Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*

**Notes on his overall argument:**
Central premise of the book is that we have underestimated the way that black identity in Europe and the Americas is always *transnational*. It must be understood in terms of a series of exchanges and travels across the Atlantic, and it must also be understood in relation to European modernity. Gilroy argues that for more than a century and a half, black intellectuals have traveled, worked, and written in a transnational frame that precludes anything but a casual association with a nation of origin. Instead, they operate within a transnational culture of the African Diaspora. Earlier chapters trace out this transnationalism in the life and writings of Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Richard Wright, and others.

The slave writers always circulated back and forth between England and America. Jacobs and Douglass live in England. Many later writers live for a time in France, and DuBois and others ‘repatriate’ to Africa. There *is* a high degree of circulation and movement in the black intellectuals of America and the Caribbean.

**Three major motifs that are useful to our class:**

**Middle passage:**
Gilroy also speaks to the importance of the sailing ship as a “chronotype” for the black Atlantic:

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship--a living, microcultural, micro-political system in motion--is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons... Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs. (4)

**Slavery:**

Gilroy represents slavery as a shared experience of terror that lies at the heart of the community of the African Diaspora. It is the root cause of the transnational nature of black identity. At the same time, *slavery* and the slave trade was inextricably linked to the rise of European modernity. It was the first major transnational form of trade that established Western hegemony. Therefore, slavery is part of the framework of modernity, and the black writers that insist on *remembering* slavery are also always enacting a critique of modernity in general. [This is what makes the memory of slavery so uncomfortable to many whites; this is why it triggers the sense of guilt]/
Discussion Notes for Gilroy’s Chapter 6:

1. The problem with Africentrism:
   The first part of this chapter is a challenge to the idea of Afrocentricity as a viable strategy for identity in the African Diaspora. This refers to the notion that the children of the Diaspora must claim identities as African. What is Gilroy’s critique of the “Africentric project,” and why does he see it as something far less powerful than “the double consciousness that fascinated black modernists” (188)?

   a. It is essentially locked in “a defensive posture against the unjust powers of white supremacy”, and it assumed that tradition and modernity are opposites as different and irreconcilable as “the sign black and white” (188). Tradition offers a “refuge” against an external threat.

   b. It posits slavery only as a site of victimage; it is what needs to be erased, or replaced by the narrative of “a mystical and ruthlessly positive notion of Africa…. That is frozen at the point where blacks boarded the ships that would carry them into the woes and horrors of the middle passage” (189). The result is that “slavery… gets forgotten and … a black civilization anterior to modernity is involved in its place” (190).

   c. It reproduces a linear, progressive idea of time; it is the story of African Advancement, interrupted by slavery. Thus the story after slavery is a story of a recovery of lost African rituals and rites and a “redemptive journey back to Africa” (193). Kwanzaa is an illustration of this tendency.

   d. What Gilroy is most interested in here is how time and tradition become intertwined with the idea of authenticity and the integrity of the self. These come to be seen as the same thing as political autonomy, and this is a very limiting perspective. What results is “the belief that the contemporary political and economic crises of blacks in the West are basically crises of self-belief and racial identity” (194). He uses the discussion of Shahrazad Ali’s Blackman’s Guide to illustrate this point. Ali argues that the social and economic problems of entire communities are reduced to “a protracted crisis of masculinity” that can only be cured by the Blackwoman accepting her rightful place as “queen of the universe” and thereby enabling the Blackman to “regenerate his powers that have been lost to him for over 400 years” (194, qtd. 193).

   e. Fundamentally, the Africentric position denies the real tension of black experience, which is that “Diaspora time is not, it would seem, African time” (196). The answer has to be more than a simple rejection of the West and a return to Africa; what Gilroy seeks is “building a dialogue with the West: within and without” (196).

2. A Redefinition of tradition
   Essentially, in this section he is summing up his earlier arguments about how he wants to
redefine modernism and tradition.

a. Tradition does no identify a “lost past” nor a reclaimed culture meant to compensate for what was lost in Diaspora.

b. It does not “stand in opposition to modernity”

c. It is the “nameless, evasive, minimal qualities that make” conversations between peoples of the Diaspora possible. It is the connection that has allowed for tremendous hybridization and exchange between Africa and the cultures of the Diaspora.

d. He uses the hybrid flow of musical exchange as the illustration. African music informs American music, which becomes Jazz, which returns to Africa and becomes the Afro Pop of Fela Kuti.

e. What remains constant in this exchange not the content of the music. It is both the central place of music in all these cultures, as well as in “the ubiquity of antiphonal, social forms that underpin and enclose the plurality of black cultures in the western hemisphere. A relationship of identity is enacted in the way the performer dissolves into the crowd. Together, they collaborate in a creative process governed by formal and informal, democratic rules” where the performer is in the role of storyteller (200). It is a ritual of performance that is constant across the Diaspora, and that has enabled the creolization and exchange of music and other cultural arts.

3. How this applies to the aesthetics of the black novel, with illustration from music

a. The novel has replaced the more obvious, vernacular story forms of autobiography. How has this impacted the form of story and tradition being remembered?

b. “the stories which dominate black popular culture are usually love stories or more appropriately love and loss stories. That they assume this form is all the more striking because the new genre seems to express a cultural decision not to transmit details of the ordeal of slavery openly in story and song. Yet these narratives of love and loss systematically transcode other forms of yearning and mourning associated with histories of dispersal and exile and the remembrance of unspeakable terror” (201).

c. “I suggested that some of the most powerful components of what we experience as racial identity are regularly and frequently drawn from deeply held gender identities, particular ideas about sexuality and a dogged belief that experiences the conflict between men and women at a special pitch is itself expressive of racial difference” (201-2).

i. Example of the major motifs in blues music
ii. Ellison’s quote about “a slightly different sense of time”

d. The music and “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 a related ontological state that I want to call the condition of being in pain. Being in pain encompasses both a radical, personalized enregistration of time and diachronic understanding of language whose most enduring effects are the games black people in all western cultures play with names and naming.” (203)

4. **Children of Israel (the broader meaning of Diaspora)**

   Essentially, how can Jewish thinking on Diaspora relate to the African Diaspora? Raises the interrelations between American eugenics and German racial science. Spends a lot of time talking about the politics of this fusion, none of which is really interesting or relevant to us, in my view.

   a. The point is really to get to the question: How do black cultures practice remembrance? How is their remembering socially organized? How is this active remembrance associated with a distinctive and disjunctive temporality of the subordinated? How are this temporality and historicity constructed and marked out publicly?” (212). What part of the memory of terror has been left behind in order to secure the unity of the community of sentiment? How do changes in the ways these terrors are represented illuminate the “shifting, restless character of black political culture? (212).

   b. Discusses the “idea of a special redemptive power produced through suffering” as something that reoccurs in both Jewish and black intellectuals. Discusses King as an example of this idea that black suffering can redeem and transform the modern world “from the truth and clarity of perception” that emerges from their pain. In other words, as with Jewish writing on the Holocaust, black pain is represented as part of the “ethical agenda of the West as a whole” (216).

   c. Crouch’s criticism of *Beloved* as “a blackface holocaust novel” illustrates the resistance to really embracing a theory of diasporic art that considers the intersections between the black and the Jewish experiences of ineffable terror. Crouch sees the parallel as one that is “a theory of black martyrdom in which the downtrodden were canonized before their misery could be sifted for its special, moral magic” (qtd. 217).

   d. Of course, Gilroy questions Crouch’s representation of the novel’s intentions. BUT, he also questions whether there is not something useful in the sort of comparison Crouch dismisses.

5. **What is the point?**
a. Theory is skeptical about the value of “trying to revisit the sites of ineffable terror in the imagination” because it is always a sort of vicarious “warming” of life in the face of the death of another. This has to do with the novel as a form, with narrative theory.

b. But the recent novels that go back to this story tend to really complicate the novel form itself. They particularly (and this is my clarification, not Gilroy’s) complicate the “pleasures” of novel reading. Think about the ways *Beloved* unsettles our habits of reading in those first few chapters. Discuss Morrison’s quotes (219 and 221).

c. What does it mean to say that slavery *begins* modernity? That it constituted an irrecoverable break with the past that gave to the children of the Diaspora the sort of “dilemmas and difficulties which would only become the substance of everyday life” in the Western world a century later?