issue of *Research in African Literatures*, entitled simply "The Black Atlantic" and edited by Simon Gikandi, articulated a critique of Gilroy's exclusion of Africa itself from his conception of the Black Atlantic. From this Africanist perspective, Gikandi, in his introduction, recognized the intrinsic value of Gilroy's work as "a revisionist history of modernity and modernism" (1) even as he raised critical questions about the way in which Gilroy elided discussions of slavery from his thesis; for many critics, as he points out, there is "uneasiness about the haunting shadow of Africa in the making of modern culture" as well as regards "his desire to detour historicity as he tries to transcend both European rationalism and its anti-humanist critique" (2). In addition, the critic Joan Dayan, in particular, pointed out that in Gilroy's analysis, "the idea of slavery … becomes nothing but a metaphor" (7). A number of other contributors to the volume also accused Gilroy of neglecting the formative role of colonialism in Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, while highlighting slavery as the primary historical crucible for modern blackness. For the African historian Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, the constraints intrinsic to Gilroy's approach are even more clear-cut: "Gilroy's central concern was to deconstruct the idea of the black race, to divorce it from any African essence or presence, to demonstrate its fluidity, mutability and modernity, and that black Atlantic cultural identities emerged in the transnational and intercultural spaces of the diasporic experience itself, in response to the terrors of racism and out of transoceanic transactions in which creolized and hybridized

experiences, ideas and cultural artifacts, especially music, emerged and were exchanged." (36-7). What all of these approaches share, at bottom, is a vision of Black Atlanticism that practices an exclusionary cultural politics and displays a clear disdain for Africa.

To sum up, then, whether or not one agrees with its central tenets, it is evident that Gilroy's work cannot be ignored or dismissed. What Paul Williams demonstrates clearly in this useful work is the extent to which Gilroy's almost two decades of critical work have (re)shaped critical discourses of race, diaspora, culture, and identity. This is so in large part because of his work's firm grounding in the history of slavery as the central shaping force of Atlantic modernity. In establishing his counter-narrative to modernity and to linear, progressive history, his work compels us to reassess nationalism and Pan-Africanism as well as such contemporary concepts as diaspora and transnationalism, even as we take a fresh look at the intersectional and interdisciplinary relationships among a number of well-established fields.

Works Cited

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