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# [Mute-edit] million man mail

Dear Eds/Ben

I agree - Marek is looking like a full-on target of critique after his comments about gender as a no-brainer instance of demonstrable biological determinism.

Also, I like the idea of a review of Goldner's book a lot. I will get down to number crunching in a mo' and then we'll see whether there's slack in the system. We'll need to prioritise the proposed articles too.

Just wanted to forward the below response to Gilroy's Against Race book too. This is written from the perspective of a black nationalist anti-racist. He wants to preserve culturally/racially constructed difference and tolerance at the same time and thinks that Gilroy (in the employ of the white bourgeoisie) is a race traitor for espousing racelessness. Although much of it is wack, it does have some provocative ideas in it. Also, makes me wonder about whether MC is really a byword for racelessness a la Gilroy's PoMo notion of hybrid/mongrel identities etc. Also, what forms of solidarity are ok and what not/wotnot? Race as a mechanism to unify tranches of the working class/ descendants of slaves will always be mired in the same white-enlightenment-supermacist discourse it results from, but it is a powerful agent of solidarity.

xxj

Paul Gilroy, Against Race - A Review

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Periodically there appears a book that runs counter to the wisdom of experience in the African American community. Against Race by the sociologist Paul Gilroy is just such a book. Gilroy, a British scholar, who teaches at Yale University, made a reputation in the states with the postmodern work, The Black Atlantic. I see this book as a continuation of that work's attempt to deconstruct the notion of African identity in the United States and elsewhere. Of course it runs squarely against the lived experiences of African Americans. The history of discrimination against us in the West, whether the United States or the United Kingdom or other parts of the western world, is a history of assaulting our dignity because we are Africans or the descendants of Africans. This has little to do with whether or not we are on one side of the ocean or the other. Such false separations, particularly in the context of white racial hierarchy and domination, is nothing more than an acceptance of a white definition of blackness. I reject such a notion as an attempt to isolate Africans in the Americas from their brothers and sisters on the continent. It is as serious an assault and as misguided as the 1817 Philadelphia conference that argued that the blacks in the United States were not Africans but "colored Americans" and therefore should not be returned to Africa. To argue as Gilroy does that Africans in Britain and

the United States are part of a "Black Atlantic" is to argue the "colored American" thesis all over again. It took us one hundred and fifty years to defeat the notion of the "colored American" in the United States and I will not stand idly by and see such misguided notion accepted as fact at this late date in our struggle to liberate our minds. We are victimized in the West by systems of thinking, structures of knowledge, ways of being, that take our Africanity as an indication of inferiority. I see this position as questioning the humanity and the dignity of African people.

It should be clear that Gilroy's new book, *Against Race* is not a book against racism, as perhaps it ought to be, but a book against the idea of race as an organizing theme in human relations. It is somewhat like the idea offered a decade or more ago by the conservative critic, Anne Wortham in her reactionary work, *The Other Side of Racism*. Like Wortham, Gilroy argues that the African American spends too much time on collective events that constitute "race" consciousness and therefore participates in "militaristic" marches typified by the Million Man March and the Million Woman March, both of which were useless. The only person who could make such a statement had to be one who did not attend. Unable to see the awesome power of the collective construction of umoja within the context of a degenerate racist society, Gilroy prefers to stand on the sidelines and cast stones at the authentic players in the arena. This is a reactionary posture. So *Against Race* cannot be called an anti-racism book although it is anti-race, especially against the idea of black cultural identity whether constructed as race or as a collective national identity.

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Let us be clear here, *Against Race* is not a book against all collective identities. There is no assault on Jewish identity, as a religious or cultural identity, nor is there an attack on French identity or Chinese identity as collective historical realities. There is no assault on the historically constructed identity of the Hindu Indian, nor on the white British. Nor should there be any such assault. But Gilroy, like others of this school, see the principal culprits as African Americans who retain a complex love of African culture. In Gilroy's construction or lack of construction, there must be something wrong with African Americans because Africa remains in their minds as a place, a continent, a symbol, a reality of origin and source of the first step across the ocean when they are really not African. But Gilroy does not know what he is talking about here. This leads him to the wrong conclusions about the African American community. The relationship Africans in the Americas have with Africa is not of some mythical or a mystical place. We do not worship unabashedly at the doorsteps of the continent although we have an active engagement with all that it means. Are we always conscious of it? Of course not! You will not find all African Americans walking around the streets of Philadelphia or Chicago or Los Angeles thinking about engaging Africa, yet we know almost instantly that when we are assaulted by police, denied venture capital or criticized for insisting

on keeping Europe out of our consciousness without permission that Africa is at the center of our existential reality. We are most definitely African, though modern, contemporary, Africans domiciled in the West.

Actually Gilroy spends a considerable amount of time in this book explaining how race, a false concept, "is understood." He writes "Awareness of the indissoluble unity of all life at the level of genetic materials leads to a stronger sense of the particularity of our species as a whole, as well as to new anxieties that the character is being fundamentally and irrevocably altered" (p. 20). I do not know how Gilroy can move from this position to indict the African people as the carriers of this anxiety about "race," clearly a concept that was never promoted by African people in this country or on the continent. It is essentially a Anglo-Germanic notion, manufactured and disseminated to promote the distinctions between peoples and to establish a European hierarchy, as well as a hierarchy among Europeans themselves.

I am of the opinion that Gilroy has no understanding of what Randall Robinson means in *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks?* In fact, Gilroy would proclaim Robinson's work of the genre that does not extend "beyond the color line." But it is not color that creates problems in the Western world between African descended people and whites, particularly Anglo-Germans. It is rather a strange belief on the parts of whites that they are superior to Africans, that they have a right to establish and maintain a hierarchy over blacks by force of arms or customs or laws or habits.

Gilroy's notion that "anti-racism" has lost credibility and authority and therefore there has to be a new language "beyond the color line" seeks to get us to renounce race-thinking as a dramatic strategic gesture. The problem with this line of thinking, however, is that those who practice racism, those who support in their workplaces, and in their daily lives the institutions that discriminate against people on the basis of their "races" understand what they are doing. What is absurd is our belief that they are ignorant of the false divisions that are maintained by white racial domination.

It may be true that fascism is a major political orientation of national wills in the last century, as Gilroy contends, but fascism's most daring and dangerous manifestation has always been in white racial domination and white supremacist notions. This is true whether they have been expressed in Germany, Britain, Australia, or the United States. To deplore or lambast African fraternal gatherings without an appreciation of the successful historical reactions to racism and white supremacy in the American public by black nationalism is to miss the point of this century. The most exacting antidote to white racism is African American nationalism where African agency, self-determination, and self actualization allow Africans to live their lives regardless of white racial insanity. Otherwise, in violent reactions or in acquiescence the African person becomes lost in the same madness of race as the white racist.

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One of the advantages of having an organic relationship with the ordinary people of the African American community is that one does not forget what the issues are in the struggle against racial domination. Ordinary Africans in the United States are not wrestling with the identity issues of the elite classes who are seeking ways to express an abstract cosmopolitanism devoid of actual contact with African people. I believe that Gilroy's issues are those of Africans who are trying to de-Africanize Africans in order to make us more acceptable to whites. This was the old canard when the issue was our hair, our skin color, or our speech. But we knew even then that these were false issues and that nothing could please the racist but the annihilation of the African. Unfortunately, instead of the racist having to perform the task of making Africans invisible, now scholars like Gilroy rush to demonstrate that there is something wrong with being an African.

The reality is that any new language about race or identity ought to be straightforward, blunt, and uncompromising. It should say that one does not have to give up his or her heritage, ancestry, or color in order to exist in the world. Why should African descended scholars be promoted for advancing ethnic abstractness. I prefer the language of my late father who said, "if you cannot accept me as I am and for who I am then that is your problem, not mine." I do not believe that this is arrogant or militant; I believe it is the only authentic voice that is necessary to bring about a new language of race in this century.

There is much to applaud in Gilroy's visionary statement about an intercultural society but it is not the "raceless future" aspect of his argument. First, I do not look forward to such a colorless, heritage-less, abstract future, and do not see why anyone should look for it. Only those who have a need to escape from their own histories have a need for such a raceless future. On the contrary, it is much more hopeful that we defeat the notion of racial superiority and establish a broad new moral vision based on mutual respect for all human beings. I cannot believe that racelessness, whether that means racial amalgamation or the obliteration of the African phenotype, would amount to anything except the diminishing of the world. Where Gilroy has a point is his intense desire to counter the rise of European fascism, but I think that he has the wrong idea about how to counter that resurgence. To me, it is not in the elimination of race or races, but in the elimination of racism, the defeat of white racial domination, that we will discover the way to a new humanism.

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