Journeying to death: Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* has received huge international acclaim.¹ Within American studies, anthropology, black studies, Caribbean studies, cultural studies and literary studies the book has been hailed as a major and original contribution. Gilroy takes issue with the national boundaries within which these disciplines operate, arguing that, as the book jacket tells us

there is a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once; a black Atlantic culture whose themes and techniques transcend ethnicity and nationality to produce something new and, until now, unremarked.

Political energy animates Gilroy's academic challenge. He sets out to expose the dangers as he sees it of contemporary nationalism: whether academic or popular, implicit or explicit, black or white in focus, Gilroy sees it as socially and politically undesirable. Gilroy's concept of a black Atlantic is then offered as a political and cultural corrective, which argues the cross-national, cross-ethnic basis and dynamics of black diasporic identity and culture.²

Gilroy's formulations mesh neatly with the 1990s metropolitan academic climate, which saw the rise in popularity of concepts of fusion, hybridity and syncretism as explanatory tools for the analysis of cultural formation. The 1990s was also a decade in which postmodernist intellectual concerns with language and subjectivity infused both academia and 'new left' politics to create a dominant paradigm of 'culturalism' for the analysis of social relations. This development risked abandoning the tenets and resources of socio-economic analysis. Aesthetics and aestheticism were made to function both as explanation of and solution to social and political processes. For these reasons, Gilroy's book (the aestheticism of which will be discussed later) is a 'sign of the times'. These are also among the reasons it has become so popular.

The 1990s intensification of diverse nationalist movements – ethnicist, secular and fundamentalist – supplies an additional context for the book. Gilroy's characterisation of nationalism tends not to acknowledge such diversity but rather targets a generalised ethnicist nationalism as the only kind of contemporary nationalism, which afflicts both white and black communities in identical ways.³ Hence another reason for the book's appeal to academics. It licenses an easy armchair condemnation of black politics; it enables academics to feel justified in not taking seriously the challenges posed to their institutional privilege and to hegemonic forms of knowledge-production by black and Third-World nationalisms.

If contesting nationalism is one goal of this book, intervening in debates about modernity is another. Gilroy challenges Marxist, economic and philosophical accounts of the development of modernity as a self-contained European process, based on principles and practices of rationality, economic productivism, Enlightenment egalitarianism and wage labour. Slavery, he argues, was fundamental to modernity; racial terror lies within its heart. Gilroy's concern with the racial terror of slavery chimes with a burgeoning academic interest in the experience of Jews under Nazism (the emergent 'Holocaust studies'), a connection that Gilroy makes explicit in the book.

In contrast to some trends in post modern thought which equate the whole of the Enlightenment project with genocide, Gilroy does not reject modernity altogether but rather accentuates slavery as an unacknowledged part of it. I welcome the way this contests modernity's complacency by its emphasis on the inhuman violence and brutality with which modernity is entwined. However the mere juxtaposition of the concepts 'freedom' with 'coercion', 'reason' with 'terror', does not amount to a reconceptualisation or explanation of the relationship between the two spheres. They remain in frozen, almost mysterious association. Gilroy's formulation arguably caters to current academic predilections for paradox, the sublime and the incomprehensible. The suggestion that certain phenomena 'defy' norms of explanation may encourage analytic passivity; one need not attempt to find more adequate norms.

Of the many important concerns in *The Black Atlantic*, I want to focus on two here: Gilroy's conceptualisation of the relations between nationalism, socialism and black identity; and the characterisation of black expressive culture in relation to slavery and political agency. I am interested in tracing the implications of Gilroy's opposition to nationalism and socialism, and his formulation of a black utopian aesthetic premised on a death-drive.⁴

Gilroy's entire oeuvre rejects what he sees as the inescapably absolutist, vanguardist and essentialist currents of nationalism and socialism. However the counter-model Gilroy presents, of an outer-national, hybrid blackness, itself rests on many of the same assumptions. Where Gilroy is a powerful, materialist deconstructor of other intellectuals and their mystificatory, authoritarian agendas, his own project subscribes to a decidedly mystical ideology and a transcendental notion of blackness that retains the very ethnicism for which he castigates Afrocentric nationalism. Because his definition of this emancipatory black diasporism repudiates the potential resources of nationalism and socialism, and proceeds by way of positing absolute antinomies between these respective value systems, Gilroy's formulations become necessarily self-enclosed, hermetically sealed off, resistant to dialogism, dialectical transformation and cross-fertilisation. 'The Black Atlantic' becomes, despite its immense potential, an exclusive club liner, populated by 'mandarins' and 'masses' hand-picked by Gilroy, bound for death.⁵

'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': the emergence of antinomies

Gilroy's first book, *'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack'*, argues black British expressive culture to be fundamentally anti-capitalist.⁶ This anti-capitalism, he contends, derives from a wholesale rejection of productivism. The experience of slavery, and its historical memory, has rendered black peoples, unlike white workers and socialists, resistant to the notion that productive labour and expansionism of productive capacities are the medium, or precondition, for human emancipation. Black music, argues Gilroy, is full of this romantic anti-capitalism, expressed through lyrics that criticise the alienation of the labour system and which

celebrate non-work activity and the suspension of the time and discipline associated with wage labour ... In these cultural traditions, work is sharply counterposed not merely to leisure in general but to a glorification of autonomous desire which is presented as inherent in sexual activity. The black body is reclaimed from the world of work and, in Marcuse's phrase celebrated as an 'instrument of pleasure rather than labour'. (p. 202)

There is much to agree with here. But what I find questionable is the equation of 'wage labour' with 'labour', so that the critique of capitalist

wage-labour structures is becomes a rejection of productive labour itself, or self-realisation through labour. Gilroy's stark polarisation of work and recreation is also questionable. A more fruitful approach to the analysis of black anti-capitalisms might start with the premise that there is anything *but* an antinomy between work and play in this music. In fact, the labour-intensive process of sexual pleasure that Gilroy presents here is fuelled precisely by the notion that labour has a positive value. Gilroy even discloses such an approach, but seems not to notice, when he argues that 'these tropes are supported by the multi-accentuality and polysemy of black languages. For example, in black American ghetto speech the word work can mean dancing, labour, sexual activity or any nuanced combination of all three' (p. 203). The fact that the word 'work' can denote, equally, 'labour', 'dancing' and 'sexual activity' suggests that, far from an opposition, there is a strong affinity among all the activities. What needs conceptualisation is how and why such a fluid linguistic interchangeability between the spheres can occur. And that requires a methodology that can allow for dialectical and dialogical relationships rather than static oppositions.

If Gilroy's anti-economistic approach precludes dialectical relations between blackness and labour in expressive cultures, it also jettisons the possibility of any economic analysis of black cultures or social movements. Black music, and other recreational activities such as sport, are exactly the media most subject to mass commodification. I recommend, then, that Gilroy's analysis is supplemented by an approach that retains the utility of economic analysis in conceptualising black cultural productions. I advocate too an expansion, not rejection, of class conceptualisation. This needs to be adequate to black experience, neither invalidated by it, as Gilroy alleges, nor invalidating of it.⁷

The same expansion I would urge of the analysis of the nation-state. Gilroy in *'There Ain't No Black'* wants to locate blacks as falling historically outside the received versions of the nation-state by cultural racism and choosing to remain outside by choice, identifying as members of diaspora and local community instead.⁸ His intolerance towards all nationisms reaches new heights in *The Black Atlantic*, where his emphasis falls on a black trans- and anti-national identity as an antidote to the pernicious exclusivisms heralded by black nationalism-as-ethnic-absolutism.

Important though it is, Gilroy's denunciation in *'There Ain't No Black'* of a cosily racist cultural nationalism, shared by right and left, needs revision and supplementation. His denunciation rests on a

fatalism – there ain't no black in the Union Jack and there never can be – which ironically operates to leave such racially exclusive nationalism intact rather than capable of being challenged from within, the more so as he rightly sees right and left as united here. This fatalism however overlooks the historically highly contestable and contested constructions of British nationness and nationalism.⁹ In effect, Gilroy's analysis replicates the cultural determinism that he ascribes to cultural nationalists, by presupposing an unchangeable homogeneity of white British national ideology. The more challenging approach would be to work theoretically and politically to foreground the seldom-acknowledged heterogeneity of Britishness through history. And one way to do this is by opening up a comparative mutually illuminating analysis of the languages and practices of British nationalism, colonialism and imperialism. Gilroy, in focusing solely on the interaction of languages of race and nation, forecloses such analysis.

If materialism is useful for explaining and challenging exclusivist types of nationalism, so is the notion of utopia. Gilroy is indeed a big fan of utopianism, but his formulations align utopianism exclusively with outer-national cultural impulses. The utopianism of black music, for him, lies in its expression of a fundamentally migratory identity. And in an anti-capitalism that is, for him, radically opposed to all aspects of the production process. Contemporary Afrocentric black nationalism, however, also has a utopian dimension. This articulates an idealised African heritage to which black Americans rightfully belong, and through which they can in some way transcend socio-economic disadvantage.

Gilroy's critique of this essentialising brand of nationalism is very valuable in its disclosure of Afrocentrism's intellectual fallacies and political shortcomings. Where his critique falls short is in not taking seriously enough the force of the utopianism within it, and recognising its critical, as well as affirmative, relationship to white racist hegemony. Rather than seeing Afrocentrism as a reprehensibly self-inflicted false consciousness, worthy of denunciation, and strangling other possibilities for black political imagination, it might be more productive to find ways to engage with it. And to look at it as a symptom rather than as a cause. My sense is that though some of Afrocentrism can be explained as the product of black petty-bourgeois intellectuals in pursuit of self-aggrandisement – as Gilroy has it – not all of it can be. One would never know from Gilroy's account that Afrocentrism has gained popularity amongst a wide range of black institutions and communities in the context of an ever-worsening

socio-economic crisis for black Americans, in which white racial paranoia and hostilities towards black minorities seem to be intensifying.¹⁰ That broader context has to be considered to have some bearing on the phenomenon's popularity; an exclusively immanent critique will not go very far in hastening its demise.

In any case, I do not consider it possible, or desirable, to eliminate all nationalist ideologies, or cancel national entities as objects of analysis. Gilroy's presumption, in his discussion of Afrocentrism as of white British nationalism, is that nationalism can only be ethnically purist and exclusivist and is incapable of pluralisation. This is questionable. To posit nationalism and outer- or trans-nationalism as mutually incompatible political goals, cultural values and analytic perspectives is less productive than to see them as interdependent.

First-World blackness, intellectuals and Europe

Gilroy's conception of the black Atlantic is motivated, in part, by his desire to rebut the fallacies of black nationalism and white English cultural theory. As he argues:

In opposition to both of these nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches, I want to develop the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective. Apart from the confrontation with English historiography and literary history this entails a challenge to the ways in which black American cultural and political histories have so far been conceived. I want to suggest that much of the precious intellectual legacy claimed by African-American intellectuals as the substance of their particularity is in fact only partly their absolute ethnic property. (p. 15)

What Gilroy then advocates and initiates is a mode of conceptualisation that posits black diasporic identity to be constituted through the triangular relationship of the continents of Africa, Europe and America. He traces the path of this transnational cultural-political formation through an exhilarating series of case studies analysing contemporary black music, the formative sojourns of prominent black intellectuals W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright in Germany and France respectively. Of Du Bois, for example, he argues:

Du Bois's travel experiences raise in the sharpest possible form a question common to the lives of almost all these figures who begin as African-Americans or Caribbean people and are then changed into something else which evades those specific labels and with them all fixed notions of nationality and national identity. Whether their experience of exile is enforced or chosen, temporary or permanent, these intellectuals and activists, writers, speakers, poets, and artists repeatedly articulate a desire to escape the restrictive bonds of ethnicity, national identification, and sometimes even 'race' itself. Some speak ... in terms of the rebirth that Europe offered them. Whether they dissolved their African-American sensibility into an explicitly pan-Africanist discourse or political commitment, their relationship to the land of their birth and their ethnic political constituency was absolutely transformed. The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity. (p. 19)

Exciting though his readings of black Americans Du Bois and Wright are, and highly insightful into the role that travel and European philosophy played in shaping their personal, political and intellectual identity, as a counter to Afrocentrism they are probably limited. Only from a very specific and academic perspective could the affirmation of black debts to European philosophy be argued to be a counter-model of social emancipation. A better way to counter Afrocentric nationalism might be to emphasise intellectual, political and cultural cross-fertilisation of black America with the Caribbean and Latin America; with proletarian and socialist US cultures; with Third-World liberationist thought. And a way to counter the problematic racial purism of Afrocentrism might be to emphasise and explore the significance of mixed-race intellectuals and their cultural texts.

My other reservation about Gilroy's exclusive focus on Europe as space of liberation for New World blacks is that it overlooks entirely the experience of Europe as historically, and structurally, oppressive for blacks from colonies – so well charted, for instance, in the Senegalese writer and film-maker Sembene Ousmane's *Black Docker*, the novel of a young Senegalese aspiring writer who comes to Marseilles, works as a docker and entrusts his book to a white French woman writer who having promised to help him find a publisher steals the book and has it published

to great success under her own name.¹¹ After accidentally killing the woman, in anger, he experiences the humiliation of being denounced as a liar when he claims the book to be his own, and is imprisoned, sentenced to death.¹²

My reservation is less that Gilroy does not take on black colonialism in what is already a highly ambitious and broad-ranging analysis, but that the way in which he conceptualises the black Atlantic is one which makes totalising claims for itself. The identity and experience of New World slave-descended black people is, by default, seen to contain or represent all modern black experience. Slavery is consistently accorded a primacy which colonialism is not. Slavery becomes the prime shaper of black identity and culture and also takes primacy as the structural or ontological deconstructor of Enlightenment modernity.

Conceptualising slavery

If Gilroy's black Atlantic is concerned with the work of 'high' intellectual black writers, it is also concerned with the mass phenomenon of slavery and its impact on black vernacular culture and sensibility. It is this aspect that I want to focus on here, in some detail, since it is from Gilroy's conceptualisation of slavery that his most controversial, most powerful and also most problematic contributions derive. Gilroy's characterisations of slavery serve two distinct if overlapping aims. The first is to situate slavery and its legacy as constituting in black people a distinct 'counterculture of modernity'; the second is to argue slavery as a condition which forces a reconceptualisation of Enlightenment modernity even as it calls the project into question. I find it fascinating that Gilroy seems split between two very different, and possibly conflicting, representations of slavery's counterculture. The first is essentially holistic, in which slave subjects form a condition that refuses modernity's categorical separation of the spheres of aesthetics, ethics, politics and epistemology. As Gilroy suggests:

Their progress from the status of slaves to the status of citizens led them to enquire into what the best possible forms of social and political existence might be. The memory of slavery, actively preserved as a living intellectual resource in their expressive political culture, helped them to generate a new set of answers to this enquiry. They had to fight – often through their spirituality – to hold on to the unity of ethics and politics sundered from each other by modernity's

insistence that the true, the good, and the beautiful had distinct origins and belong to different domains of knowledge. First slavery itself and then their memory of it induced many of them to query the foundational moves of modern philosophy and social thought, whether they came from the natural rights theorists ... the idealists who wanted to emancipate politics from morals so that it could become a sphere of strategic action, or the political economists of the bourgeoisie who first formulated the separation of economic activity from both ethics and politics. The brutal excesses of the slave plantation supplied a set of moral and political responses to each of these attempts. (p. 39)

Gilroy explicitly argues that slaves and their descendants are thus set up to occupy the place of humanity's emancipatory subjects in an unabashedly utopian formulation:

This [slave] subculture often appears to be the intuitive expression of some racial essence but is in fact an elementary historical acquisition produced from the viscera of an alternative body of cultural and political expression that considers the world critically from the point of view of its emancipatory transformation. In the future, it will become a place which is capable of satisfying the (redefined) needs of human beings that will emerge once the violence – episodic and concrete – of racial typology is at an end. Reason is thus reunited with the happiness and freedom of individuals and the reign of justice within the collectivity. (p. 39)

Now, there is much here that I find suggestive. This, notwithstanding Gilroy's contradictory characterisation of slaves' holistic subjectivity as something that they struggled to retain against the pressure of modernity *and* as something bequeathed to them by the very experience of modernity itself. What I find troubling is the next step of his argument, which repeats the polarisation of labour and liberation, labour and art, found in '*There Ain't No Black*', and already briefly discussed here. Gilroy argues thus:

I have already implied that there is a degree of convergence here with other projects towards a critical theory of society, particularly Marxism. However, where lived crisis and systemic crisis come together, Marxism allocates priority to the latter while the memory

of slavery insists on the priority of the former. Their convergence is also undercut by the simple fact that in the critical thought of blacks in the West, social self-creation through labour is not the centre-piece of emancipatory hopes. For the descendants of slaves, work signifies only servitude, misery, and subordination. Artistic expression, expanded beyond recognition from the grudging gifts offered by the masters as a token substitute for freedom from bondage, there becomes the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation. (pp. 39–40)

I find this problematic for a number of reasons, not least being Gilroy's assumption that he can pronounce so authoritatively on the meaning that labour has for these people, a meaning that admits of no positivity whatsoever. I will return to the exclusively negative characterisation of labour shortly, when I discuss Gilroy's revision of Hegel's master–slave dialectic. But here I want to focus on the description of the aesthetic activity for slaves, which is argued to function as their vehicle for individual and collective liberation. For workers, Gilroy implies, labour serves this liberatory function; for slaves, however, it is artistic expression alone that fulfils such a transfigurative role.

I wonder about this aestheticism. Whereas in *'There Ain't No Black'* Gilroy did go to some length to argue black expressive culture to be part of a broader black emancipatory, transfigurative social movement, and devoted a chapter respectively to the analysis of black music and black social movements as witnessed in the 1980s black British 'riots', by the time he writes *The Black Atlantic* he has it seems reached the conclusion that black art *is* black social movement, not one component but its totality.¹³ He does not altogether outlaw directly political activity by blacks, but accords it no transfigurative potential, labelling it instead as expressive exclusively of a politics of bourgeois civic 'fulfilment'. Artistic activity, in contrast, performs what Gilroy terms a 'politics of transfiguration'.¹⁴

Now what has happened to Gilroy's contention that slave counterculture is distinguishable precisely for its refusal to segregate politics, aesthetics, ethics and knowledge as human categories and operations? From the challenge posed by this holistic formulation he moves swiftly, and regrettably, to the less challenging refuge of a traditional aestheticism, in which, it seems, black art is the only authentic repository of this holism, the only category which can contain and articulate black countercultural ethics, politics and knowledge.

Gilroy's refusal to cede political and labouring activity any social transformative capacity is embodied in his account of the master–slave relationship as represented in Frederick Douglass's autobiography. Douglass, a leading nineteenth-century black activist and thinker, had been a slave, and wrote several versions of his autobiography. His first and most famous narrative contains a detailed account of the turning point in his life, when he fights his slave master in a protracted physical struggle. The struggle engenders Douglass's self-respect, masculinity and the respect of his master, who cannot defeat him. Douglass concludes that: 'I was no longer a servile coward, trembling under the frown of a brother worm of the dust, but my long-cowed spirit was roused to an attitude of manly independence. I had reached a point at which I was not afraid to die' (p. 63). Gilroy argues this account to present a radical alternative to Hegel's version of the master–slave dialectic, contending that

Douglass's tale can be used to reveal a great deal about the difference between the male slave's and the master's views of modern civilisation. In Hegel's allegory, which correctly places slavery at the natal core of modern sociality, we see that one solipsistic combatant in the elemental struggle prefers his conqueror's version of reality to death and submits. He becomes the slave while the other achieves mastery. Douglass's version is quite different. For him, the slave actively prefers the possibility of death to the continuing condition of inhumanity on which plantation slavery depends ...This [is a] turn towards death as a release from terror and bondage and a chance to find substantive freedom ... Douglass's preference for death fits readily with archival material on the practice of slave suicide and needs also to be seen alongside other representations of death as agency that can be found in early African-American fiction. (p. 63)

I am not concerned with the accuracy of Gilroy's interpretation of Hegel, but rather with the way he manipulates Douglass's testimony to pursue his central argument of the death-drive fundamental to slave culture, a drive maintained in what Gilroy argues to be the nihilistic orientation of contemporary black cultures. I want to remark on two things here, before going on to consider the political and intellectual consequences of such a theorisation for the mapping of contemporary black counterculture. The first is that Gilroy seems over-quick to convert a *willingness to risk* death into a positive orientation, a desire for, death. The second is that, even were one to grant the persistence of a death-drive in contemporary and

historical black culture, such a desire is articulated, as in the Douglass narrative, within the matrix of a spiritual redemptionism. Douglass throughout his narrative stations himself as a form of Christ, for whom, one supposes, death is not quite the finite condition it is for mortals.¹⁵ Gilroy is so determined to identify death-drive as expressive of a radical nihilism – he bizarrely links Douglass's position to Nietzsche's in its alleged godlessness – that he underestimates here the significance of redemptionism as a condition of Douglass's 'inclination towards death'. For Gilroy, apparently, it matters little whether the death-drive is conditioned by 'apocalyptic or redemptive' sensibilities, as both are the same in their consequences for modernity's rationality, as he argues:

The discourse of black spirituality which legitimises these moments of violence possesses a utopian truth content that projects beyond the limits of the present. The repeated choice of death rather than bondage articulates a principle of negativity that is opposed to the formal logic and rational calculation characteristic of modern western thinking and expressed in the Hegelian slave's preference for bondage rather than death. (p. 68)

It is extremely important to differentiate between the meanings of a positive and a negative utopianism in black cultures. By the time Gilroy reaches his final chapter, it is clear that his preference is for the negative, drawn from his version of Adornian thought and fused, awkwardly, with a Benjaminian conception of modernity as ontological rupture. In this brand of utopianism, only the principle and representation of negativity, and the rejection of a possible 'afterlife' or future earthly life – only these can gesture towards an 'authentic' emancipatory future condition of being.

The emphasis, that is, falls on nihilism instead of optimism; a nihilism through which its opposite can emerge. To give positive expression to, and literally represent, the forms an emancipated life might take (in heaven or on Earth) is to capitulate to the existing forces of actual domination which exercise control (among other things) over the notion of 'representation' itself. This I find both problematic and inaccurate, in the case of slave cultures. Their explicit emphasis upon utopian notions of spiritual redemption, solace and the imaginings of actual future social transformation is overlooked and undermined by Gilroy's exclusive valorisation of the negative and non-representable.

This emphasis on moribundity as the fundamental, and inescapable, consequence of slavery, along with the refusal to grant legitimacy to

modern rationality, is at once politically challenging and disturbing. For all his discussion of modernity and rationality, it is never quite clear to me whether Gilroy is arguing the institution of slavery to be a form of racial terror which is obscene because it *is* rational, systematic, or whether, in contrast, he is arguing for slavery's basis in *irrationality*. The relationship and his argument are mystified and obfuscatory, and all that is clear to me is Gilroy's desire to invite scepticism towards rationality's emancipatory qualities. His own systematic isolation of slavery from any economic context adds to this ambiguity, and his argument at the end of *The Black Atlantic* for the linkage of Jewish Holocaust thinkers (including the Frankfurt School) and their experience with black diasporan experience does nothing in itself to elucidate his position further.

Since the concept of dialectics is refuted by Gilroy's allegorisation of Hegel's allegory, the Frankfurt School's historical-dialectical analysis of the relationship between reason and unreason, and their dialectical linkage of rationality with political economy, is obviously not what Gilroy has in mind when he argues for elective affinities between black and Jewish analysis. Such a dialectical approach, based upon a structural concern with the dynamic, mutually transformative processes of political domination and intellectual production, might be a more productive basis for analysing the connections of slavery, reason and terror than the static, ontological and mystical approach taken by Gilroy.

It is the partiality of Gilroy's death-drive as an account of slavery's counterculture that I want to consider here. Discussing contemporary black culture as derived from the allegedly primal moment of slavery Gilroy argues:

The turn towards death also points to the ways in which black cultural forms have hosted and even cultivated a dynamic rapport with the presence of death and suffering ... It is integral, for example, to the narratives of loss, exile, and journeying which ... serve a mnemonic function: directing the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and its social memory ... this music and its broken rhythm of life are important ... The love stories they enclose are a place in which the black vernacular has been able to preserve and cultivate both the distinctive rapport with the presence of death which derives from slavery and in a related ontological state that I want to call the condition of being in pain. (p. 203)

Blues, blues and more blues, seems to be the conclusion. Powerful though this is, and, I find, a convincing gloss on one component of black vernacular culture, it overlooks – actually, precludes – theorisation of other impulses in contemporary black cultures, which arguably derive from more positive, resistant elements in black political history. So intent is Gilroy to emphasise slave suicide and fatalism (see also, for example, his discussion of Margaret Garner in chapter 2) that he neglects other forms of violent and non-violent resistance practised by slaves, such as the regular sabotaging of plantation machinery and the practice of abortion.¹⁶ Both of these practices are themselves complex examples of the performance of a scientific rationality, which is presumably the reason for Gilroy's disinclination to consider them. As technological and calculated practices these do not demonstrate his desired scepticism towards rationality. In deploying knowledge of scientific reasoning, they refute his contention that slave identity is 'opposed to the formal logic and rational calculation characteristic of modern western thinking' (p. 68).

I would however be interested to consider the legacy of industrial sabotage as a component in the black political cultures of graffiti, and more generally to pronounce the iconoclastic, ironic and scatological aesthetics alongside those expressive of pain and death. And since Gilroy emphasises black convergence with Jewish history and experience, how about researching the parallels between black and Jewish *humour* as a response to racial terror, a survival resource and a means of resistance? Black cultures contain an abundance of saturnalian, ludic and trickster elements. As I suggest above, Gilroy may not acknowledge these as significant modalities because they too are rooted in a form of intensified – and often lateral – reasoning.

As a means of conceptualising New World black cultures, Gilroy's model is richly suggestive. But it is also limited by his determination to present antinomies – between socialist and black value systems, between nationalist and internationalist impulses – where it is more useful to consider these as mutually enabling categories. The most serious question concerns Gilroy's presentation of death-drive in black cultures.

Notes

- 1 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).
- 2 See the critical discussions of the notion of the African diaspora of Robin Kelley, 'How the West Was One: On the Uses and Limitations of Diaspora',

- The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, 30, 3–4 (2000), pp. 31–5; Colin Palmer, ‘The African Diaspora’, *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, 30, 3–4 (2000), pp. 56–9; and Richard Roberts, ‘The Construction of Cultures in Diaspora: African and African New World Experiences’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 98, 1–2 (1999), pp. 177–90.
- 3 A meticulous account of nationalism is Gregory Jusdanis, *The Necessary Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
 - 4 Gilroy’s formulation of a ‘turn towards death’ within black subjectivity – discussed later in this chapter – is more ontological than psychoanalytical. He argues it to have its origins in the historically specific, social experience of slavery.
 - 5 For an important critique of *The Black Atlantic* see Neil Lazarus, ‘Is a Counterculture of Modernity a Theory of Modernity?’, *Diaspora*, 4, 3 (1995), pp. 323–40.
 - 6 Paul Gilroy, ‘There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack’: *The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987).
 - 7 See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), for an example of such an expanded conceptualisation, and see also the journals *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* and *Race and Class: Journal for Black and Third World Liberation*.
 - 8 Different accounts of contemporary black British diasporic politics and culture can be found in Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women’s Lives in Britain* (London: Virago, 1985); Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 259–85. For historical anthologies of black British writing see Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen (eds.), *Black Writers in Britain 1760–1890* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993); Caryl Phillips, *Extravagant Strangers* (London: Faber, 1998); Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush* (London: HarperCollins, 1999); James Procter (ed.), *Writing Black Britain, 1948–98* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Onyekachi Wambu (ed.), *Empire Windrush: Fifty Years of Writing About Black Britain* (London: Gollancz, 1998). For historical and sociological discussions of black communities in Britain see Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984); Winston James and Clive Harris (eds.), *Inside Babylon: The Caribbean Diaspora in Britain* (London: Verso, 1993). For contemporary black British writing see Wasafiri: *Caribbean, African, Asian and Associated Literatures in English*, 29 (1999), special issue ‘Taking the Cake: Black Writing in Britain’.
 - 9 See Hugh Cunningham, ‘The Language of Patriotism’, in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity. Volume 1: History and Politics* (London: Routledge 1989), pp. 57–89, for a contrasting account of the historical variability of English national definitions.
 - 10 In 1993, the year of *The Black Atlantic*’s publication, Earl Ofari Hutchinson published ‘The Continuing Myth of Black Capitalism’, in *The Black Scholar*,

23, 1 (1993), pp. 16–21. He gives some important sociological information: ‘more than 70% of the nearly twelve million black workers in America are still concentrated in clerical, services, and the trades. A sizable proportion of blacks are employed as unskilled laborers. The black median income of \$19,330 is slightly more than half of the white median income’.

When it comes to net wealth, the gap between blacks and whites is even more glaring. The average for white households is \$39,135, for blacks, \$3,397 ... African Americans own less than 1% of the nation’s stock holdings ... By 1990, more than 30% of blacks fell below the poverty ... While some black firms have prospered, most prospective black entrepreneurs still find the door shut when they seek credit and capital from lending agencies or managerial and technical training from corporations.

Overall, the gross revenues for black business hovers at about 3% of the corporate total’ (pp. 17–18). The disparities have grown worse since then.

- 11 Sembene Ousmane, *Black Docker*, translated by Ros Schwartz (1973; London: Heinemann, 1986).
- 12 For another fictional exploration of African migration to continental Europe see Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy* (London: Longman, 1977) which charts the less-than-positive experience of a young Ghanaian woman sojourning in Germany. See also Caryl Phillips, *The European Tribe* (London: Faber, 1987).
- 13 For an analysis of these ‘riots’ see chapter 6 of ‘*There Ain’t No Black*’, ‘Conclusion: Urban Social Movements, “Race” and Community’, pp. 223–48. See also A. Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (London: Pluto, 1982) and *Communities of Resistance: Writings on Black Struggles for Socialism* (London: Verso, 1990).
- 14 See, for example, p. 37 of *The Black Atlantic*, for Gilroy’s distinction between what he calls a ‘politics of fulfilment’ – ‘the notion that a future society will be able to realise the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished’ – and his notion of a ‘politics of transfiguration’, taken from Seyla Benhabib, which ‘exists on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung’. While the ‘politics of fulfilment’ are, he argues, ‘immanent within modernity’, the ‘politics of transfiguration’ ‘partially transcend modernity, constructing both an imaginary anti-modern past and a postmodern yet-to-come’.
- 15 I am grateful to Robert Chrisman whose insight this is.
- 16 On slave women’s reproductive resistance see Barbara Bush-Slimani, ‘Hard Labour: Women, Childbirth and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies’, *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians*, 36 (1993), pp. 83–99.