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## Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture - Paul Gilroy

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## Review

### ***Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture***

Paul Gilroy. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 2010. 224 pp.

Shiera S. el-Malik<sup>\*</sup>

In this work, Paul Gilroy charges academics including scholars of the African and Black Diaspora with inadequately addressing ethical questions of racial hierarchy. He posits that academics apply a uniquely American framework of racial hierarchy to their analyses of places other than the U.S. The result, according to Gilroy, is that American conceptions of blackness (and whiteness) then substitute for social structures regardless of people's lived experiences. Further, this globalised spectacle of blackness operates in the service of the U.S. imperial war machine. Gilroy argues that the current moment of geo-political restructuring offers opportunities for rethinking the connection between racial hierarchy and moral economy. His hopeful conclusion is that "peace, love and harmony" have the potential to outshine the morally bankrupt and anti-human politics of late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> centuries (177). He aims to resurrect utopian conceptions of society that are still accessible in the work of decolonisation theorists like Léopold Senghor, Amilcar Cabral, and especially Frantz Fanon, while also bringing attention to bear on the humanism that drove musicians like Bob Marley and Jimi Hendrix.

*Darker than Blue* began its existence as part of the W. E. B. DuBois lecture series at Harvard University as a critique of the stagnancy of African-American Studies programs. It is divided into three stand-alone, but related chapters. In his first chapter, "Get Free or Die Tryin," Gilroy uses a political economic history of the automobile in order to illuminate connections between race, commodity and globalisation. He suggests that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of freedom came to be gauged by a capacity for mobility. This "automotivity" occupies a powerful space in

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the American imaginary. Gilroy analyses how car ownership signalled a form of arrival in middle class America. He argues that buying a car is both a form of consumerism indicating participation in capitalist society and a form of consumerism linked to recognition of humanity. His suggestion is that having the capacity to purchase confers a respect that takes the place of recognition of one's human-ness. Gilroy characterises the desire to be "King of the Road" and thus in control of one's own destiny, as deeply attractive to black Americans for whom such control has seemed distant (21). The Depression may have weakened one of the barriers to consumption. One story goes that companies, such as Chrysler, that had been disinclined to sell to black buyers became less race conscious when macroeconomic developments threatened their bottom lines (49). In this way, Gilroy notes, it is possible to suggest that the Depression expanded opportunities for those with money or credit, who could trade their less-than-human (Gilroy uses the term *infra-human*) status for that of an anti-political consumer.

In his second chapter, "Declaration of Rights," Gilroy juxtaposes human rights discourse against anti-racist struggles that supported an extensive notion of rights. Utopian in character, he suggests that the struggles against racial hierarchy were "not amenable to color-coding" or even to gender difference (59). Gilroy argues that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offers an anti-racist variety of universal humanism with her depiction of a society constructed by racial hierarchy. To his mind, talk of rights without a history of racism is useless. For Gilroy, human rights discourse reads the problem of inequality as one of hierarchy rather than race (or racism). He sees the problem as one of how to "manage the contending claims made upon raciality by racism's victims as well as by its practitioners" (87). Gilroy is hopeful that the underpinnings of Bob Marley's utopian politics have defied simple commodification. These underpinnings—or what Gilroy conceives as "ethically infused aspirations" (94)—survive in their capacity to touch new generations of listeners and encourage disalienated human relations. Gilroy traces the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the Wailers as a global phenomenon with the assumption that "every cultural expression compliments [sic] an ecology to which it primarily belongs" (100). He finds blacks scarred by the terrors of Jim Crow, colonial subjects speaking back to a variety of regimes, and disaffected white youth all moving to the same "hybridity, mixture, and contaminating combination" of sounds (105) that evoke a sense of space (not a

specific “place”) in opposition to the oppression of racial hierarchy in all of its guises.

In his third chapter, “Troubadours, Warriors and Diplomats,” Gilroy tries to salvage what is left of this post WWII generation of anti-racist activist artists. Here, Gilroy hammers home an idea that weaves through this text: an African-American conception of freedom still exists, but has been strategically marginalised by the dominant conceptions of spectacularised African-American culture. He contextualises Jimi Hendrix’s utopian notion of freedom and the anti-racist humanist underpinnings in his music with his experiences as a paratrooper in Vietnam. Gilroy suggests that “Hendrix’s reaching for not just the future, but [for] a more philosophically coherent ‘not yet’, unsettled his contemporaries and continues to confound critics” (131). Using DuBois’ idea of double consciousness and Fanon’s intellectual and methodological slippage between perpetrator and victim, both of which indicate that “it is the racist who produces the infra-human object as a racialized being” (159), Gilroy demonstrates the Saidian notion that “purity is impossible” (151). It is in Hendrix’s music that we can see a grassroots, postcolonial subjectivity that touches generations of “dissenting listeners” (133) who are looking to unseat the dominance of alienated subjecthood.

Gilroy is writing to Departments of African American Studies in U.S. universities. He suggests that dominant conceptions of blackness that emerge from these centers are also limited because they limit slavery to morality (the idea of owning a human being) and to victimhood. According to Gilroy, African American Studies avoids slavery in several senses. First, it claims to *own* slavery, which for Gilroy is a global history. Second, it ignores the political-economic fact of slavery. In other words, slavery was more than a personal attack on black people, it was also the outcome of early capitalism’s requirement for labour. The vulnerable were caught up in processes of labour and production that were complicated and vicious. Thus, slavery is about race, but more specifically about racialized labor. Lastly, slavery is about commodities. It made infra-human objects out of specific bodies. In thinking further about these connections, Gilroy notes that the Fanonian moment in which one discovers one’s blackness is an important one, but he argues that academics have to resurrect the “precious narratives of liberation from white supremacy and the pursuit of equality...gleaned from elsewhere” (176). Gilroy thinks that these narratives and arguments that explore nuanced conceptions of

citizenship and community are ones that this current moment might allow to emerge from obscurity.

In sum, this book is a vast theoretical and empirical assault on corporate multiculturalism that centers race without history, on human rights that centers rights without race, and on the geo-politics of sustained conflict in the name of “freedom” that detaches the notion of freedom from its moorings in the experience of slavery and other forms of racialized violence in the U.S. Gilroy supposes that Bob Marley fine-tuned his thoughts on modern wage slavery while working in Detroit’s automobile industry. He suggests that “perhaps from those moments of disenchantment a twenty-first century critique of consumer capitalism might be reintroduced into the vacuum that black political thought has become?” (54). If, as Gilroy argues, black American culture derives from a history of dehumanising practices that were assuaged by the incorporation of blacks into the cult of consumerism—which in turn maintained their infra-human status—then the dominant version of black American culture (the one that is globalised) is also spectacularized. If black American culture has become a spectacle then it is anti-human and stands in for relations between (illusions of) actors. Race as a signifier, then, is part of this illusion and the ethical position must be an anti-racist one. Thus, we need a “better theory of cultural plurality” (164).

Civic unrest in postcolonial metropolises indicates that Gilroy is correct. My question is: can one take the ethical position Gilroy proposes for today’s context without theorizing the embeddedness of *a priori* notions of identity within neoliberal economics—a dynamic which 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers and activist-artists did not have to analyse—and what would such a theory look like?