

Every Little Bit Hurts: Paul Gilroy, Moral Panic, and the Soundtrack of Globalisation

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I think there is a loss there and it is a loss that asks some tough questions about the way in which African American cultures supplies the sound track to globalisation. What counts as American culture in the world is very often, if not always, derived from African American forms and styles. ... If that development is something that DuBois had foreseen, something that DuBois had imagined when he realised that the idea of freedom that African Americans offered the world, something that was going to succeed in a teleological sequence, all the other conceptions of freedom that human beings had developed on our planet.
- Paul Gilroy (Farrar 2007)

This essay considers several related notions that focus on Black politics (in this essay I use Black and African-American interchangeably) and Black popular culture(s) as refracted through Paul Gilroy's wide-ranging and skillful critiques. While acknowledging the visionary role he has played as a theorist and critic, I also want to examine what I see as contradictions in certain aspects of his broader observations about Black affairs in the U.S. I am interested in offering a rejoinder to his critiques of Black U.S. political and cultural projects that he suggests are, among other things, simply or simple captives and agents of capitalism and, therefore, are (1) incapable of offering a substantive critique of its practices and (2) as well, function as stalking horses for U.S. cultural imperialism around the world.

In doing so he follows a school of thought that continues to actively confront and critique U.S. globalizing practices and the resulting hegemonic structures they create, but, at the same time, he misunderstands or dismisses the complicity and enabling practices of other western nations and local actors in nations of the south. More importantly, his contemporary vision of both the political and cultural

landscape of U.S. Black communities repeats misapprehensions that date back to his earlier works on the same topics.

I want to interrogate more closely Gilroy's claim that, in various ways, U.S. Black popular culture, by default, deforms indigenous Black cultures or represents an active form of cultural imperialism in collusion with U.S. globalizing practices. His observations skillfully draw our attention to discomfiting aspects of Black popular cultures, particularly the ways they are commodified and reproduced through various technologies, which is a fairly common analysis that is neither implausible or novel. However, and even considering the relentless assault of U.S. marketing, I am concerned whether he ignores key elements of 'agency' in international communities, and if the implications of his critique views these communities as passive, unthinking automatons who are incapable of making critical decisions about market driven cultural incursions.

I will also try to remind Gilroy and other cultural critics who adopt a similar stance, that the constituent elements of Black popular culture are numerous and extend beyond the mass cultural forms that are, erroneously, equated to the whole of Black popular cultural production and Black popular cultural creativity. In effect, I resist the tendency to adopt the reductive approach that sees Black cultural production as a pathological specimen or artifact of life in the U.S. Instead I ask for a more balanced analysis that considers all of the ways that Black cultural production has been adapted and redeployed for liberatory purposes.

Where Y'All At?: Gilroy and the Critique of African-American Class Politics

You got to speak the language the people are speaking
Especially when you see the havoc it's wreaking
Even the rap game started out critiquing
Now it's all about killing and freaking
All you 60's radicals and world beaters
Righteous revolutionaries and Camus readers

Liberal students, equal rights pleaders
What's goin' on now that y'all are the leaders?
Where y'all at?

This brief excerpt is taken from Wynton Marsalis' CD release *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary* (2007). *Where Y'All At?*, the five minute 'message' from which the above lines were excerpted features Marsalis delivering the lyrics as a 'rap' and, perhaps, helping to embellish his image as a conscious and concerned cultural figure. I begin this section with this excerpt because it, in many ways, captures Paul Gilroy's discontent over the state of both Black popular culture and progressive Black politics. Both Gilroy and Marsalis understand the symbiotic relationship between cultural and political consciousness and that, often, one can discern the condition of one by examining the state of the other.

It is the concordances between these realms as well as their contradictions that seem to motivate Paul Gilroy who has, since the release of *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1991), influenced the trajectory of studies in Black popular cultures in the diaspora as much as any other contemporary scholar. Upon his arrival in the U.S. from London Gilroy expressly identified himself as a Black Studies professor, albeit with a broad interpretation of that designation, and immediately added his voice to the numerous 'new' voices that were emerging in the early nineties. He is strongly identified with the group of British scholars who came to the U.S. during the period extending roughly from 1985-2000 seeking new opportunities to engage in work focused on Black life. By the time he returned to Britain in 2005 after a stint as professor and chair of African-American Studies at Yale, it was estimated that close to 50% of Black British social scientists were working in the U.S. They, like Gilroy, most often referenced the lack of significant interest 'Black issues' in British intellectual and political circles as the primary reason they flocked to U.S. colleges and universities.

Gilroy's writings became influential during this period in ways that both changed the field and offered new perspectives that questioned the way Blackness had

previously been understood. At the same time, he joined a brewing storm in the field that pitted a new group of 'public intellectuals' against a diverse group of scholars, political activists, and popular culture icons who had previously been the dominant voices in African-American cultural and intellectual affairs. Some, including Adolph Reed (1995) questioned the relevance of public intellectuals at a historical moment when political conditions demanded more direct and organic engagements from elite scholars. His now famous denunciation of public intellectuals, *What are the Drums Saying, Booker?: The Current Crisis of the Black Intellectual* (Village Voice, 11 April 1995, pp. 31-36)1995). Gilroy, although never identifying himself as a public intellectual, joined other figures including Henry Louis Gates, Kwame Appiah, William Julius Wilson and Gerald Early in a sustained attack against many of the orthodoxies that had previously defined African-American socio-cultural and political thought, particularly their views on the relevance and utility of 'race' and identities defined by race.

Their arguments were picked up and quickly adopted by elements in conservative political circles (albeit in seriously truncated and self-serving formulations), in the white left and in the conservative wing of the Democratic Party (led by the Democratic Leadership Council), former traditional allies of African-Americans. Although neither Gilroy nor his cohorts are responsible for this breach, their views on race, identity and Black culture captured the imaginations of many who were dissatisfied or disillusioned with traditional Black politics and political culture. A significant number of African-Americans from across the political spectrum also found something to identify with in Gilroy's work.

In a conversation with bell hooks in (1996), Gilroy expanded his field of criticism by focusing on the failure of U.S. Black politicians and activists to theorize and enact a serious response to capitalism and the ways that the Black poor were stigmatized as an unredeemable underclass, a position that does not acknowledge that this critique actually takes place on a continuous basis in every

decade after the 1970's. (Davis 1981, Boston 1988, Marable 1991, Smith and Seltzer 1992, James 1996, Green 1997, Springer 1999, Reed 2000)

In this exchange, and in later writings, he further burdens Black U.S. politics with his own expectations, and complains that, "It's curious for me to come here from Europe at a time when things are getting worse for so many people, and yet finding that the political possibility of a complete break with the economic and social institutions in this country is completely unimaginable." He then distills Black struggle during that period to the iconic imagery that became popular after the demise of black power ideologies:

It isn't just about people writing poetry or making films or a movement that was around 25 or 30 years ago that had a commentary on capitalism, because today those ideas, those images, those movements, those histories are still present, but they have actually been worked on so as to purge this sense of anti-capitalism. Look at what has been done to the black power movement. (Z magazine, April 1996, p. 48)

While it is difficult to argue with his reading of the ways that *imagery* of Black radical politics has been revised and appropriated in the interest of capitalism, It is much easier to distance ourselves from Gilroy's romanticism about Black power which assumes it can only be expressed in the terms of the 1960's and that its *substance* has not persisted in new formulations. Cynthia Young (2006), for example, has explored the local and international political groundings of the Black left in this period and she provides a way for us to follow its continued evolution into the current period that does not assume, in the ways that hooks and Gilroy seem to imply, their demise. Her approach is to emphasize how international exchanges sharpened the analysis of Black radicals and how their ideas were changed and now are more relevant and available to anti-capitalist and anti-imperial political work.

Further into his conversation with hooks, they both seem to assume a sort of intellectual and political exceptionalism compared to other less enlightened African-American elites, particularly those elite formations who have, in his opinion, been able to depend "... on the poor for its cultural resources, for its vernacular, for its language, for its energy." (hooks 1996). From this perspective he is able to extrapolate the elites' lack of consciousness and conviction to Black struggle in general, thereby implying that Black political fortunes are dependent on the roles of these elites. It is manifestly not so. It may be, as is the case with many of Gilroy's critiques, that he agrees with Reed (1997) and rejects or discounts the idea of 'infrapolitics', as suggested by Kelly (1993) and others, where infrapolitics takes into account the everyday struggles carried on out of the limelight and with little acknowledgement from mainstream politics and media. If this is true, it is a fundamental error that is repeatedly made by those who see classical social movement theory as the only way to interpret Black struggles and their cultural components.

Gilroy also errs by confusing the *substance* of political struggle with its reflection in popular cultural representations of politics. For the most part the class critique he claims is missing from Black politics has been a consistent element in Black progressive politics and cultural politics dating back to his own invocation of DuBois. In *Enter and Exit the "New Negro"* (2002), Richard Powell draws our attention to the ways that the Harlem Renaissance was marketed by white entrepreneurs while some, including Langston Hughes struggles with the class implications of 'the New Negro' and what that meant for representations of the race.

The class analysis and critique that Gilroy demands is probably more readily available than he is willing to admit. It has been articulated both in formal academic circles as well as in activist and movement oriented settings at the same time as less progressive prosperity capitalism oriented formations also attempt to position themselves in the Black political imagination. This clash of

consciousness between capitalist oriented reformers and more radical anti-capitalist articulations, a constant historical fact for Blacks in the U.S., has been missed by Gilroy and others who suggest the conservatism of Farrakhan, the Black church and the Black bourgeoisie is a 'resurgent' phenomenon.

Because Gilroy seems to have little regard for vibrant local and regional movements, he is compelled to focus on the commentary of elites versus the informed critiques of these struggling but consistently vital grassroots communities where the most important 'theories in action' are constructed. Whether by default or design, injustices dating back to the MOVE debacle in Philadelphia up to the racial and class bias that was apparent after Katrina, and in Jena, have required an analysis that is as sensitive to the class dimensions of these issues in both the national as well as in the intra-racial context. Few credible African-American have commentators suggested otherwise.

For example, in the period beginning with the reactionary politics of Ronald Reagan, Black civil society groups were forced to reorganize to contend with a virulent form of racism that first demonized, and then criminalized the poor (particularly those on welfare). In addition, a supposed law and order mandate reminiscent of Richard Nixon's administration, led to draconian penalties that were significantly out of proportion to the crimes committed. In the ensuing years the U.S. prison population soared and people of color and the poor were the hardest hit.

The political responses from the African-American community, or from the various sectors within the African-American community, more often than not acknowledged the race-class and structural nature of the oppressive policies facing their communities as one would expect given the demographics of those who suffered the most. At almost the same moment the AIDS epidemic struck the U.S. and briefly leveled the class disparities that were often evident with health related crises. In a relatively short period the structural inequities of the

health system, as reflected in the shortage of health related resources in Black and predominantly poor communities for example, sharpened class contradictions and local communities responded by developing a more nuanced analysis of their conditions.

It is significant that, the first and most effective response in Black communities came from the Black church whose care facilities and AIDS ministries were often the only refuge for the indigent and homeless. Initially these were not the opulent mega-churches that are the implicit target of Gilroy's critique. Instead it was the smaller congregations that make-up the majority of Black churches. Is it too far fetched to consider that members of those congregations, after encountering those afflicted, would develop what Argyris and Schon (1974) call a 'theory in action' or an intersectional analysis that helped them to resolve, or at least overcome, the race-class problematic?

At the same time as Gilroy (and hooks) take exception to what they see as an unacknowledged class issues in the U.S. and in Black politics, they refuse to acknowledge the contradictions in their own privileged class conditions and that of their cohorts in elite educational institutions. Even while invoking Amilcar Cabral's notion of class suicide he fails to take hooks' to task for her defense of the way she and other Black intellectuals are paid relatively exorbitant salaries and speaking fees, and why it's ok for her to have apartment in New York that is expensive, but only relatively so given the real cost of living in New York.

This essay, and the contradictions cited above, is probably the most illustrative of the problems that others and I have with Gilroy's critiques. Whether in close reading or in limited engagement, it is difficult not to see the value of his insights and the broad sweep of his intellectual vision. He consistently provides observations that strike at the heart of the issues facing Black struggle. However, it is the inherent weaknesses of broad sweeps that disables other aspects of his work. When he for example, indicts prosperity ministries and wealth building

strategies, as selling capitalism while simultaneously demonizing the poor he speaks an undeniable truth.

However, his indictment, or this particular straw horse, serves to normalize these particular practices as the most significant vehicles in Black communities when they merely exist besides multiple strategies, a constant feature of Black struggles. The bell hooks interview itself reinforces an unspoken divide that has been growing in Black arts and letters for the past twenty years or so, where additional hierarchies, within the privileged class itself, have been manifested. Unfortunately, the image of Black organizing and struggle transmitted by the mainstream media and taken up by scholars wedded to the idea of prominent personalities and dutiful followers, continue to present issues within the framework of older civil rights organizations and their contemporary counterparts in places like Washington, D.C., Newark, Detroit and New Orleans.

In these cities middle class, gentrifying whites join with corporate capital and the disaffected segment of the Black middle class to elect young, Black middle-class politicians. Gilroy might find the real war against the Black poor in these cities where ambitious young politicians ally themselves with local capital to enact neo-liberal strategies that marginalize grassroots and poor Black communities. These, and old-line politicians who have run out of ideas should be Gilroy's real targets.

Who Stole the Soul?

Banned from many arenas
Word from the motherland
Has anybody seen her?
Jack was nimble, jack was quick
Got a question for jack ask him:
40 acres and a mule jack
Where is it? Why'd you try to fool the black?
It wasn't you, but you pledge allegiance
To the red, white, and blue

Sucker that stole the soul!
- Public Enemy (1992)

Although he is now identified more broadly with developments in cultural studies, Gilroy, like other scholars whose voices became prominent in Black cultural criticism during the early nineties, directly targeted the most accessible and visible, although not necessarily the most relevant, figures in U.S. Black popular culture to help make his points about race, nation and racial politics. His work in *Small Acts* (1993), *the Black Atlantic* (1993) and *Against Race* (2002), included unequivocal attacks on Afro-Centrism and its adherents, Spike Lee, and other cultural and political icons who function as foils as he inveighs against essentialism, the idea of the nation and the political irrelevance of race. At times in these works, and in various essays, he even seems to suggest that the wider diaspora has long expected African-Americans to finally 'get it right' and somehow deploy their tremendous political and cultural potential as an example to the rest of this far-flung community, a burden that no diaspora community could possibly bear.

His revival of the idea of a Black Atlantic has been translated beyond its significance as simply a descriptor for a process of ethnogenesis in one geographic region of the African diaspora and has become the foundation for a new organizational approach within the academy. As the Black Atlantic thesis gained more adherents, particularly in Europe, numerous conferences and symposia, study circles and research projects sprung up and provided the critical mass of scholarly activity necessary to ensure its permanence within the walls of the academy.

Despite critics who see it as simply a ploy to re-situate Europe within Black Studies, it is now commonplace to see the designation Black Atlantic Studies for university departments or programs that have re-organized themselves along these lines. And, naturally, faculty recruitment for these programs stipulate

specializations in the Black Atlantic or Black Atlantic Studies. His contributions in the development of the field parallel important intellectual interventions in the field including the work of feminist scholars, the growth of diaspora studies and rising interest in Black Radical studies. If we follow the central problematic addressed in the Black Atlantic, for example, we can recognize how its corrective stance is carried over into his critique of Black popular culture in the US in later essays and interviews.

Gilroy has been consistent over the past decade in challenging us to consider how we might think critically about artistic products and aesthetic codes that, although traceable back to one distant location (Africa), have been somehow changed either by the passage of time or by their displacement, relocation, or dissemination through wider networks of communication and cultural exchange. This question serves as a preface for several additional problematics that are closely related to his central concern and are equally as difficult to answer. These problematics include the unity and differentiation of the creative black self, the vexed matter of Black particularity, and the role of cultural expression in its formation and reproduction.

To be sure, and despite his pointed and sometimes disparaging critiques, Gilroy must be understood as one who maintains a deep reverence for U.S. Black popular cultures particularly the rhythm and blues (r&b) and soul music tracks that defined the generation coming of age in the period 1960-1980. His reverence for the Black popular music genres that ruled the charts during this period is revealed in full in *Young Black Teenagers Then and Now* (The Black Atlantic, p. 109.), a moving tribute to the sounds that influenced him as a youth in London. His sentimentalism is common to Black music lovers of his age and era (including me) and, as is often the case, he and they forget that much of the artistic production that made those years so memorable also included some incredibly trite and politically vacuous material. His nostalgia for this era and its

music can be contrasted with his disdain for current incarnations of hip-hop that celebrate materialism, misogyny and criminality.

In Question of a “Soulful Style” (Guillory and Green, 1998), the text of an interesting and revealing interview with Gilroy conducted by Monique Guillory and Richard Green, he outlines an idea of ‘rupture’, or break in the evolution of Black music. When Green asks whether hip-hop or other musical forms have some of the same elements of ‘soul’ that was typical of Black popular music in the periods commonly identified with r&b, funk and soul. Gilroy responds: “No. I see it more as a break with the past, as a rupture.” Perhaps the most remarkable passage occurs as he relates the loss of ‘soul’ to the loss of discourses around freedom:

I do see what I would call a changed relationship to the embodied self in much of Black popular culture. We are well past the point where a particular set of conceptualizations derived from religious language in the relationship between the flesh and the spirit, the body and the soul (which gets secularized in an uneven way) were blasted apart. Those old pieties have been replaced by an acquisitive but emphatically post-Protestant notion of individuality and by a changed sense of the value of life and living which suggest that carnal vitality is the most intensely felt experience of being in the world that you can find. P. 253

While posing an explicit criticism of the crass materialism and prurient preoccupations that permeates much of today’s mainstream hip-hop and rap, he also offers a sort of a disclaimer where he acknowledges that he might be harboring a generational prejudice, but then offers a reasoned and plausible critique of why he can’t hear the soul in contemporary Black music in general. At this point his remarks become much more subjective, and his arguments are less convincing when he contrasts Chaka Khan to Mary J. Blige, and suggests that the latter merely ‘simulates’ soulfulness. This point, as well as the comparison, is questionable and one could argue that Blige has remained closer to the soul and

r&b aesthetic than Khan who is much more identified with the vacuous pop that almost destroyed black music in the 1980's. Sekou Sundiata's half-minute reading of Mary J. Blues (Sundiata 2000), provides some insights into the nuances of Blige's music that Gilroy overlooks:

For every lover, and every fool, in the middle of the floor,
Slow dancing across at their own crossroads.
Mary J. Blige in a pool of light,
her face a spirit washed in sweat.
Right hand to God.
Baby, Baby, this I know.
There's a story going down, all night long.
Ain't no wrong can't be coaxed, into song.
So, she gained a little weight, sings in and out of key.
Your voice shakes too when the truth comes through

There are other examples but the secular-religious (and politically progressive) connection that Gilroy feels no longer exists in Black music, is, in fact in great supply. Unfortunately, the deformed values he associates with popular music are also readily apparent and are a prominent feature of markets controlled by transnational media conglomerates. This however, is not the case for Blige or other young soul artists like Lyfe Jennings, Anthony Hamilton, the sadly misused Chante' Moore, and perhaps Dave Hollister who seems to channel the old school DJ Rogers for whom Gilroy expresses a nostalgic yearning.

Gilroy's remarks coincide with the heightened attention given to the more onerous expressions of hip-hop/rap by policy makers, social activists, educators and cultural critics. It is interesting, however, to contrast the way some writers have understood the effects of this form of hip-hop/rap in context out side of the U.S. context, or even within the ill defined boundaries of African-American communities. For example, various commentators have long suggested that hip-hop's audience is predominantly young white suburban males although its influence and sales are evident among almost every income level and across gender lines. Others, including Bakari Kitwana have challenged this analysis but

it remains that white youth are avid consumers of hip-hop while there is little commentary about its effects on their 'cultures' or 'souls'.

Even though many critics assume that Black cultural forms operate like invading species, supply the "soundtrack to globalization" (Gilroy in Farrar 2007) and overrun native or traditional cultures, few are willing to suggest that this perceived cultural imposition does not also provide for various other intercultural and socio-political dynamics. Several examples illuminate this point. Sunaina Maira (2000) examines the ways South Asian cultures were appropriated in the late 1990's producing a new 'orientalization' of India while, simultaneously, South Asian males drew "on the cultural idiom of black and Latino youth, consuming hip hop music and style to craft a uniquely second-generation subculture."

According to Maira, the process of ethnic and national identification devised by Asian-American youth was a specific adaptation to the peculiar "racial politics and late capitalistic economy of the U.S., and of New York City in particular." She sees a specific practice of agency on the part of Asian-Americans youth:

... the recreation of hip hop by Asian American youth suggests that as commodities cross cultural and national boundaries, the "deflections, rejections and subversions that can take place at each point in the economic cycle of production-exchange-consumption" have to be grounded in particular relationships between the "local" and "global," that is, in specific instances of cross-cultural consumption.

Maira offers her own perceptive reading of Daniel Miller (1995) while juxtaposing Indian youth who appropriate hip-hop culture with mehndi and bindi adorned white youths who appropriate Indian culture. She focuses on the interplay between boundary crossing and boundary setting in cultural appropriation and looks to Miller's view of consumption as a moral project:

... built on the possibilities that commodities offer to re-imagine cultural ideologies such as those of "self"

and "other." Miller explains: "Consumption is simply a process of objectification— that is, a use of goods and services in which the object or activity becomes simultaneously a practice in the world and a form in which we construct our understandings in the world.

The usefulness of Maira's approach is best seen in her understanding of the ways that hip-hop fashioning came to define style and symbolize belonging for those in New York City's (and other northeastern metro areas with significant South Asian populations) second-generation South Asian communities who are the creators of what is known as the desi remix subculture. Her critique takes pains to identify the multiple cultural sources besides hip-hop and rap, both local and international, that contributed to this subculture. Yet, as she notes cultural borrowings don't translate into increased social contact and that often the only Black people in attendance at desi remix parties are security guards. Here, the totalizing effects of Black popular culture that is a primary concern of Gilroy is intercepted by racial barriers at the same moment that it manages to transcend aesthetic barriers constructed around racial imagery.

Maira's findings are in sharp contrast to those in Dennis (2006) and in Peter Wade's (1999) study of hip hop among youth in Cali, Colombia where he found that they expressed a strong orientation towards statements about their socio-political conditions following the same recombinant strategies that produced a wide range of Black popular cultures throughout other parts of the Americas. Wade argues that dismissing these strategies, "... also raises issues about the analysis of cultural politics and the deconstruction of cultural 'inventions' without thereby invalidating them as a locus of ethnic solidarity."

Njubi (2001) calls these efforts the "counter-penetration of information technology by people of African descent in the struggle against human rights violations produced by slavery, colonialism, apartheid and globalization. Historical anti-racist movements like abolitionism, Pan-Africanism and the anti-apartheid and civil rights movements all used communications technology to expose the extent

and brutality of white supremacy and to create international networks of resistance movements.” Njubi’s analysis is examined further in an Italian context in Wright’s (2000) ‘A Love Born of Hate’: Autonomist Rap in Italy. Neither Njubi nor Wright concedes Black culture to the pathology approach that trivializes community celebrations of Black creativity (Ostendorf 2000).

We can also follow Simon’s (1998) thesis on Blaxploitation films to get a better understanding of why many, like Gilroy, dismiss the liberatory possibilities of Black culture. Simon is concerned with the manner in which Blaxploitation films were, and continue to be “... reviled for their actual substance...”. He divides the various critiques of the genre into three categories: the political; the psychological; and the aesthetic. The political critique, according to Simon observes that these films were said to perpetuate stereotypes and that they lacked a revolutionary consciousness while, at the same time, promulgated a false one. Persons appearing in these films were said to be complicit in an enterprise that amounted to treason, while those impressionable Black men who paid serious attention to the film’s messages, “squandered revolutionary energies cheering for ersatz agitprop.” (Washington and Berlowitz 1975).

Another set of critics focused on the psychological damage that these films pose to the individual rather than the race. Well-known scholars including Alvin Poussaint and others suggest that Black teens require a means to channel their fantasizing in a positive direction and that carefully executed criminality is too often presented as an appropriate response to the problems of the inner city. Simon then summarizes the aesthetic critique by distilling it to its basic premise: “...the extremes of the genre make it bad art (or) art in bad faith.”

In the summary of his review Simon makes several definitive and related notations. The first has to do with his understanding that we need not make decisions whether those films were/are good or bad art or “spiritually uplifting or politically motivating, or in some quantifiable way beneficial to the identity

formation of the young Black people that make up the bulk of their audience.” Instead, Simon urges us to understand that Black popular cultures or cultural forms occur within a diaspora aesthetic that may or may not serve to ‘uplift the race’ but may, instead, “speak in terms simultaneously more outrageous and more subtle.”

I refer to Simon because he adopts a novel strategy for assessing the ways Black popular cultures affect audiences. As he references gangsta rap and Blaxploitation films he reminds us that we need not receive them in ways “predicated on hierarchies of taste, accumulations of cultural capital, or degradation/deficit models of behavior.”

He argues convincingly that certain forms of rap and Blaxploitation films are ‘marginalized’ within Black cultural criticism as part of a class divide and a type of paternalism where expert opinion (conceit) sees itself as standing above the masses in a protective stance. This ‘privileged insight’ as Simon terms it, “functions as an instrument in social stratification, in its own way ‘perpetuating the flawed model of art as a pipeline for delivering meaning, rather than as a social field for constructing, negotiating and contesting it’”. (Walser 1992)

When Gilroy expresses concern (and rightfully so) for the ways South African youth adopt, what he feels, are stylistic conventions taken directly from hip-hop imagery transmitted to that country via various media, he participates in the questionable critiques that are the basis for Simon’s essay. Simon’s cautious attitude reminds us that there is little evidence that demonstrates the kind of causal, one-to-one correlations between negative content in film, music, or music videos with anti-social or criminal behavior on the part of audiences. By implication he suggests that possible reactions run the gamut from uncritical acceptance of whatever message an audience perceives, to the sincere imitation in the manner described Diawara (2000) and finally to the practice of conscious dismissal that occurs more often than Gilroy apparently believes.

In many contexts Black culture, and particularly Black music, remain influential and are as likely to narrate new politics of struggle as they are to provide the 'soundtrack of globalisation'. In almost all of the areas outside of the U.S. where youth communities have developed an affinity for the music and the cultural structures that surround it, we generally see vibrant new local forms that incorporate the performative strategies of hip-hop, or r&b, or soul to deliver pointed and incisive critiques of their own concrete situations. These practices of youth always threaten hegemonic systems of authority and produce a renewed sense of cultural and political agency.

However, Gilroy, in his rebuke of gangsta rap and its derivatives, provides an opening for the 'moral panic' that is of greater concern than the perceived effects of the music. In a moral panic a group of persons emerge to "become defined as a threat to societal values and interest: its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people." (Welch, Price and Pankey 2003). A derivative of these fears can be seen in recent French attempts to limit or censor U.S. content in their media (Riding 2005). By invoking the worst scenarios for the way Black culture travels Gilroy leaves little room for agency in local contexts, and forgets the formative experiences of his impressionable youth.

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