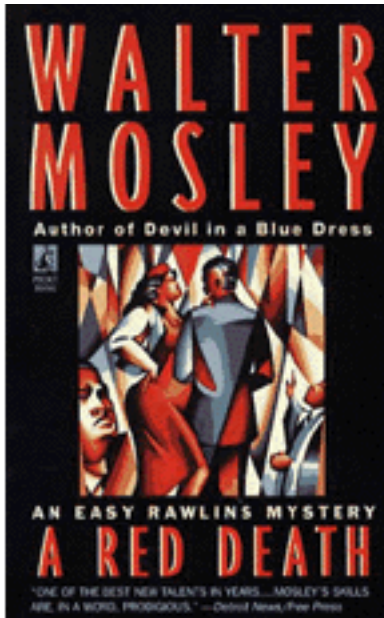


## Notes on Black Marxism

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In his 1991 novel *A Red Death*, Walter Mosley's street savvy black protagonist Easy Rawlins receives a letter from the Internal Revenue Service challenging his reporting of income after it learns that he has acquired three real estate properties. Rawlins is in fact a landlord who with the help of a friend has established a "dummy corporation" that allows him not only to avoid reporting real estate incomes but to disguise himself as a "janitor" in the buildings he owns while using friends to collect his rent.

Rawlins is forced to meet with IRS agent Reginald Lawrence, who teams up with FBI Special Agent Darryl T. Craxton to present him with a tough choice: cop to his tax crimes and do time in jail, or help the feds by tracking down and surveilling a Jewish communist union organizer named Chaim Wenzler. Wenzler, a veteran of the Polish resistance, splits his time between pro-union activity and

work within the First American Baptist Church, a black church in Rawlins' neighborhood. The choice foregrounds numerous contradictions for Rawlins: during World War II, Rawlins' helped liberate Jewish concentration camps; he recalls the War as a period when the Soviets were U.S. allies and remembers Paul Robeson's sacrificing his career to radical politics (this is 1952). Coupled with his easy distrust of white authority, these facts make Rawlins suspicious of Craxton's warnings that Wenzler and the Reds "want to take the whole world and enslave it." Mosley in fact crystallizes Rawlins's dilemma with this pregnant rumination: "Craxton and Lawrence had me so worried about my money and my freedom that I had become *their* slave." (*emphasis mine*)

Rawlins attempts to defer this dilemma by turning to booze. While drunk one day, he travels to an elementary school operated by the First Baptist church to help it get rid of an insect problem: red ants that attack the schoolchildren in their playground. He arrives with a special poison and pours it into the hive. Here is Rawlins's description of what he sees:

At first there was just a wisp of smoke rising from the hole. They were frantic, running in widening arcs and stamping on the sand like parading horses held under a tight rein. These ants ran off into the night but were followed by weaker, more confused ants.

I saw no more than four of them actually die, but I knew that the hives

were full of the dead. I knew that they had fallen where they stood, because the poison is very deadly in close quarters. Like in Dachau when we got there, the dead strewn like chips of wood at a lumberyard. . . .

There were so many that I had to back away to avoid them swarming over me. . . .

In his stupor Rawlins confuses attacked and the attacker: he is simultaneously killing "red" ants to save black children, "liberating" them from red menace, while engaging in a holocaust against those he is learning and already knows are most vulnerable to fascist poison: "red" ants (Communists, blacks and Jews). He is at war with himself, ideologically, racially, ethnically, ethically. The passage puts Rawlins between fascism and communism and, psychologically at least, makes him go both ways. Later in the novel Wenzler is murdered. The "mystery" of *A Red Death* is revealed when FBI Agent Craxton is found out as the killer. Other murdered black victims of federal power litter the scene. The fascism is, as we suspected all along, domestic in *A Red Death*. Wenzler thus becomes a martyr to the road not taken. Readers both black and white, meanwhile, are left feeling, like Rawlins, badly hungover.

Mosley's is thus an anti-Cold War novel with a reluctant resignation about the fate of Cold War Communism at its center. But the most lasting image of the novel for me is of revolutionary manque Rawlins as ambivalent executioner, an image that should resonate with those familiar with African American literary representations of Communism. The question of whether the turn to Communism represents freedom from white racist oppression at the expense of racial unity or "authenticity" is, after all, fundamental to struggles between black and other variety nationalisms and Communism. The vituperative hostility with which ex-Communists or Communist-sympathizers like Harold Cruse and Ralph Ellison, for example, have "killed off" their Communist pasts as a cathartic statement of racial (or in Ellison's case integrationist) solidarity also reminds us of a larger problem about racial formation and Marxism generally in the United States. That is, just as putatively "white" Marxist critics and labor historians have in recent years made what Greg Meyerson has diagnosed as the psychoanalytic turn to attempt to explain white supremacy as a racial reflex to blackness within the American working-class, so black Marxists have often hunted out the psychic space of black racial betrayal--race traitorhood from the other side of the color line--as the target for their disavowals of historical materialism. Easy Rawlins's drunken confusion is Mosley's fruitful if simple metaphor for Communism and Communist sympathy as a point of psychic racial excess that can spill over in highly toxic forms when black goes "red": a red death, as it were.

Indeed variations on this critical problematic have informed several of the most interesting books published in recent years by black radical intellectuals. In his often brilliant and important book *Black Marxism*, for example, Cedric Robinson presents a historical narrative in which the "black radical tradition" emancipates itself from a historiography of Eurocentric radicalism, purging it of what Robinson attempts to describe as a white racist epistemology. The book opens with this statement about class formation and relations of production:

The historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism. This could only be true if the social, psychological, and cultural origins of racism and nationalism both anticipated capitalism in time and formed a piece with those events that contributed directly to its organization of production and exchange. (9)

Robinson in effect folds the history of class relations and class struggle into the history of racism. Capitalism itself is produced as a systemic articulation of unconscious racism and nationalism. Robinson's description of racism as pre-capitalist mirrors a critical move David Roediger makes in *The Wages of Whiteness*, namely identifying white racism with a mythic prehistory of social relations located, for example, in white phobic reactions to black "excrement." Both writers argue, in effect, that capitalist exploitation is ultimately a manifestation of the desire of whites to control non-whites. Robinson is thus free to include in his own "black radical tradition" (which is presumptively Marxist) not only figures of sympathy like C.L.R. James and W.E.B. Du Bois, but anti-Communist nationalists like Marcus Garvey. This is not presented as contradictory in *Black Marxism*, but demonstrative of a need to put a brake on Marxism's "white" epistemology.

Paul Gilroy makes a similar critical move more influentially in his 1993 *The Black Atlantic*, a book which read carefully seems wedded to Robinson's *Black Marxism* paradigm. Gilroy refers to Robinson only once, in his chapter on W.E.B. Du Bois. Robinson's phrase the "Black Radical Tradition," he writes, "can be shown to have interesting cultural correlates in the lifeworlds of black subjects and in the grounded aesthetics which animate their social aspirations to be free and to be themselves" (122). Gilroy proceeds to stake out a very ambivalent relationship not only to Robinson's work but to all forms of Marxist critique. Put simply, Gilroy continues Robinson's project of defining a "black " historiography premised on its resistance to white Eurocentric Marxism. The ambivalence in this task derives from the fact that Gilroy is an avowed anti-essentialist. He tries to demonstrate this credential by first debunking Robinson's "Black Radical Tradition" as "both illuminating and misleading" mainly because "the idea of tradition can sound too closed, too final, and too antithetical to the subaltern experience of modernity" (122). Yet Gilroy's attempts to "de-essentialize" black experience only leads him to re-essentialize it. Despite his attempts to evade and eviscerate the "too closed" sphere of Robinson's Black Radical Tradition, Gilroy emphatically recreates it precisely as Robinson does: as the "alternative" to a Marxian or Marxist historiography which cannot fathom and "contain" (and thus functions to oppress or ignore) the black experience. As demonstration, here are two passages: the first is the final paragraph of his opening chapter, in which he presents the "diaspora" and the experience of black people under slavery as the foundation of both "modernity" and the "double consciousness" it creates in black people; the second is another definition of diaspora:

I have already implied that there is a degree of convergence here with other projects towards a critical theory of society, particularly Marxism.

However, where *lived crisis and systemic crisis come together, Marxism allocates priority to the latter while the memory of slavery insists on the priority of the former* [emphasis mine]. Their convergence is also undercut by the simple fact that in the critical thought of blacks in the West, social self-creation through labour is not the centre-piece of emancipatory hopes. For the descendants of slaves, work *signifies only servitude, misery, and subordination* [emphasis mine]. Artistic expression, expanded beyond recognition from the grudging gifts offered by the masters as a token substitute for freedom from bondage, therefore becomes the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation. Poiesis and poetics begin to coexist in novel forms--autobiographical writing, special and uniquely creative ways of manipulating spoken language, and, above all, the music. All three have overflowed from the containers that the modern nation state provides for them. (39-40)

Gilroy veers towards postmodern language of "excess" or slippage to describe race, nationalism and culture as figures of indefinite "difference" which cannot be "defined" or contained and are always already in movement, motion, multiplicity. Yet black identity, citizenship and even "culture" do cohere in one significant way for Gilroy: in their rejection of "work" as an experience. Black subjectivity, the diaspora, modernity, double consciousness, in other words, are at bottom *anti-historical materialist, anti-working-class and anti-Marxist*, while Marxism itself comes to represent something like white essentialism. This explains in a new way what Gilroy calls his own "anti-essentialist-essentialism." Gilroy comes full circle, diasporically, to a reductive and redactive variation on Robinson's theme of a Black Radical Tradition as an alternative to Marxism. The circumlocutionary logic of both texts--each of which claims to be, to differing degrees, Marxist, or Marxist-influenced, is evidence of what I called at the beginning of this essay ambivalent executions. Like Easy Rawlins, Robinson and Gilroy stare in the face of capitalist history and, in very different but similar ways, seek to liberate black people by alleviating its "red menace."

In 1983, the same year as Cedric Robinson's book appeared, Manning Marable published: *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*. The book was dedicated to Walter Rodney, author of *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Marable used Rodney's underdevelopment thesis in service not of a "black " Marxist methodology, but a Marxist analysis of black economic development. Marable generally succeeds in preserving a dialectical and historical materialist analysis of not just black workers as part of the American working-class but racism and racial formation, including white supremacy, under capitalism. Here is to me the most significant and compelling passage from the book on this question:

Racial divisions within the working class accelerate the processes of exploitation in the workplace for Blacks and whites alike. Yet given clear political options, white workers have frequently sacrificed their own material and political interests to engage in the mass-mania of racist lynch mobs, raped Black women, mutilated Black children, engaged in

strikes to protest the employment of Black co-workers, voted for white supremacist candidates in overwhelming numbers . . . and have created all-white unions.

. . . In a racist/capitalist state and economy, the instinct among whites to exhibit racist behaviors and practices is not a psychological aberration. To be racist in a racist society is to be normal; to reject racism, denounce lynchings, and to fight for Black political and economic rights is to be in a symbolic sense "abnormal." Racism benefits the bourgeoisie absolutely and relatively; working class whites are usually part of the larger 'social mechanism' of racist accumulation and Black underdevelopment, serving as uncritical cogs in the wheels of Black exploitation.

. . . For many working class whites, the Afro-American is less a person and more a symbolic index between themselves and the abyss of absolute poverty. All whites at virtually every job . . . level are the relative beneficiaries of racism in the labor force: Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, etc., supply the basic "draftees" in the permanent and semi-permanent reserve army of labor . . . (44-45)

Marable's critical use of the language of "pathology" here to describe white racism is a therapeutic relief from the psychic and psychological tropes I have been discussing earlier. His definition of racism as ideology, and a "relative" gain for white workers undercuts, it seems to me, his invocation of white racist "instinct." It retains a good faith investment in racism as part of ruling class hegemony. It underscores that white workers engage in racism against their own interests. Marable is fairly successful in my view in staving off reductive interpretation of racism (or Marxism) as primarily debilitating to or threatening of black "identity." He persistently locates race and racial identity within the social relations of production between groups.

Marable's book has recently been republished by South End Press. In an introductory critical reassessment of the first edition, Marable notes that the book's "greatest conceptual flaw," in his view, was its organizational premise that "the totality of African-American history has been polarized and structured around the class division between the Black 'haves' and the Black 'have-nots.' . . . The real problem isn't the contradictory and accommodationist behavior of the Black middle class, but the exploitative policies and practices of the capitalist ruling class" (xxxix):

The racist/capitalist ruling elite in this country will do whatever is necessary to stay in power. . . .

There can be no long term "Historic Compromise" with capitalism. The choice for Blacks is either socialism or some selective form of genocide; for the U.S. proletariat, workers' democracy or some form of authoritarianism or fascism (262)

Marable's materialist socialism in *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* is grounded in the influence of black and white Marxists like C.L.R. James, Du Bois and Oliver Cox. In recent years, he has moved closer to a position of democratic socialism predicated more on anti-corporate populism than working-class solidarity. This was reflected in his endorsement of Ralph Nader as the candidate of choice for black voters in the 2000 election. Marable argued that since neither mainstream party represented black interests the Nader vote would both send a signal of discontent and demonstrate anti-corporatism as a black voting interest. Yet Nader's campaign itself demonstrated how divorced anti-corporatism and anti-capitalism are: he never campaigned on anything remotely like the latter. Too, Nader was deservedly criticized even among progressive and liberal organizations for his resounding silence on corporate racism and exploitation of workers of color. Marable's support for Nader's compromised agenda is yet another manifestation of black radicalism mutating in the direction of anti-communism.

A parallel development can be seen in the most recent work of Walter Mosley. Mosley's non-fiction book-length essay *Workin' on the Chain Gang: Shakin' Off the Dead Hand of History* was written during the earliest stages of the recent presidential election. In his opening chapter, written in casual confessional mode, Mosley tells us he originally intended to sit down and write an essay about "race at the end of the twentieth century. But every time I sat down to write, the words seemed a bit too facile and rhetorical" (8-9). Instead, Mosley's epiphany was that class and capitalism were the topics he needed to address. He puts it this way:

Regardless of the poignancy of the crimes against black Americans our oppression is, after all, only a part of a much larger malignancy. The American structure of slavery was a consequence of the New World, its roots in Europe, not Africa. Mass oppression for mass production is part of the Western psyche. Therefore the problems experienced by blacks in America have to be seen as part of the larger malady. It is impossible to extricate the black experience in American from the larger American experience. (11)

Mosley also writes this:

The juggernaut of capitalism, having broken the bonds of its imprisonment-national Borders--exact its toll in an equal-opportunity manner. It is the nature of Capitalism to apply its value system to everything. . . .

Capitalism has no race or nationality. Capitalism has no humanity . . . all that exists in the capitalist bible is the margin of profit, the market share we are all part of an economic machine. Some of us are cogs, others ghosts, but it is the machine, not race or gender or even nationality, that drives us. (11)

Mosley's analysis seems on one hand a sincere reconsideration of the limits of political ambivalence. Yet the attack on capitalism as "anti-humanist" and the re-referencing of what might be called psychological hegemony--"Mass oppression for mass production is part of the western psyche"--steers his analysis back into the soft tissue realm of spiritualist critique. Mosley is much sharper in *A Red Death* about the materialist conditions underlying black American struggle. As a sardonic gadfly named Jackson puts it in the novel, "An niggah ain't got no union he could count on, an' niggah ain't got no politician gonna work fo' him. All he got is a do'step t'shit in and a black hand t' wipe his black ass" (198). Distressingly, these conditions are pointed to not only as those which capitalism produces, but those which *estrangle* African-Americans from Communism. Still, where Mosley's fiction doggedly renders black working-class life as a lived condition of alienation and resistance, *Workin' on the Chain Gang* is informed, ultimately, by a brand of secular millennialism common to black liberation theology that is in fact a political subtext to *A Red Death* (referenced in Wenzler's comradeship and safe harbor in the First Baptist Church). Thus Mosley considers his confrontation with capitalism and its possible rejection in terms of abjection: ". . . I am not looking to the socialist or communist experiments of the twentieth century [*sic*] to answer our economic or social problems. Instead I want to look directly into the voracious maw of capitalism to see if there is a way to survive the onslaught" (16). Having described capitalism as affliction, Mosley proceeds to offer up liberal bromides he could hardly himself have believed in after his grand opening: calling for example for mass protest in the form of letter-writing campaigns to elected officials, a national boycott of television, and deeper apprehension by Americans of historical black suffering. *Workin' on the Chain Gang* is one of the most interesting and frustrating books I have ever read. Yet it is most important I think as the most recent evidence of an impasse in writing by many black radicals.

The nature of this impasse can also be apprehended in Paul Gilroy's most recent book, *Against Race*, also published in 2000, Gilroy argues that we need to rethink race as a global signifier of contested meanings, much in the manner of postmodern Marxist definitions of "class." In Gilroy's presentation, it is market forces, advertising, 'global' capitalism and the consumer power of even Third World citizens that have contributed to the new 'purchase' on race as post-biological. Gilroy's best example of this is Bob Marley, whose father, he reminds us, was white. Marley, he writes, both signifies blackness and the transformation of blackness into an international, or transnational trope of liberation. Blackness, globalized, can now signify vital prestige rather than abjection. Yet rather than writing of blackness as an aspect of commodity fetish, Gilroy fetishizes the commodity of blackness in order to argue against commodification!: "Racial conflict must yield to different imperatives deriving from the planetarization of profit and the cultivation of new markets far from the memory of bondage."

The "different imperatives" to which Gilroy alludes includes debating the scientific and epistemological meaning of "race." "I propose," he writes, "nothing short of the liberation of the man of color from himself. We shall go very slowly, for there are two camps: the white and the black." Gilroy invokes a Cold War paradigm--Communism and Capitalism as the "two camps"-- but shifts its oppositionality to race, thus offering a "third way" anti-

essentialism. Yet as I have demonstrated earlier Gilroy's anti-essentialism is itself essentialist and deeply anti-communist. Both of these characteristics of his thought are evident in his treatment of the work of Frantz Fanon. He enlists Fanon, justifiably, as a writer "against" racial epistemologies, but he creates a Fanon few readers would recognize through descriptions like this:

Making raciology appear anachronistic--placing it squarely in the past--now requires careful judgment as to what histories our heterocultural present and our cosmopolitan future should entail. This work may best be undertaken in the indiscreetly anti-Marxist spirit established by that prototypical black-European Frantz Fanon in the closing pages of his first book *Black Skin, White Masks*: '. . . I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny . . . I do not have the right to allow myself to be mired in what the past has determined. . . . The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions' (336).

This citation of Fanon is to his response to the frontispiece to "By Way of Conclusion," the last chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, which is this passage from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*:

The social revolution . . . cannot draw its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped itself of all its superstitions concerning the past. Earlier revolutions relied on memories out of world history in order to drug themselves against their own content. In order to find their own content, the revolutions of the nineteenth century have to let the dead bury the dead. Before, the expression exceeded the content; now, the content exceeds the expression.

Fanon is clearly reading Marx's "dead history" thesis sympathetically, not antagonistically; it is not "history" qua history but the history of capitalist exploitation which each is trying to jettison. Ironically, Gilroy proceeds to reiterate Marx, substituting "tradition" for history, sounding vaguely dialectical, and invoking "planetary humanity" again as a neo-template for internationalism shorn of its proletarian dimensions. All of these speculative assumptions are the formulae for his definition of "freedom":

Our challenge should now to be bring even more powerful visions of planetary Humanity from the future into the present and to reconnect them with democratic and cosmopolitan traditions that have been all but expunged from today's black political imaginary. (356)

A reductive but important question to ask of Paul Gilroy is this: how do we get there from here? Even given the now not disputable premise that race is a fiction, and even given the indisputable idea that the Black diaspora is a crucial event in world history, what program does this work offer for realizing a "planetary humanity"? In his own recent work on diaspora, for example, Robin D.G. Kelley and Tiffany Patterson have argued that historical specificity is crucial to diasporic studies, particularly the economic



variables that produce and result from them ("Unfinished Migrations, 11-14). It's a good reminder: diaspora, rendered ahistorically, might offer a jubilant example of "planetary humanity," just as Fanon, studied ahistorically, might look like an anti-Marxist. Studied historically, they look very different. My point is this: Gilroy's work posits the complication of race through diaspora as an alternative to historical materialism. In so doing Gilroy attempts to mask the contradictions of capitalism's hand in creating diaspora, and preserves his own paradigm for discussing 'race' outside or in opposition to a Marxist analysis. In short, his anti-Marxism is the most essential (and essentialist) characteristic of Gilroy's work to date.

### **Conclusion:**

All of the books I have described here have been written during an interesting critical conjuncture: the diminishing of state Communism, and the transformation of black nationalism in the United States into something approximating civil rights politics (c.f. Farrakhan and Al Sharpton). These two developments have allowed U.S. imperialism a somewhat unhindered ascent to the position it enjoyed, at least prior to September 11, as the pinnacle nation-state under contemporary capitalism. A sympathetic way to read the "ambivalent executions" of Marxist commitment in these books is as a conjunctural sign of these historical conditions. Indeed I tend to see Marable, Mosley, Gilroy and Robinson attempting to make ambivalence the basis of a political praxis. These writers write about the centrality of Marxist thought and analysis to their work, while ultimately working to purge their work of Marxist analysis. The red deaths described and enacted in these books do and can produce important spectres for further study.

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### **Work Cited**

Patterson, Tiffany Ruby and Robin D.G. Kelley. "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World." *African Studies Review*, V. 43, n. 1. (April 2000), pp. 11-45.