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Against Race, Yes, but at What Cost?

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Paul Gilroy's latest book, *Against Race* (Harvard, 2000), is the third and final component of a series of monographs that began with *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (Chicago, 1987) and continued with *The Black Atlantic* (Harvard, 1993). Through these books, and a number of influential articles and essays, Paul Gilroy has proved to be one of our most exciting and provocative thinkers on race, ethnicity, and cultural studies. In particular, he has reinvented the notion of "diaspora" and linked it to a notion of culture that is both proof against and remedy for what he considers to be one of the most debilitating and destructive aspects of modern cultural and political thinking—that of "ethnic absolutism." In this mode of thinking, people are indelibly marked by a single and unchanging identity; culture is the mere reiteration of the same and unchanging. In this final part of the trilogy, Gilroy ties together and extends the key themes of his prior work: *Against Race* may be seen as the logical culmination of a longstanding trajectory of interests.

Here I will first focus on a few of these themes, and then show how they both form a constellation of issues which have an immediate impact on the theoretical formulation of "race" and at the same time compel us to confront a series of profound questions that have deep implications for not only African studies, but diasporic studies and our study of race and culture in general. To get a sense of why and how these questions are of central importance to this work, I first sketch out the main themes of his previous work and show how he has elaborated

them in *Against Race*. Next, I outline the main components of his thesis, again showing its relation to his *corpus*. Given the primacy Gilroy awards his notion of "diaspora" and diasporic cultures, the two basic questions for this essay will be, What "contains" "diaspora" as a concept and a reality? That is, how to define "diaspora" if not by taking recourse to the very terms that Gilroy wishes to problematize, that is, geography and race? Can we conceive of diaspora without race? Second, how can we think *historically* in the terms Gilroy asks us to in order to go "against race"?

We might isolate five key components of Gilroy's trilogy: first, Gilroy had defined diaspora as a historical concept—taking his lead from the historical event of the Jewish exile, the first recognized manifestation of what will come to be called "diaspora," he previously argued that the transatlantic movements of African peoples under slavery constituted another historical instance of diaspora. Earlier expressions of this argument focussed on the phenomenon of forced dispersal and the designation of the transatlantic ship as a particular chronotope which temporally and spatially constituted the common reality and symbol of the "Black Atlantic." In this later work, Gilroy elaborates the connection between Jewish and African diasporas by focussing on another common bond—the shared legacy of racism aimed against them. But Gilroy does not simply mention racism as an act perpetrated against Jews and blacks, but attaches racism to fascism and argues that both blacks and Jews also have historically engaged in fascist practices themselves. This is most evident in manifestations of intense nationalistic fervor, whether it be Zionist or in terms of certain formations of black liberation. Therefore, the very mechanisms that set diaspora in motion—racial thinking which reduces humans to ethnic or racial objects—are not the sole deficit of non-Jews and non-blacks, but the shared deficit of all human beings who follow racial thinking. And such racial thinking is most evident in the discourses that assume an absolute ethnic, racial, or national identity. This critique is the logical culmination of Gilroy's critique of "ethnic absolutism" found throughout his work.

Second, Gilroy had considered diaspora as a structure of feeling, an intuitive relation to the homeland. The fact of movement out of Africa is a remembered experience, the symbol of

the slave ship persists as a touchstone in which is figured a common historical experience referencing a common origin. What is crucial here is not the detailed remembrance of an ordinary event as much as it is a registering of the effects of displacement in not only sentimental terms, but in recognizing its material historical effects—how has the fact of displacement and enslavement taken various forms historically, how has racism in particular been manifested in this act and rearticulated historically? In *Against Race*, "Home," that form of memory of origin is reconfigured such that it is neither nativist nor fascist. The very structure of feeling that undergirds diaspora is to be opened up to newer forms of identification that necessarily avoid the reductiveness of racial thinking and fascist violence, most evident in extreme nationalistic thinking that insists on situating certain peoples in certain places.

Third, diaspora previously had been considered as cultural practice—as a practised reiteration/reformulation of "culture," with culture understood as the expression of the emotional and material forms of life just described. Emphasis is placed on its hybrid, dynamic, unsettled and open-ended aspects, as opposed to a static, place- and race-bound narrative of "tradition." In *Against Race*, this connects critically with the specific cultural forms which embody and articulate diaspora. Here Gilroy's own preference for music becomes renewed and strengthened. We remember that in his earlier works, Gilroy counterposed music to textuality. The idea of textuality was seen as a key element in modernity, with its obsession for referentiality, representation, and objectification. Such issues of referentiality and representation had everything to do with not only the production of knowledge, but also its commodification. Against the linearity and referentiality of texts, Gilroy posed black music culture as intuitive, multidirectional, resistant to stratification and objectification, and, importantly, a collective and communal enterprise. Instead of a private, individualistic mode of consumption, according to Gilroy, music calls for and enables a particularly contestive notion of "consumption." Music was thus for Gilroy not only the preferred form of cultural expression, but the only possible form adequate to the task of conveying the multifaceted, constantly diversifying nature of diasporic cultures.

In *Against Race*, this valuation of music as diasporic cultural form *par excellence* is located differently in two respects. First, it is now set not against textuality, but opposed urgently to visual media. Second, music as the preferred form of diasporic consciousness is now regarded, regrettably, as an historically past (or at least absent) phenomenon. The two work together. Gilroy argues that blackness today is predominantly conveyed by visual media that fixate on, project, and reproduce in myriad forms a reified image of blackness that is at once masculinist, heterosexual, intensely individualistic and privatized (and that private space is seen as repressive and sexist), and, last but not least, absolutely commercialized. Crucially, these visual "bites" are in no way dialogic, shared, communal, collective, but instead, according to Gilroy, celebrate the individual black figure in a strictly delimited (that is to say, absolutist) manner.

If this were not depressing enough, Gilroy sees this movement in music as well—the same privatized, masculinist, misogynistic, self-centered aspect of visual representations of blackness are dominant in today's music. Hence he laments the near disappearance of the transglobal, humanistic, cosmic progressive politics of Bob Marley and notes their displacement by the music of self-gratification. Music's transatlantic, liberatory capacity has been set aside, its anti-capitalist, anti-textual, anti-modernist potential has been negated. Instead we find a potential for racism and fascism, the twin evils that Gilroy has set out to address and neutralize in this book.

Fourth, diaspora is seen as produced in and by *modern* culture—that is, its nonarbitrary historical nature. The logic that undergirded and drove slavery is part and parcel of a tradition of Enlightenment philosophy whose primary component is a dialectic that at once argued for the resolution of antinomies and estrangement, and yet maintained the basic and fundamental autonomy of race. It was the preservation of this autonomy that allowed for "development," for western "progress" on the backs of racialized peoples.

Whereas before Gilroy's diasporic critique is held up as anti-modern in the sense that it resists national form, embracing instead a postmodern notion of diaspora that refuses to be confined to one national model of authenticity and belonging over another, and sees instead constantly shifting hybrid formations, in this latest work such an anti-modern formation

of diaspora is jeopardized by exactly the disappearance of collective liberatory models and their replacement by absolutist values that shift away from diaspora as a cultural value and form and toward a static, race-centered culture that is allied with nationalistic, and fascist, thinking.

Finally, we have the notion of diasporic culture as *postmodern* culture—again, we find the hybrid articulation of diaspora. Resisting the categories offered to this experience by modernity, Gilroy has characterized diasporic culture as heterogeneous and mixed, hybrid, in accordance with the historical process that has both a common origin and wildly discrepant points of recombination. Understanding diasporic culture as hybrid has not only the positive value of tracing within it the various elemental strands of diverse national and local cultures which make up diasporic culture, but also the negative value of guarding against a modernist reduction of diasporic culture as ultimately belonging to one or another national culture. This critique of the nation state as the proper "container" for diasporic culture of course harks back to the postmodern critique of modern forms of social and philosophical organization.

As Gilroy previously balanced his enthusiasm for an anti-modern model with a caution against an uncritical and ahistorical postmodernism that would subscribe to the notion of an unanchored, free-floating model of diaspora, so in this book he sees the current formation of blackness stripped of any real historical sense. Instead, he laments its retreat into absolutist myths and nationalistic nostalgia. The primary goal of the current work is to dissolve the absolutism of "race": Gilroy proposes that we emulate the advances of nanoscience, which have shown a universal human being in genetic codes which do not change from race to race. This invisible truth of human commonality is set against the ascent of the visual iconicity of "blackness" which silently references a set of behaviors (which Gilroy deems to be eminently heterosexual, misogynistic, hedonistic) which imprisons black culture and isolates it. But he also urges us to develop a very different sense of historical time. In the next two sections, I first detail Gilroy's particular lines of reasoning in these three books, and then conclude by addressing my questions regarding race, history, and diaspora.

Gilroy is concise and clear about the aim of his argument: he demands "liberation not from white supremacy alone . . . but from all racializing and raciological thought, from racialized seeing, racialized thinking, and racialized thinking about thinking" (AR, 40). But despite the originality and force of the particular components of his argument, Gilroy rightly suspects that, when all is said and done, his basic argument—that the human race needs to think beyond "race" as an absolute marker of identity—will be seen as nothing new: "There is a danger that this argument will be read as nothing more than a rather old-fashioned plea for disabusing ourselves of the destructive delusions of racism" (AR, 30).¹ To pre-empt this accusation, he articulates his points of distinction: "All earlier arguments conform to the same basic architecture. They posit the particular, singular, and specific against the general, universal, and transcendent that they value more highly. In contrast, the approach I favor attempts to break up these unhappy couples. It has less to say about the unanswerable force of claims to singularity and particularity that have fueled ethnic absolutism. Instead, it directs attention toward the other side of these simultaneous equations. We should, it suggests, become concerned once again with the notion of the human into which reluctant specificity has been repeatedly invited to dissolve itself" (AR, 30). As if to make good on this claim at the onset, and as a gesture that confirms Gilroy's attention to visual signifiers, this third book conspicuously deletes the term "black" from its title.² And yet, at the end of this essay, I will return to ask whether Gilroy has actually fulfilled this promise, or whether this assertion does not rather outline the difficulty of negotiating that point of tension. What is his notion of the human, where is it to be found, or at least searched for, and what relation does it bear to the "human" as we have previously understood it? This question is especially important because Gilroy declares that his solution is "the only ethical response" (AR, 41). And that presents us with a quandary—for to object to any aspect of the entirety of his anti-racist program (and it does come as a piece), is to risk being accused of being unethical. Gilroy has raised the stakes considerably, and we must then carefully discern what, exactly, the costs

might be of accepting this moral imperative, especially with regard to the social institutions of justice.

It is precisely an unmistakable sense of urgency and of the moment that informs Gilroy's book. What he sees as the general condition of thinking on race, and in particular as manifested in black culture, is the resurgence of fascistic thinking: "The persistence of fascism and the widespread mimicry of its styles constitute only the most alarming sign that modernity's best culture is assailed from all sides by political movements and technological forces that are working toward the erasure of ethical considerations and the deadening of aesthetic sensibilities" (AR, 93). This finds particular expression in the notion of identity: "The reduction of identity to the uncomplicated, militarized, fraternal versions of pure sameness pioneered by fascism and Nazism in the 1930s is now routine, particularly where the forces of nationalism, 'tribalism,' and ethnic division are at work" (AR, 103). In this light, identity ceases to be something dynamic, changing, and, most important, self-fashioned. Instead, "it becomes [...] a thing to be possessed and displayed. It is a silent sign that closes down the possibility of communion across the gulf between one heavily defended island of particularity and its equally well fortified neighbors, between one national encampment and others" (AR, 103).

Throughout Gilroy's work, there has always been the possibility (and reality) of such thinking. He has always been attentive to the fact that racism is founded upon racial thinking, and that racial thinking can not only aid and abet racists, but also, ironically anti-racist forces. For if one side argues the supremacy of one race over the other, the other side can, in defending the degraded *group*, make the mistake of accepting offhand the very categorization of peoples that particularized them as such: "By defining 'race' and ethnicity as cultural absolutes, blacks themselves and parts of the anti-racist movement risk endorsing the explanatory frameworks and political definitions of the new right" (LJ, 13). In his latest book, Gilroy advocates the wholesale rejection of the very discourse of race as irremediably contaminated: "Revitalizing ethical sensibilities . . . requires moving away from anthracism's tarnished vocabulary while retaining many of the hopes to which it was tied" (AR, 6). He urges us to think against race, but in terms freed from the absolutist assumptions of the