What Has Modernity To Do With It?: Camouflaging Race in the "New" South Africa

Gugu Hlongwane

Summary

This article explores the place of alternative modernities in the tentatively "new" South Africa. Premised upon Paul Gilroy's theoretical deconstruction of "race" and "nation" in the "black Atlantic", the arguments presented will underscore the limitations of Gilroy's "counterculture" of modernity. Whilst the world is in need of the humanism that Gilroy advocates, "postrace" and "postnation" states are premature ideals for a newly post-apartheid country like South Africa. Present cultural configurations in this country not only suggest the lingering quandary of racism but they make critical the questioning of Western literary prescription. The rather uncertain conclusions drawn on these issues, point to the continuing universal and local compromising of African perspectives in these so-called modern and postmodern times. Forging alternative modernities is a complex enterprise; yet postponing necessary alternatives to modernity will only serve to detain meaningful socioeconomic change.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die plek van alternatiewe moderniteite in die tentatief "nuwe" Suid-Afrika. Op grond van Paul Gilroy se teoretiese dekonstruksie van "ras" en "nasie" in die "black Atlantic" sal die argumente wat voorgehou word die beperkings van Gilroy se téénkultuur" van moderniteit uitlig. Waar die wêreld 'n behoefte het aan die humanisme wat Gilroy voorstaan, is toestande van "post-ras" en "post-nasie" premature ideale vir 'n pas tot stand gekome postapartheid land soos Suid-Afrika. Huidige kulturele konfigurasies in hierdie land suggereer nie alleen die voortslepende penarie van rassisme nie, maar maak die bevraagtekening van Westerse literêre voorskriftelikheid kritiek. Die bra onseker konklusies waartoe geraak word oor hierdie kwessies wys heen na die voortdurende universele en lokale kompromitering van Afrika perspektiewe in hierdie sogenaamde moderne en postmoderne tye. Om 'n weg te baan vir alternatiewe moderniteite is 'n komplekse onderneming, maar om noodsaaklike alternatiewe vir moderniteite uit te stel, sal betekenisvolle sosio-ekonomiese verandering verhinder.

Millennium Blues

In his employment of the seminally heuristic coinage of the "black Atlantic", Paul Gilroy examines various sites of resistance and cooption enacted by communities dispersed in the Caribbean, the United States and Britain through the system of trans-Atlantic slavery. Gilroy's specific focus on the positioning of "new world" blacks in the West strongly implicates modernity in the perverse nurturing of what he calls discourses of raciology.

By first establishing the manner in which "races" were "invented and imagined", Gilroy (1999: 185) then explores the lethal intersections of "race" and "nation" in the furthering of supremacist ends. This hazardous combination not only engendered, through its "race" hierarchies, what Gilroy calls "the glamour of whiteness" (p. 188), but it also resulted in militarised, hierarchical camps (p. 188).

Whilst *The Black Atlantic* (Gilroy 1993a) painstakingly illustrates slaves' puncturing of both racist camps and European rationalities in the "new" world, *Against Race* (Gilroy 2000a) offers alternatives to the raging fires depicted on this book's cover. Metaphorically speaking, these flames fuelled by race-thinking can be disturbed not only through the transcendence of "race" and "nation" but also through the forging of what Gilroy calls a "postracial humanism" (2000a: 37). Contrary to Gilroy's earlier theorisations (cf Gilroy 1987: 247), however, it seems that in this "postrace" climate, "race" is now irrelevant as an analytical category (cf Gilroy 2000a). But there is a sense in which even Gilroy realises the difficulty of his "ambitious abolitionist project" (2000a: 15). In a paper titled "Whose Millennium is This?" Gilroy deconstructs a day conference celebrating "occidental civilisation", a meeting conversely interpreted by Gilroy as a premature lauding of "the myth of [European] developmental progress" (1993b: 153).[1] Here, Gilroy not only points to the exclusions of modernity but he also expresses disquiet over its millennia-hyped "triumphalist overtones" (p. 153).

Gilroy emphatically refuses to participate in millennia celebrations by jettisoning the "triumph" of a modernity that perpetuates slave/master, savage/civilised dialectics. However, in his rewriting of "race" as not only an anachronism but also as an "afterimage – a lingering effect of looking too casually into the damaging glare emanating from colonial conflicts at home and abroad" (2000a: 37), Gilroy's otherwise salient rejection of racial discourses loses its potential power. When Toronto's mayor, Mel Lastman, (prior to his 2008 Summer Games promotional tour to Mombasa) confided to a reporter his fears of being boiled in water by Kenyan natives, these venomous comments could not possibly have been interpreted simply as "lingering effects" (cf Deacon 2001: 47) but rather as real contemporary *hurt* in a millennium that Gilroy himself correctly reads as flawed. It is a

millennium central to a modernism that has everything to do with the still very operative margins and centres of race.

It should be explicated here that Gilroy writes not from a Canadian viewpoint but, at least in *The Black Atlantic* (1993a), he privileges American and European perspectives. His widely criticised geographical bias is evidenced by his overemphasisation of American blacks and the total neglect of racial conflicts in places like Toronto (cf Clarke 1996). What will concern me in this paper are similar selective yet prescriptive theories which end up rehearsing the absolutism Gilroy is so at pains to avoid. His general marginalisation of Africa (cf Masilela 1996) in his discussions of diasporic cultural relationships and a concomitant suspicion of nation-based traditions, clears very little space for non-nativist, nonessentialist cultural recuperations. Zakes Mda's recent *The Heart of Redness* successfully explores the intersections of "race" and "nation" in the mid-nineteenth-century. It would be erroneous to read his cultural excavations narrowly as advancements of notions of racial purity or cultural absolutism. While there is an important celebration of early indigenous African culture in this novel, Mda is also quite adept at seeing the shortcomings of these traditions.

I hope to further extend Gilroy's theories to contemporary South Africa. Specifically, I will focus on the intersections of race and nation in an effort to argue for the relevance of race as an analytical category. This insistence is pertinent to a country where black identities are asked to disappear in the currently fashionable theorisations of creolisation and hybridity. In other words, the "*simunye*" (we are one) "nation" under construction is severely limited in many respects.[2] Gilroy is therefore too hasty in his general dismissal of a race consciousness that can, if approached genuinely, engender the psychic healing of those who were so brutally subjected to the insidious forces of colonialism and apartheid. Moreover, Gilroy's discounting of geography as a petty detail (1993a: 23) only serves to elide strategic postcolonial pan-Africanisms. The premature reading of President Thabo Mbeki's potentially potent pan-African Renaissance as "reverse racism" will show the centrality of both race and geography to the illogic of modernity.

Creolisation or Assimilation?

In an effort to combat a general essentialism in cultural theories, Paul Gilroy makes a "heartfelt plea" against closed categories in which concepts like "racial purity" are honed. In creating an opening for identities "which are always unfinished, always being remade" (1993a: xi), Gilroy suggests the reality of the "inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas" (p. xi). For Gilroy, the "black Atlantic" functions as an enabling site of rootlessness,

encouraging an inter-culture receptive to cultural fusions. At the opposite end of the globe, Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael suggest, in "postrace" theories similar to Gilroy's, that "alongside the closure of South African imaginations there exist [creolised] intimacies and connectivities, other ways of seeing" (2000: 5). Notions of creolisation and hybridity in the above theorisations, then, seem to function as conduits for a progressive "postrace", modern humanity.

Others have made the connection between hybridity and modernity even more explicitly. Kenneth Parker, for example, embraces modernism as a progressive hybridity opposing dominant traditions of white male supremacy in South Africa. However, he does not problematise modernism's racial hierarchies nor hybridity's camouflaging of lingering race problems. Eleanor Heartney makes similar observations in her evaluation of the Johannesburg Biennale, an art exhibition (organised by Nigerian publisher Okwui Enwezor in 1997, subtitled "Trade Routes: History and Geography") designed to revitalise links between South Africa and "developing countries". Although the exhibition was clearly focused on change, read as modernism and as a "multiculturalism grounded on hybrid identity, nomadism and decentraliza-tion" (Heartney 1998: 55), there seems to have been little emphasis on the very operative margins and centres in South Africa which decide who is modern or "developed" and who is not. As I will illustrate, a similar elision of modernist hierarchies is apparent in two specific areas: South African literature and South African politics. In this section, then, I explore the usefulness of creolised identities in these two areas of interest. I consider the extent to which some modernist perspectives mask a race-thinking that severely neglects the socioeconomic shortcomings of this fledgling "nation".

Francoise Verges usefully defines the theories I will be grappling with here. In her study of the racial dynamics of French colonialism in Reunion Island, she establishes that, unlike the term metissage associated with

> racial harmony and reconciliation ...[which] lost what had once been its radical dimension ... [as it] became synonymous with denial and compromise ... hybridity [and] creolization ... insisted on multiplicity, temporalities, excesses, [and] disruptions.
>
> (Verges 1999: 9)

While Verges adopts metissage as a radical alternative to "European racism and the discourse of mono-ethnicism" (1999: 9), Sarah Nuttall and Cherly-Ann Michael (who quote Verges in their notes) distance themselves from creolisa-tion generally read as assimilation (2000: 10). In keeping with Verges's definition, they propose a creolisation that disturbs "notions of fixed identities" (p. 6). For Nuttall and Michael, then, the fiction of Bessie Head typifies a

useful creolisation that explores

> Southern African society [in *A Bewitched Crossroad*] before colonial inter-
> vention ... not so much in terms of barriers, frontiers, margins, and centres but
> as a set of reciprocal worlds of hybridized encounters between individuals and
> societies open to exchange and fusion.
>
> (Nuttall & Michael 2000: 8)

Contrary to the above position, it has not been uncommon in the "new" South
Africa to use racial markers in the identification of individuals. The formal
toppling of the apartheid state machine has generally not erased the colour
consciousness and barriers of this society. In fact, Zoë Wicomb argues that
"not everyone wishes to abandon racial naming: black groups jealously guard
their blackness, [and] coloureds cling to their colouredness ..." (1998: 363).
Grant Farred's reasons for lingering race categories are quite different from
Wicomb's. While Farred does not necessarily advocate coloured separatism in
his theorisation of the intersections of South African culture, sports and
identity, he nonetheless recognises the complexities of what he calls hybridised
identities. His discussion maps vexed identities which cannot be easily
subsumed into a hybridised counterdiscourse. As Farred writes:

> by virtue of being labeled racially mixed, the hybrid subject cannot be a full
> member of the nation, in either its black or its white instantiation; for the
> coloured constituency there are all too few differences between white rule and
> black governance.
>
> (Farred 1999: 2)

Farred's quote attests to a racial naming that has caused significant insecurities.
It is quite difficult, therefore, to simplistically talk about transcending these
gaping chasms so soon after apartheid repression. The very different positions
of Farred and Wicomb show how the so-called hybridised read their in-
between states. In Farred's theorisation, some Cape coloureds who feel racially
superior to blacks, are not totally reconciled to a black government. On the
other hand, Wicomb's analysis of the coloured vote for the National Party
during the first democratic elections does not focus on coloureds' mistrust of
blacks. Rather, Wicomb condemns Cape coloureds in *shameful* cahoots with
a former apartheid party (Wicomb in Attridge & Jolly 1998: 93). Notions of
creolisation, then, clearly elide the felt racial alienation and insecurities of
some members of the "nation". Even Bessie Head, who is given as an example
of a writer representing an accommodating hybridity in Nuttall and Michael,
is read by Wicomb as an artist deeply uncomfortable with her black skin (Head
in Attridge & Jolly 1998: 96-97).

Those who are tentative in their usage of clearly politically loaded terms

like hybridity and creolisation are especially wary of theories made in the West and imposed elsewhere (cf Mukherjee 1998). Although hybridity in terms of cultural mixtures is a reality of modern nations and communities, hybridisation, as Néstor García Canclini points out "is not synonymous with reconciliation among ethnicities or nations, nor does it guarantee democratic interactions" (Canclini quoted in Gilroy 2000b: 48). By the same token, creolisation is not necessarily a constructive alternative to nation-building's "polite proximities" (Nuttall & Michael 2000: 6).

The unfortunate reality is that, even in these so-called creolised times, racism continues to rear its ugly head. The UNESCO World Conference on Racism and Xenophobia, recently held in South Africa, provided an apt platform for the airing of these national ailments. However, a timely opportunity to dwell intro-spectively on this country's well-known experiences with raciology was missed. Salim Vally's research on racial harassment in South Africa's public schools shows the currency of these issues. As long as racially inspired murders continue in postapartheid South Africa, then the whole "nation" remains at risk. As Vally suggests, desegregation in South African schools cannot simply be dealt with "as a mechanical process, which simply involves the physical proximity of members of different groups in the same school" (1999: 72). Such insights into South Africa's continuing race crises point to the diligence required in not only combating discrimination and intolerance, but in working for a revolution that has not yet occurred in terms of genuine societal transformation.

Notwithstanding the suspicion of global theories by critics like Canclini and Mukherjee, the term creolisation is widely used. My argument vis-à-vis these critics is a similar disease with global and local coinages which become impractical in a country where the current language of reconciliation ignores power differentials of a "nation" in the process of becoming. Aside from local systems of dominance inscribed through the language of reconciliation and forgiveness, those who have power are not only profoundly influencing the trajectories but also the configurations of a "creolised" reconciliation. Healing the "nation" is crucial in a region that has experienced unspeakable violence. But reconciliation, like creolisation, is fast becoming a socially vacuous buzz-word. In other words, the unequal local configurations of creolisation have to be scrutinised.

There are hierarchies even in what may appear, to some, to be a depolarised society since in terms of the racial stratifications of South African literature, the Gordimers, Coetzees and Brinks were, during the days of apartheid, "perceived as delineating the 'real experience' of black oppression and resistance" (Parker 1993: 30), while blacks were trusted with "the aesthetically 'less demanding' form of autobiography" (p. 30). Not much has changed. Today Afrikaner poet and former TRC commissioner, Antjie Krog, is the

popular interpreter of nation-building processes. As a white South African, she represents versions that dominate. In fact, Gail M. Gerhart pronounces that "it is doubtful that a better book [*Country of My Skull*] will be written about South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (Gerhart 1998: 167).

The point being advanced here is that the Western gaze influences not only how some South Africans write, but also who is elevated as the modern interpreter who will be palatable for Westerners. These literary preferences which have a penchant for cultural particularities rather than creolised representations are obviously not aligned exactly to Gilroy's brutal Hitler-like camps, but they nonetheless expose the hierarchical tastes of publishing institutions.

Coleen Angove is more optimistic about changing perceptions in South African theatre, however. As a now widely used term, an alternative theatre of reconciliation is described by Angove as one that defies stratifications by depicting "human beings from all racial and cultural groups, communicating, sharing and understanding one another's problems" (Angove 1992: 44). But theatre practitioner, Zakes Mda, insists that South African theatre "is not ... a homogeneous monolith" (Mda quoted by DeRose 1993: 53). The differences in Mda's and Angove's viewpoints are also apparent in the former's disagreement with Athol Fugard's appreciation of the formal qualities of theatre. Playwright Athol Fugard, a modern favourite for the West, is familiar with a country where "large areas ... [have] no electricity, and therefore no television, and where television signals can't be picked up" (Fugard 1993: 392). A sensitised theatre that is cognisant of "events on the street" appears to be important to him. However, even as Fugard maintains the above position, the modernity-conscious metropolitan gaze seems omnipotent. In his interview with Marcia Blumberg and Dennis Walder, Fugard critiques a crude theatre of low standards. He maintains that theatre is

> a fine young craft in America, it's an even more finely honed craft here in London, where your audiences, having grown up, come to the theatre and , by their very presence, their awareness of theatre, challenge the writer.
> (Fugard quoted by Blumberg & Walder 1999: 228)

Fugard's concern is not only with the lack of "sophisticated" audiences in South Africa, whatever this means, but also with the general structural shortcomings of South African theatre. These are the low budget plays which Fugard describes as being "at an apprenticeship level ... [and therefore unlikely] to travel outside of South Africa" (Fugard 1993: 393).[3]

High budget theatre would require an audience able to cover the costs of production. In *polarised* South Africa, theatres are often half empty because of high ticket prices. As Zakes Mda observed in his lecture at York University,

instead of lowering prices, places like the Johannesburg Civic Theatre, now run on business lines by the new management, tries to give theatre-goers a feeling of being in *modern* New York City. While "the main stage is named after [ex-president Nelson] Mandela, the rest of the stages and restaurants carry such New York names as Off-Broadway Bytes and Spencer's Showbiz Bar" (Mda: 2001: 13). In a society that is already so immersed in American culture, Mda's theatre for development is not interested in re-creating American staples. Mostly mobile, his theatre not only facilitates dialogue between societal centres and peripheries, but it also "utiliz[es] the people's own performance modes" (Mda quoted by Attridge & Jolly 1998: 259).

The globalising language of hybridity and creolisation is not only problematic in literature but is, for some critics, a shortcoming of President Thabo Mbeki's Africanist philosophies. The Africanist thrust in the ANC's language of nation-building is best understood within a general spirit of an African Renaissance concerned with not only the cultural and economic rejuvenation of South Africa but also the rebirth of Africa as a whole. In numerous of his addresses, Mbeki, the main proponent of this Renaissance, has confronted the skeptics with an idea of a South African "revolution" (1998: 38) that will help to usher "an African century" (p. 204). It is in this context that Mbeki's "I am an African" speech was delivered in 1996 on the occasion of the adoption of the South African Constitution Bill.

In his embrace of polyphonic South Africans, Mbeki alluded to his creolised identity formed by "migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land" (Mbeki 1998: 32), an identity similarly shaped by those from India and China. Mbeki's definition of a creolised African was not premised on apartheid's racial categories but, as he explained, his was a definition rooted in "a firm assertion made by ourselves that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white" (p. 34).

Mbeki's philosophies have received diverse interpretation from South African critics. Referring specifically to the 1998 African Renaissance Conference spearheaded by Mbeki, Makgoba refers to this gathering of about four hundred and seventy people as "historic because it was the first such conference held in South Africa ..." (Makgoba 1999: i). The Renaissance is also read constructively as one cognisant of a "nonracialising and creolising world" (p. ix). Kwesi Prah similarly acknowledges "creolisation ... [as] a constant feature in all cultural areas"; however, he asserts that "it would ... be wrong to suggest, as some like to do, that creolisation is the main trend in African cultural evolution ..." (Prah quoted by Makgoba 1999: 39). Kgaphola, Seepe and Mthembu were more emphatic in their responses. Aside from the high cost of a conference that lacked conceptual clarity, they were especially disturbed by the gathering's marginalisation of race issues. Hence, their question: "If Africa has been creolised beyond redemption, why even talk

about an African Renaissance?" (Kgaphola et al.1999: 63).

As I will illustrate in the next section, Thabo Mbeki has vacillated between a creolised "nation" and a racially polarised South Africa. By the time he delivered his "South Africa: Two Nations" speech at the opening of the debate on reconciliation and nation-building in Cape Town's National Assembly, race presided over creolised alternative identities. Whilst President Mbeki harped on South Africa's racial disparities in the above latter speech, he has not directly answered the question raised by Kgaphola et al. regarding the place of creolisation in the African Renaissance. In an indirect but nonetheless relevant, albeit nonchalant answer to Kgaphola et al.'s question, Kwame Anthony Appiah supports cultural fusions similar to those privileged by Gilroy:

> If there is a lesson in the broad shape of this circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other, that there is no longer a fully autochthonous echt-African culture awaiting salvage by our artists ....
> (Appiah 1992: 155)

I would agree with Appiah in terms of nativist perspectives that are probably not helpful in cultural recoveries. Just like "the people" evoked in Frantz Fanon's essay, "On National Culture", the past is a "zone of occult instability" ([1961]1968: 227) not wholly accessible. But what theories of cultural contamination and creolisation overlook, however, is the *nature* of the contamination. Global discourses have alerted us to the contamination or cultural fusions that are acceptable and those that are not. In truth, people refuse contamination, especially of the African type. Daniel Herwitz's comments will illustrate this point in the final section of this paper. In other words, the modern contamination that Appiah celebrates is not only one-sided but is assimilative in its dominance.

Nations and Camps

The "new" postapartheid "nation" is inclusive on paper. But in reality, different cultural groups pull in their own directions. These realities reveal in-built tensions of multicultural societies where different groups are polarised rather than creolised.[4] Whilst the discourses of nation-building premised on reconciliation and forgiveness have somewhat contributed to the writing of a new postapartheid chapter, the widely fashionable practice of public atonement has sometimes functioned as yet another global imposition on this hardly ten-year-old democracy. At a colloquium held at the University of the Witwatersrand in August 1998, South African critic Leon de Kock observed the importance of South Africa in these now international discourses of reconcilia-

tion. He refers to a suggestion made by Jorn Rusen (a non-South African) who "forcefully suggested to South African delegates that they, as South Africans, *needed* a master narrative, a 'rainbow nation' type of governing motif that would frame everyone's energies within the miraculous new nation" (De Kock 2001: 289).

In the above quote, De Kock critiques Western literary prescription and bullying. Like Rusen, however, Gilroy similarly makes sweeping generalisations about how other places around the world should negotiate their way towards a "postnation" reconciliation, away from "solidarity sanctioned by the territorial regimes of the nation-state" (Gilroy 2000a: 111). While Gilroy remains mostly critical of the nation-state and the idea of homogenous nations, he does look forward to "a more refined political language for dealing with ... crucial issues of identity, kinship, [and] generation ..." (1993a: 31). Although he argues that he is not against the nation per se but against "the rhetoric of cultural insiderism" (1993b: 72), his proposed alternatives to the nation and the nation-state are quite vague.

Before teasing-out Gilroy's suggested counterdiscourses, I will dwell a little on Thabo Mbeki's treatment of modernist hierarchical features of national and racial formations which Gilroy calls "camps." Mbeki, who has called the proponents of apartheid "[a] gang of butchers" (1998: 7), has been equally vocal in his criticism of postapartheid stratifications. Now, while Mbeki has said that he had "absolutely no doubt" (p. 114) that South Africa would "realize ... [its] dream" (p. 114) of a "new" South Africa, this viewpoint has not always been consistently maintained. In his "two nations" speech, Mbeki argued that South Africans were not only failing to reconcile successfully but were struggling to "becom[e] one nation" (1998: 72). The optimism behind the "I am an African" speech of 1996 which celebrated cultural creolisations had, by the time of the latter speech, deteriorated into a mere "mirage" (p. 72). Mbeki's view was now of a South Africa that divided into two nations: one white, rich and with ready access to "a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure" (p. 71), and the other, black, described as not only poor but as lacking access to the above infrastructure (p. 72).

Although Mbeki's analyses of a racialised social fabric are quite accurate, the class dynamics of these stratifications are eschewed. The ANC's reconstructive economic policies, designed to remedy stark imbalances between blacks and whites, rightly call on whites to make the necessary economic sacrifices in order "to help underwrite the upliftment of the poor" (p. 74). However, Mbeki's speech is silent on the black elite who may not be as economically powerful as white South Africans in the same class, but who nonetheless need to make similar sacrifices and commitments. As Gilroy rightly points out, the "nation" and its implicated elite "should have no special

privileges in the process of its production and enjoy no immunity from prosecution" (Gilroy 1993b: 69).

While Gilroy's confrontation of hierarchical national "camps" is crucial for his "postrace" humanism, one can't *simply* transcend hierarchies. In organising against the formidable camp of white privilege in South Africa, countercamps are required as a starting point towards the achievement of more equitable socio-economic structures. Although Gilroy is critical of former President Nelson Mandela's 1994 inauguration speech, specifically his evocation of a rooted camp-like belonging and national solidarity, he has, elsewhere, curiously and prematurely celebrated South Africa's transcendence of camp-mentalities. In an interview with bell hooks, Gilroy wonders

> whether the experience of what has been happening there [South Africa] isn't a resource that we could use a lot more in making sense of some of the things around us in the other overdeveloped countries undergoing processes of de-industrialization.
>
> (Gilroy 1993b: 220)

His vagueness regarding "their educational system which is being engaged in there" (Gilroy 1993b: 220) seems, to me, to rehearse the romanticism that he generally ascribes to practices of nation-building. As Vally's research illuminates, the "creole counter-discourse" suggested by Gilroy as an alternative to the "alchemy of nationalisms" (1993a: 31) is not yet taking root in some of South Africa's racially divided schools.

Alternative Modernities and Discontents

Gilroy does not forge alternative modernities in the sense that his hermeneutics do not aggressively counter modernism. His interests lie not with a counter-discourse but a "counterculture" that, through the shifting of Manichean boundaries, "partially transcend[s] modernity, constructing both an imaginary anti-modern past and a postmodern yet-to-come ..." (1993a: 37). My discussion here will grapple with the relevance of three related aspects of Gilroy's "counterculture": the diaspora as an alternative modernity outside the rooted nation-state, the place of Africa in modernist discourses of geography and finally, the role of African humanism, *ubuntu*, as a possible counter to modernity.

Gilroy explains that "diaspora demands the recognition of interculture" (1999: 190). In other words, the diaspora as a site encompassing those dispersed through trans-Atlantic slavery, "opposes the camp where it becomes comfortable in the in-between locations that camp thinking deprives of any

significance" (p.191). In its interstice position, the diaspora is curiously beyond rooted belonging. While the concept of ideas and places open to evolution is welcome, it is also safe to assume that the diaspora is not a uniform entity. The point I want to make here is that the majority of black South Africans today are rootless not because of choice. Put more succinctly, the land issue is, to date, the most painfully unresolved aspect of the reconstruction that Gilroy is so quick to ascribe to South Africa.

Interestingly, Nelson Mandela is criticised for his inaugural language of a fixed belonging, his nationalist embrace of the beauty of the South African land, free from bloodshed, at least at that particular juncture. Instead of appreciating understandable high emotions of a people finally emerging from three centuries of white domination, Gilroy instead invites the reader "to consider what might be gained if the powerful claims of soil, roots, and territory could be set aside" (2000a: 111). Gilroy's reckless invitation seems premised on "black Atlantic" intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright who, in their capacities as economically privileged nomads and travellers, consistently rejected borders. Although it is made quite apparent that geography is irrelevant for people in the diaspora, Gilroy *is* aware of the potency of colour in international border wars. He is very critical of the quickness with which white South African runner, Zola Budd, was granted British citizenship only ten days after submitting her application (1987: 62). Geography, then, is not as petty as Gilroy might think, even as he maintains that "it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at" (1993b: 120). Neither is a postapartheid nationalism a process that can be dismissed with a simple stroke of a pen. Although absolutist nationalisms have seriously detained meaningful change in many places around the world, Gilroy's criticisms weigh too heavily on the side of extreme cases, on "white supremacists and black nationalists, Klansmen, Nazis, neo-Nazis and ethnic absolutists, Zionists and anti-semites" (2000a: 219). The inclusion of black nationalists in the above "camp" suggests a homogeneity that cancels power differentials.

While Gilroy is critical of the "homogeneity and hypersimilarity" demanded by African-American rap artists like Ice Cube (2000a: 236-237), he does also focus on diasporic solidarities that are not fascist. Unlike nationalists elsewhere, some black expressive cultures in Britain largely show "the dimensions of black oppositional practice which are not reducible to the narrow idea of anti-racism" (1987: 154). The dread culture of Rastafarianism is given as an example of "a radical politics capable of universalising the issue of emancipation beyond the primary question of racial or ethnic particularity" (Gilroy 1987: 198).

In my understanding of Gilroy's enunciations, then, some diasporic identities are, even in constructive moments of solidarity, free from "the perilous pronoun 'we' ... [and] the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that [this

word] ... cannot help creating" (2000a: 99). Exclusive solidarities *should* be questioned. However, I continue to feel uneasy with Gilroy's selective critique which seems to disregard culturally recuperative postcolonial nationalisms in South Africa, for example, in the service of a second phase of the liberation struggle. An embrace of non-nativist indigenous systems of knowledge can spark a much-needed nationalism for a people just emerging from centuries of violent white rule. Mazisi Kunene, for instance, has consistently and unapologetically validated African perspectives in his literature (cf Kunene 1981).

Although Gilroy privileges diasporic historical discontinuities, he acknowledges Africa in what seem to be strategic moments. He suggests a "[cultural] two-way traffic" between Africa and the West that is exemplified by "the mutation of jazz and African-American cultural style in the townships of South Africa and the syncretised evolution of Caribbean and British reggae music and Rastafari culture in Zimbabwe ..." (Gilroy 1993a: 199). Howsoever much these fusions are stressed, in the final analysis these cultural affinities are based not on potent neocolonial solidarity of the oppressed, but rather on "a common experience of powerlessness" (Gilroy 1987: 158). Although W.E.B. Du Bois does finally return to Africa in his nineties after renouncing his American citizenship, these African returns, in both literal and metaphoric modes, are, in Gilroy's hands, always either abortive or unsuccessful. Even in contemporary times, Gilroy comes short of suggesting a failed relationship with Africa. He asks bell hooks, "What will happen when the experiential and political gulf between Africans in Africa and blacks in the western hemisphere is even deeper and wider than it is now? Do you think that black Americans or blacks in Europe will want to go on identifying with Africa?" (1993b: 213). hooks's response to Gilroy's question is more pan-African than the latter's and goes beyond what becomes a superficial musical connection. hooks acknowledges the romance associated with a cosmetic pan-Africanism but suggests the complexity of a continent that has value to the lives of those in the diaspora (hooks 1993b: 213-214).

Pan-Africanism, which has as its goal the ideal transcendence of narrow national camps, has enjoyed wide interpretation. I would be inclined to argue along the same lines as hooks in expressing reservation for a term that is abused but can, nonetheless, be a potential counter to a modernity that continuously patronises Africa. Until blackness is embraced more holistically, however, until social, economic and political emancipation is achieved in the continent as a whole, Mbeki's pan-African Renaissance will remain a dream (Mda in Nuttall & Michael 2000: 111, 120). The xenophobia of some black South Africans directed at dark-skinned Africans from outside the country, for example, makes a mockery of this revival. Here we see the rehearsal of Gilroy's perilous "we" in the inclusions and exclusions that are at stake. But

should these shortcomings mean a dead-end? Former chairperson of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, would surely not answer in the affirmative.

As an influential lobbyist for *ubuntu*, an African social process that recognises the interconnections between humans, Tutu has at times used the language of Steve Biko's black consciousness ideologies. Dubbed the father of black consciousness, Biko, who was beaten to death by state police in 1977, thrived to give South Africa "a more human face" (Biko 1986: 98). He was concerned with not only the solidarity of the oppressed but also with the need for blacks' psychological self-affirmation and preservation. In subverting racial hierarchies, Biko was keen on "demonstrat[ing] the lie that black is an aberration from the 'normal' which is white" (p. 49). This racial introspection was not akin to Gilroy's "ethnic absolutism" but was a necessary phase en route to a broader "postrace" humanism.

Biko's rejection of agency-denying terms like *non-white* played a crucial role in deconstructing modernity's central exercise: racial naming. In grouping around the signifier "black" what was enacted was neither a naturalisation of differences nor biological determinism. Biko's embrace of black consciousness as "not a matter of pigmentation ...[but] a reflection of a mental attitude" (p. 48) was "not a 'hate white' movement" (Tutu 1989: 88).

When Tutu has embraced a consciousness of blackness, he has not engaged in a futile anti-racism. Neither has he evoked a perilous solidarity. In combating the "blasphemous effects of injustice and racism" (1977: 10) that manifested itself in "black Christians' ... self-contempt and self-hatred" (p. 10), Tutu suggests that the required healing of self will necessarily help the insecure [blacks] to "assert their personhood and humanity because only <u>persons</u> can ultimately be reconciled" (p. 10). Even as Tutu's focus remains largely culturally introspective, he extends a hand of friendship to whites at a time when the state had more than confirmed its loathing of blacks. So, in the mid-1970s when this particular article was written, Tutu rises above grim realities and suggests the healing of the oppressor. He has not reneged from this standpoint:

> We would hope that in the process we could also help white people recover their humanity and personhood which have been grievously injured by their participation in an unjust and oppressive society ....
>
> (Tutu 1977: 10-11)

In his widely quoted essay on a South Africa readying itself for a new race-freed dispensation, Albie Sachs totally misses the point of race-consciousness even as he goes to great lengths in demonstrating how the point has not been missed. His declaration that "white is beautiful" (Sachs qouted in Attridge &

Jolly 1998: 245) undermines the race struggles that he fought so hard to terminate. What was actually at stake in the political recoveries that Biko, and to a lesser extent, Tutu,[5] were interested in, was a reclamation of a compromised social category of blackness. Biko's was a strategy that, to borrow Gilroy's term, sought to withstand a continuing hegemonic "glamour of whiteness".

Like the African Renaissance which, to some critics, appears to privilege global market forces at the expense of pressing problems of poverty at home (De Kock 2001: 289), *ubuntu* has been criticised for its commercial seduction of a potent black vote that has twice voted for the ANC (Wilson 2001: 13). I would argue that all ideas are prone to commercialism once in the public domain. I suggest that it *is* worth fighting for a transitory consciousness of blackness that will not only increase the self-esteem of a people treated as human rubbish for so long, but will also facilitate the transcendence of colonial dichotomies (cf Achebe 1975: 70-73). Although Gilroy may not advocate a consciousness of blackness, he does seem to have a sense of the grave inequities in South Africa in his acknowledgement of undismantled apartheid structures (Gilroy 2000a: 208). However, the following reading of South Africa as "postrace" is erroneous: "If the status of 'race' can be transformed even in South Africa, the one place on earth where its salience for politics and government could not be denied ... then surely it could be changed anywhere" (p. 27).

Like Gilroy, Daniel Herwitz seems reluctant to face the realities of racial inequities in suggesting a "postrace" *ubuntu* centrally tied to a globalising language. His reading of Thabo Mbeki's "I am an African" speech as an exercise in reverse racism that resonates Negritude is a case in point. Now, while Mbeki's evocation of creolised identities importantly rooted in Africa did not espouse black consciousness ideologies which, in their strategic essentialism, excluded whites, Dirk Klopper reads reactions like Herwitz's as "imputations of Africanism" propelled "largely by whites who, now a politically insignificant minority, feared a resurgence of racist sentiment in South Africa around a revived black consciousness ideology" (Klopper 1999: 26). I would also add here that, as in the not-so-old days of apartheid, blacks are not to be overly, confidently visible. To use Herwitz's language, blackness,[6] should not be "in-your-face" (Herwitz 1999: 39).

Gilroy does not go as far as Herwitz in discounting the category of blackness but he does assert that black communities around the world are not unitary but multidimensional. He argues that "the idea of blacks as a 'national' or proto-national group with its own hermetically enclosed culture ... gets invoked ... as a means to silence dissent and censor political debate" (Gilroy 1993b: 124). I agree with Gilroy here in terms of acknowledging diversity within definitions of cultural groups. But why should race consciousness be

equated with "ethnic absolutism?" Or, why should Herwitz feel so threatened by a word (black) that remains disavowed? Klopper's above interventions into these issues go some distance towards understanding racial insecurities that, again, cannot be solved behind *en vogue* banners of hybridity.

Herwitz's discomfort with blackness extends to an uncontainable space called "Africa". A nebulous concept of Africa, in other words, is the premise upon which Herwitz challenges Mbeki's association of important epistemologies with Africa. Also, he laments the speech's marginalisation of England and the teachers in Sussex "who apparently taught [Mbeki] a great deal" (1999: 45). But the president's speech, delivered in a country that is already so culturally obsessed with the West, was not about the English education Mbeki received in political exile! Herwitz's advice on what a wiser speech-writer would have done points to the difficulties of forging African-centred (nonessentialist) alternative modernities. Instead of foregrounding Africa and deconstructing modernity's revilement of this space, Mbeki

> with intentions to place the South African constitution in the global history of liberalism, might have written a speech about the history of constitutionalism from Athens to Washington. Such a speech would have placed South Africa not in the field of something called "Africa" but in the history of liberalism.
>
> (Herwitz 1999: 45- 46)

Aside from the disturbing positioning of Africa as the West's annex, Herwitz is aware of a historically paternalistic liberalism in South Africa. However, he does not clarify how *his* version of liberalism will take root. Like Gilroy, Herwitz hastily embraces a shared humanity of homo sapiens (pp. 44-45), a term he repeats three times. What Herwitz overlooks in his humanist optimism is an ethnocentrism that elevates the notion of a universalism not at all concerned with modernity-encouraged "differences" whose local dimensions need addressing before even thinking in terms of global villages.

Herwitz problematically engages with another aspect of Mbeki's African Renaissance: the question of language. The language of this revival, English, is proof that in South Africa's "dream" constitution, not all languages are treated equally. English remains the lingua franca of choice, a sign of modernity. As with hybridity one can argue here that English is a sign of modernity for certain upper classes. For others seeking work, English is a necessity of communication and survival. But Herwitz does not bother with these dimensions. Rather, he argues that even if the African Renaissance expressed its messages in indigenous tongues,

> it would be overwhelmingly likely that the African language in question would be *globally enriched* by translations and additions from English, just as English

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has been enriched by its history of contact with other languages.

(Herwitz 1999: 45; my italics)

Herwitz's quote again raises the question of contamination and the inaccurate assumption that English "enriched" the lives of the "uncivilized" whose language was often perceived as barbaric babble. What about those who died in the name of another imposed language, Afrikaans, in 1976? If languages in South Africa suffered a somewhat equal-opportunity contamination or a globalisation interpreted positively by Herwitz, then why is it that African tongues (obviously considered not-quite modern) continue to be marginalised in South African institutions of learning?

The above questions are rhetorical and those who are aware of South Africa's Eurocentrism (cf Parker 1993) would probably not rehearse Herwitz's callousness. As Salim Vally's research on language usage in various South African institutions of learning reveal, "none of the [79] schools [he surveyed] offer[ed] an 'African' language as a language of instruction and learning" (Vally 1999: 74). Moreover, he explains that "in a number of schools the home languages of a number of learners [were] ... (unconstitutionally) banned" (p. 74). At the university level, African languages don't fare any better. Cleopas Thosago asserts that linguistic colonisation dominates (cf Thosago 2000).

Even as Herwitz acknowledges Mbeki's Africanist language as engaging in a reclamation of black hegemony, he fails to appreciate the difficulty of an ideological speech that performs two simultaneous and almost impossible feats: a nation-building effort premised on nonracial unity and a postapartheid nationalism that is strongly and constructively *conscious* of Africa and its concomitant blackness. Rather, Herwitz remains very suspicious of African traditions like praise poetry that are central to the alternative modernities proposed by writers like Mazisi Kunene. Although Herwitz does not specifically refer to the praise poetry that symbolically graced Nelson Mandela's presidential inauguration, it is strongly suggested that such art forms of "worship" are "eminently unreadable, and so highly distasteful" (Herwitz 1999: 51).

A climate that refuses to sustain African cosmologies corroborates the salience of raciology and its modernist conduits, therefore. In this climate deeply suspicious of returns to Africa, a greater vigilance is required to explode myths of a "postrace" state. But in the meantime, how does one deal with the following infuriating assertions:

> to oversimplify somewhat – the period of decolonizing struggles is basically over. These conflicts, even when they are played out in the courtrooms of South Africa, no longer supply the primary moral and political referents for black aspirations towards freedom and justice in other parts of the world. How then

are we to define our pursuit of freedom? What are the versions of justice towards which we orient ourselves?

(Gilroy 2000b: 126)

Notes

1. Gilroy's talk was delivered at a conference acknowledging European modernist achievements at the turn of the twentieth century (1900-1910). The approaching millennium in 2000 heightened the mood of celebration.

2. It is now common practice to trouble the concept of a South African "nation" that has not yet enjoyed a revolution in terms of social and economic transformation. The "new" South Africa is also almost always qualified in both theory and literature. In his poetry collection titled *Talking Rain*, for example, Lesego Rampolokeng talks about the "new" dispensation in very pessimistic terms. He describes an "applause [that] rings in blood-drops / celebrating the abortion / of freedom's child / in transition" (Rampolokeng 1993: 17).

3. Kenneth Parker excludes Athol Fugard from his list of Western favoured interpreters. This exclusion suggests that Fugard is outside the dominant white male traditions that are criticised by Parker. In my view, however, Fugard's reliance on modernist "development" theories evidenced by his comments of a theatre that is lagging behind, situates Fugard within Eurocentric traditions. Janet Suzman displays a similar cultural callousness in her impatience with representations of poverty on the stage. She is very conscious of how South African black designers are out of touch with the advances in theatre design made in Britain and Europe (Suzman in Blumberg & Walder 1999: 264-265). Unlike Parker who does not deconstruct modernism, I am inclined to read Fugard's and Suzman's prescription as part of *both* a modernity and, in Parker's view, a tradition that says "unless you co-operate with the dominant authority [modernism] on its terms, there is the ever-present threat of being put back into a cleft tree!" (Parker 1993: 31).

4. A slightly different version of this paper was presented at the annual conference of the Canadian Association of African Studies at the University of Toronto (May 30, 2002). A white South African present during my talk took umbrage at my suggestion of polarised South Africans. He went to great lengths in angrily explaining the creolisation of the "rainbow nation".

5. Although Tutu echoes both Frantz Fanon's ([1961]1968) and Biko's (1986) views of a personhood negated by colonialism, critics like Tinyiko Maluleke argue that Tutu's Christian theology is not radical enough in terms of its over-privileging of the now dominant black/white reconciliation (cf Maluleke 1997).

6. The blackness contested here is tied to what Herwitz reads as a negative Africanness. He is especially offended by the enlarged typeface "every time the word "African" appears [in Makgoba's *Mokoko*]" (Herwitz 1999: 39).

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