

Conversation

“Multicultural Snake Oil” and Black Cultural Criticism

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Introduction

On December 17, 2020, the *Canadian Journal of Communication* met with Daniel McNeil via Zoom. McNeil's teaching and scholarship bring together history, cultural studies, diaspora studies, and cognate fields of inquiry to explore the complexities of global Black communities. After receiving his PhD in history from the University of Toronto in 2007, he was a lecturer in media and cultural studies at the University of Hull (2007–2010) and Newcastle University (2010–2012). Between 2012 and 2014 he was the Ida B. Wells-Barnett visiting professor of African and Black diaspora studies at DePaul University in Chicago. McNeil returned to Canada in 2014 as an associate professor of history and chair of the migration and diaspora studies initiative at Carleton University. In 2019–2020, he was the inaugural visiting public humanities faculty fellow at the University of Toronto, a position open to citizens of all countries who are tenured faculty members with a history of research achievement and who have the capacity to present their research across disciplinary and institutional boundaries; a demonstrated track record of bringing humanities research into the public realm for discussion, debate, and examination; and a promise of continued excellence. McNeil is currently a professor at Queen's University and Queen's National Scholar Chair in Black studies with a focus on interdisciplinary studies of liberation and decolonial praxis. *Thinking While Black*, his book about the political aspirations and cultural achievements of soul rebels, Black Atlantic intellectuals, and planetary humanists over the past fifty years, will be published by Rutgers University Press and *Between the Lines* in 2022.

The conversation is edited for clarity and length.

“Multicultural Snake Oil”

Chris Russill (CR): Daniel, your work takes up questions of multiculturalism in Canada as an idea, a mythology, a government strategy, a media discourse, and in the words of one prominent intellectual, as “snake oil.” It also recognizes how multiculturalism overflows from its governmental and policy articulations to shape cultures and spaces more broadly. It reminds me that when the editors of the *C.L.R. James Journal* posed the question, “What is Black Canadian thought?” (Hudson & Kamugisha, 2014) the answers all seemed to refer in some way to multiculturalism. Yet, your approach does seem distinctive in key respects. You have studied the state’s documents and how they circulate administratively and more widely. You have also historicized the stories told about the origins and purposes of multiculturalism to illustrate how these accounts are mobilized in different circumstances, contexts, conjunctures. And you have developed the idea of “shy elitism” and helped us understand the significance of the banalization of multiculturalism.

As a first question, would you like to situate your work on multiculturalism in Canada?

Daniel McNeil (DM): Thanks, Chris. My thinking about multiculturalism in Canada has shifted quite a bit over the years, but there’s probably been a BC or “Before Carleton” period and a PC or “Post-Carleton” period.

Before joining Carleton, I was relatively ignorant about the attempts to build awareness and acceptance of multiculturalism in Canada. Growing up in England in the nineties, I had a vague sense of the stories Canadians tell themselves and the world about law-abiding subjects from the British Commonwealth rubbing up against maverick Americans. I can remember watching *Due South*, a TV show about a Mountie who travels to Chicago to find his father’s murderer, which was one of the few non-British shows with a prime-time slot on the BBC when I was a kid. There were probably some similar stereotypes that I consumed via American wrestling shows as well, but I don’t think there were any courses or books that inspired me to learn more about Canadian culture and history. It’s not like I came over here on a pilgrimage to see where Marshall McLuhan or Harold Innis developed their ideas.

I ended up doing my graduate work in Toronto because I stumbled across an advert for a scholarship that offered graduates of Oxford some funds to further their studies at a Canadian university. It was named after Cecil Rhodes, the unabashed white supremacist who was one of the founders of the British South Africa Company that established the apartheid state of Rhodesia, so I was apprehensive about applying for it. I ended up pursuing the scholarship because I wanted to continue my studies without adding to the financial debts I’d accrued (the Labour government had introduced tuition fees for undergraduates

during my first year at university). It also seemed a better option than joining one of the investment banks or management consultancies that were circling the colleges and peddling their graduate training schemes.

I remember going on one of the computers in the college library to prepare for the scholarship interview. It must have been sometime in the spring of 2001. A lot of the articles were responding to the likes of Samuel Huntington (1993) and Robert Putnam (2000) and recycling tired debates about whether you can have diversity without conflict or social welfare programs in diverse environments. I jotted down the quote from Peter Ustinov about Toronto being like New York run by the Swiss as well. But most of the articles portrayed Canada as a multicultural success story that had combined the rich diversity of its so-called natural landscape with urban centres that permitted cosmopolitan citizens and visitors to sample exotic cultures from around the world. The barely concealed subtext was that the prudence and careful management of federal policies and institutions had helped Canadian cities cast off the claims that they were incredibly dull, and prevented the country from falling prey to the same levels of violence, conflict, and civil unrest as the U.S.

CR: Yes, I know the Canadian government works to cultivate these associations internationally. I was always struck by how successful these efforts appear to be when travelling overseas and how important it seemed for Canada to be seen in this way.

DM: Yeah, it's a convenient place for Americans to move to when they're frustrated with the election of a Republican president; it's somewhere you can turn to for consultants to manage creative, super-diverse populations; it's the post-national experiment that will produce the perfect mediator for discussions between the U.K. and the EU over Brexit, and so on.

I took courses in history, geography, and sociology at the University of Toronto as a graduate student in a collaborative graduate program in ethnic and pluralism studies. Still, I probably learned more about multiculturalism by just walking around Toronto, taking the streetcar, and going to soulful house parties. Oh, and observing the contradictions of an Anglo-Canadian elite as a member of a residential graduate college that modelled itself on All Souls [College] at Oxford. I haven't thought about that place for a while! It offered room and board to graduates/junior fellows and a handful of journalist fellows who were taking a sabbatical, and we'd have lunches, dinners and events with senior fellows who were part of the political, cultural, or economic elite of Canada. These exchanges could be viewed as mentorship or networking opportunities, but I tended to approach them as a kind of armchair anthropologist. I was a keen observer of the habits and customs and rituals of these senior fellows from WASP families and Upper Canada College who held prominent positions in Queen's Park, Bay

Street, etc. The junior fellows were a more diverse bunch, although all the people of colour were international students and almost all the students born in Canada were white settlers. I think there was one Indigenous student. Everyone who worked as a server or in the kitchen was from Central America. All the cleaners were from the Caribbean. It was a crash course on settler colonialism, precarious migrant labour, and paternalism. It was like seeing John Porter's (1965) *Vertical Mosaic* made flesh.

I was particularly intrigued by the Anglophilia that fuelled the attempts to make this power legitimate—all the superficial trappings of Oxbridge: the gowns, the pretension, the dour cults of Winston Churchill, the symbols plucked from a Merchant Ivory film, and so on. Occasionally, I'd ask something that made it clear I wasn't a paid-up subscriber to the private-school-junior-common-room-private-members'-club pipeline. I'd ask why they kept inviting neo-imperialist historians from Oxford and Cambridge to speak at their public lectures and contribute essays to their newspapers. If they had to limit themselves to an Oxbridge pool, why weren't they engaging with Hilda Kean, E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and countless others who smuggled dissidence into and out of the dreaming spires? I can't say I was impressed with the answers, and I'm sure that I came across as a bit obnoxious or maybe an ungrateful killjoy. I remember the "master" of the college saying something like, can't you just help us reform the place a bit? Can't you do the work for us?

I ended up leaving the college after a year or so, but I stayed on at the University of Toronto to do my PhD in History. I spent a lot of time pottering around the ninth and tenth floors of Robarts Library reading a range of postcolonial thinkers who elegantly appropriated and misappropriated Raymond Williams' (1961) ideas about structures of feeling. I remember reading Edward Said's (1978) work, which ingeniously adapted Williams' ideas about how we—the royal British we and the bourgeois we in the overdeveloped world—might perceive these less tangible and small differences in style, speech, and behaviour when we watch someone who has learned our ways but was not bred in them. I liked how it invited Williams and British cultural studies to say more about what their work might mean for the political aspirations of postcolonial people and what they had learned from their political achievements (Gilroy, 1993a; Williams & Pinkney, 1989). But while I alluded to happy, smiling multiculturalism in a film review I wrote while studying in Toronto (McNeil, 2004), and some of my work on self-fashioning and collective liberation in the Black Atlantic (McNeil, 2009, 2010), I didn't spend a lot of time studying multiculturalism as a governmental or rhetorical strategy until I moved to Carleton in 2014.

Living in Ottawa helped me to perceive the tendency to associate politics with elected officials and groups concerned with or licenced by the state. I was privy to more meetings and conversations in which it was taken for granted that

the *public* could be conflated with *public policy* and that prestigious awards and recognition were vital for a society that wished to develop or preserve “harmonious race relations” (Canada, 1984, p. 139). This rhetoric or politics of recognition tended to combine sentimental hype about individual brilliance with the cynical question, which groups need to be recognized this year? Most people I met acknowledged the idea that awards are about who you know, the psychology and qualifications of the people on the committees, and so on, but they didn’t use this knowledge to deconstruct or denounce the system of recognition as corrupt and farcical. They seemed to want to find a way to get awards for themselves or use them to assert the visibility of their group within institutional cultures. These pages on university websites devoted to recognition and reputational enhancement projects have always seemed so foreign and colonial to me. They don’t align with my experiences growing up in working-class communities in England, where most of my friends and family recoiled from any type of recognition and admired folks who turned down honours and titles, particularly those that retained their imperial associations. They believed that if you went looking for recognition, you’d already lost.

Living in Ottawa and applying to become a permanent resident also forced me to pay more attention to citizenship guides. I became more attuned to multicultural ideology as a *system* of ideas that informs what we do as much as, if not more than, what we believe. I mean, most people recognize that these stock images of happy, smiling individuals with perfect white teeth in newcomers’ guides to Canada are rather unconvincing types of “multicultural snake oil” (Gilroy, 2015), but they keep getting repeated. We can know something is inauthentic and unconvincing but continue to propagate it. So, I wanted to think about how we might divest ourselves from multicultural snake oil, or at least think about what it might mean to approach multiculturalism as something like Santa Claus or the Easter bunny that gets passed down from generation to generation.

CR: Oh, that’s great.

DM: I’m looking forward to thinking about how the official discourse of multiculturalism has been adapted, promoted, and contested in a range of literary, cultural, and corporate texts in a class on Canadian immigration in the winter. We’ll be reading work on extra-institutional, unofficial, and informal settings—the types of feral, ludic, messy spaces that Paul Gilroy and other social and cultural theorists describe as “convivial multicultures” (Valluvan, 2019)—and talking about how they compete for legitimacy with official and corporate forms of multiculturalism. We’ll have amazing guest lecturers such as Zaheeda P. Alibhai (2020), whose research engages with the Conservative government’s ban on the wearing of face coverings during the oath of citizenship at Canadian citizenship ceremonies, and Helin Burkay and David Dean (2020), who write

about the attempts to fix the definition of a national culinary tradition in Canada as well as the continuing innovations of culinary practice among different communities. I think we'll also go on a virtual tour of *They Forgot That We Were Seeds*, an exhibition at the Carleton University Art Gallery curated by Kosisochukwu Nnebe that showcases the compelling work of Black and Indigenous women artists about Canada's embeddedness in the global history of colonialism.

Drawing on these and other resources, students will have the opportunity to debate and discuss stereotypes that symbolically fix immigrants as barbaric others or model minorities, exotic beauties, and superhuman athletes. Their final assignments will consider what it might mean to develop an immigrant's guide to Canada written with and for immigrants. Can we get away from these condescending citizenship guides that define Canadians by their positive traits of fairness, openness, and generosity (Gulliver, 2018; McNeil, 2021a, 2021b)? Can we imagine newcomers' guides to Canada that don't passive-aggressively tell immigrants the rules and laws that they need to know if they wish to travel along the yellow brick road to citizenship, eh? In previous years, students have collaborated to make Instagram pages that curate the lived experiences of women who have migrated to Canada and share useful resources for navigating Canadian institutions. They've developed incredible podcasts on conviviality and nostalgia by digging into the NFB [National Film Board of Canada] archives and re-visiting short films such as *Ted Baryluk's Grocery*. They haven't just reproduced the shiny, tech-savvy corporate multiculturalism or progressive neoliberalism that merges entrepreneurial fantasy and managerial technique, identity politics and market-driven policies, and the mystique of meritocracy and the allure of technocratic expertise (Lears, 2020). Nor have they succumbed to the pessimism or fatalism that says any entry into state work is doomed—it can only lead to some exotic cultural gloss, some attractive public-facing artistic content that veils the serious business of the university or the dark side of the nation.

CR: That's really great too, this movement between mythology, a system of ideas, and the infrastructure distributing power and culture. This reminds me of some the connections made in Mark Hayward's (2019) book.

DM: Yeah, that's an interesting link. I like how Hayward (2019) introduces his work on multicultural media with a brief yet telling reflection about public transportation in Toronto as a rich site of multicultural exchange, or at least a space with the potential for one set of habits to flow into others so that all of them are altered by that encounter. It reminded me of conversations with senior fellows at the graduate college at the University of Toronto, who'd talk about multicultural Toronto as a place you could peacefully encounter difference on the subway and hear some Portuguese on the bus or some Tagalog on streetcars.

I didn't pick up on it at the time, but I think they were also throwing a bit of shade on America—and rural, suburban and exurban areas of Canada—that they imagined as sites of racial conflict and misunderstanding in which people live segregated lives and peer at each other through their car windows and on their television screens.

I also revisited this combination of smugness and intrepidity when I rewatched some episodes of *Due South*, the television show about a Mountie in Chicago. I must have been rewatching them around 2011 because I can remember comparing them to my research on the condescending, old-school-liberalism of the Canadian filmmaker Norman Jewison, who was never more in his element than when he was directing a story about white Canadian liberals using literacy and the law to secure justice for an African American individual (McNeil, 2012). Anyway, after living in Toronto, I picked up on more of the Canadian references and the humour of a show set in Chicago that was primarily shot on location in Toronto. I was also struck by how often we see the Mountie walking or running around the city while his American colleagues are driving around. But the scene that stood out the most didn't feature any action. It just had the white Mountie talking to a white lieutenant in the Chicago police force about the voyages of Robert Peary to the North Pole. Then he stopped, turned around, and gave this very intentional look to a Black detective who was just minding his business on the other side of the room, and told him that Matthew Henson, *an African American*, had claimed to be the first to reach this geographic location.

That look! That enunciation of the words *African American*! There was our Canadian do-gooder honouring the codes of civility and civilization taught to him by his parents while making it clear that he wasn't willing to write Black heroes out of the history books like many of his ancestors. Our intrepid Canadian was more benevolent and caring toward African Americans than white Americans, who primarily experienced Blackness through media stereotypes. It reminded me of the desire to emphasize narrative histories of the underground railroad because they help Black and white Canadians take pride in the courage of their ancestors rather than dwell on the shamefulness of slavery in Canada (Brown, 2000). You know, talk to us about some Black achievers we can put on our website, the \$10 bill, and some Canadian heritage spots on TV. Help us turn the complexity of their life into something that we think the Canadian public will understand.

CR: Yes. I think you've touched on something crucial when you note its routinized or bureaucratized nature. Elsewhere, you have called it "dull."

DM: Dull. Banal. Narrow. Timid. I realize that I may be sounding like one of these condescending Brits, a kind of academic Simon Cowell! I'm not trying to perform that role of the cranky judge. I obviously want to distance myself from

that caricature, if possible. Maybe I'd turn it around to say that there's a danger that folks are turned off and stifled by the dullness. I start the article for the *CJC* (McNeil, 2021b) by recounting how a librarian checked out a book by the Canadian Ministry for Multiculturalism and drolly remarked on how interesting it looked. I also mention that colleagues advised me not to use multiculturalism in course titles because students thought it was a bit boring, and pushed me to think about how dullness or banality is being conflated with peace, order, and good government in Canada. But the article is also my response to lots of conversations with Canadians who use words such as *interesting* and *lively* as euphemisms for something that needs to be managed, some type of risky behaviour that leads to excessive disruption and civil unrest, someone who's a bit too loud or bit too "American."

I didn't talk about it much in the article for the *CJC*, but at the same time as there are all these race relations industries and human rights consultancy firms popping up in Canada aspiring to manage diversity and avert violent conflict, there's a movement called Rock Against Racism in the U.K. that speaks to young people about the pleasures of resisting racism in a compelling and non-sermonizing manner. There are music critics like Val Wilmer (1977) and Paul Gilroy (1982) in the seventies and eighties talking about expressive cultures that seek to capture the spirit of Black working-class communities, develop their struggles, and add to their power. Just as the Canadian officials who developed a Green Paper on immigration in 1975 were evoking politicians in U.K., like Enoch Powell, who associated multiracialism with violence and conflict, we should be able to connect the achievements and aspirations of people in Canada to the politically infused pleasure of multiracial groups of young people in the U.K. who rocked against racism with wit, irony, and invention (Widgery, 1986). As Richard Iton (2008) suggests, it's critical to bring into conversation a range of attempts to represent coloniality as, say, the grammar of "race relations" in the United States, apartheid in South Africa, caste in India, and "those things that only happen elsewhere" (pp. 201–202) in Canada. At the same time, we also need to write against the tendency to view the nation and, by extension, the transnational and the multinational, as the only frames of meaning. It's not just about connecting Canada with other nations, but considering how, say, Detroit, Liverpool, Marseille, and Halifax articulate with each other and help us to perceive the sources of political legitimacy in the concert stage and the nightclub as well as in the polling booth and the protest march. Yet this doesn't tend to be a path taken by national institutions interested in searching out guides with some credentials from elite universities. There's a preference or predilection for searching out middle-aged, middle-class people with graduate degrees who may have more willingness or capacity to fill out grant applications and file reports that often treat ambiguity or hidden messages with suspicion or scorn.

The article has a couple of case studies of people who worked with and within multicultural institutions and discourses in Canada. One follows the public life of Rosemary Brown. I'd interviewed her brother, who had chaired the Halifax Human Rights Advisory Committee in the sixties, in 2004 as part of my PhD research on Black and mixed-race identities in the Atlantic world, but I didn't know much about Brown's work before I visited her archives at the University of British Columbia. They include her speeches and the newspaper clippings she kept as an avid consumer of Canadian media and provide us with a range of material and symbolic resources to go beyond the narrative histories that turn her life into a tale of a Jamaican Canadian achiever who can inspire Black children to do some great thing within Canadian society. Most people who follow Black History Month celebrations will know that Brown was the first Black individual to run for the leadership of a federal political party in Canada, but such factoids are rarely accompanied with a sustained reflection with her social and political thought. Deep engagements with her ideas are few and far between even though—or perhaps because—the potted accounts of her life proliferate. So, I wanted to learn more about her humanistic ideas and how she wrestled with complexity and contradiction. How did she come to believe that challenging ideas and perspectives had to be communicated in the safest and most bland manner for Canadian audiences (Brown, 1989), and think that a good title for a book about Canada would be *Let's Pretend, Let's Deny* (Brown, 1991)? How did she deconstruct the mythology of multiculturalism but still deliver speeches that presented Canada as a nation of immigrants? What fuelled her determination to create space for Black authorities to be seen and heard, to speak out on behalf of others, to challenge a state that failed to offer protection and recognition to racialized and minority groups? And how was this connected, or not, to a Black radical tradition that also says, let's support young people and autodidacts to search out information so they can challenge or disrupt hierarchical thinking; let's not presume that people without formal educational qualifications need an intellectual vanguard to tell them what to do or say; let's disrupt the patronizing attitudes of elites and spokespeople that presume that they need to speak on behalf of subaltern groups because they don't have the time, ability, or inclination to develop theoretical ideas.

The other case study selects key works written or co-written by Frances Henry. Before researching the article on multiculturalism, I didn't know Henry's work particularly well. I'd just seen her give a talk when I was a grad student at the University of Toronto. She came to a class on ethnic and pluralism studies to discuss the research she was doing on racism in the English language press in Canada, and I'd taken the journalist fellows from my college to see her. They weren't particularly impressed! They thought that she was attacking their profession and their integrity, and there were lots of murmurings of discontent dur-

ing the question-and-answer period. I remember asking a question about journalistic and academic praxis—something intended to get us talking about the pitfalls of superficial journalism and narrow scholasticism, and maybe something that might permit us to critically reflect on some of the ironies of the work we do while located within our respective institutions—and I remember Henry lamenting that she just didn't think social science research was making much change in the "real world."

So, I had a sense of her identity as a social scientist who was pushing against a reluctance to engage with systemic racism in the media, but it wasn't until I read the special issue on Black Canadian thought in the *C.L.R. James Journal* that I thought about studying her work over the past half-century. Her name pops up in the issue a few times—Hudson and Kamugisha (2014) describe her as the author of a "condescending" (p. 7) book review of David Austin's (2013) *Fear of a Black Nation* in their introduction, for example—but there weren't any articles that deeply engaged with her body of work or her belief that white validation and "serious research" was necessary to communicate the pain and suffering of Black communities to decision-makers in the middle and upper levels of Canadian society (Agnew, 2007). When I read the books and reports Henry had authored and co-authored, I kept wondering how she was performing the role of a serious academic researcher who challenged white elites who were reluctant to consider racism a very serious issue in Canadian society. How was she citing Black cultural theorists, for example, but not necessarily taking on board their aspirations and accomplishments in producing new forms and styles of writing and a generative approach to aesthetics (Highmore, 2018)? I highlighted passages that cited Stuart Hall or some other prominent cultural theorist but didn't communicate why or how they used ambiguity, irony, and metaphor to disrupt what is taken for granted. I was drawn to paragraphs in which Henry and her collaborator Carol Tator (Tator & Henry, 2006) considered metaphors such as "the elephant in the room" (p. 141) as too confusing to the average Canadian reader. They were just so different to the tone and texture of scholars such as Katherine McKittrick (2021), who are participating in these ongoing conversations with Hall and a Black radical tradition that invite us to address how metaphors are necessary and how we might think about how they are structured by and through the groundedness of Black life that is not irony-averse or irony-deficient.

One of the passages that crystallized some of my concerns about Henry's approach came in a book she wrote with her long-time collaborator Carol Tator on racism in Canada. There's a section in the book about the notorious *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum that describes its strong use of irony as a problem (Henry & Tator, 2009). I understand this desire to avoid such public relations nightmares, and the wider point that the exhibit is

an important case study of systemic racism, limited Black representation in Canadian institutions, and demonstrated an aggressive indifference to the emotional and mental well-being of Black visitors. I appreciate that some audiences—and many Canadian institutions—may treat irony as an aggressive act or something that needs to be handled with extreme caution. But their response to the exhibit seemed to suggest that specialized, serious race relations professionals needed to come in to instruct a general audience, or maybe consult the institution, and cut down on the irony. They didn't seem to invite people in to ask, how might we explore complexity and ambiguity together? They seemed to want to reduce the complexity and diminish the ambiguity. There seemed to be this didacticism, this desire to control the message, this lack of faith that you can invite people in to take possession of the material and explore compelling questions, this belief that absolute clarity is possible, necessary, and desirable.

It's probably worth repeating that Henry and Tator are developing a strategy that they hoped would address the aggressive indifference to racism among the middle and upper levels of Canadian institutional society. I'm not suggesting that this is invalid or ineffective. I just have some concerns about the implications of their approach and the rejection of the type of close-reading strategies and slow-looking strategies that are designed to cultivate discussion and reflection about what is often dismissed as tangential (Gallop, 2000). It doesn't seem to reckon with Black expressive cultures, such as jazz, which refuse to submit to a world without irony. It also appears at odds with how I was stimulated into learning by witty, ironic exhibits at art galleries and museums. I mean, I'd often travel to Liverpool city centre to go to art galleries and museums with my grandmother. They were all free to access, and we'd potter around and write down any words we didn't know. We'd write down the names of artists that made us smile or were just a bit of a mystery, and we'd go off to the library to pick up some books that could help us learn more about how the art was made and what historical circumstances and ideas it was in dialogue with. If there wasn't some mystery or irony or wit in these institutional spaces, I don't know if I'd have been stimulated to go off on a journey of intellectual discovery that took me from Merseyside to Oxford to Canada. I probably wouldn't have had the opportunity to work with you on letters addressing systemic racism, classes about curating scientific knowledge, or this conversation.

So, there are all types of professional, political, and personal reasons why I worry about this framing of irony as a problem, *per se*. I may overemphasize irony coming from a country in which it's often considered an achievement to deliver statements that simultaneously appear 100 percent sincere and 100 percent ironic. But if you curtail the "strong use of irony" from museum exhibits and outsource it to a few select private gatherings or academic spaces where you

think people can handle and appreciate it, aren't you likely to be left with exhibits that do little more than repeat press releases from a government agency or a corporate patron? Shouldn't we be doing more work to ensure that exhibits can be experienced at lots of different levels, rather than repressing the things some specialized professionals presume are a bit too demanding or esoteric for "ordinary people" or the "informed general reader?" Should we even be wasting our time on such questions when we can work together to challenge the assumption that it's necessary to demand that most people have to pay an admission fee to enter purportedly public museums, which tends to create a situation in which working-class kids only enter such spaces on school trips while middle-class parents feel entitled to use them as extended child care?

CR: Yes, I had hoped we would talk about these questions, and thanks for that way of contextualizing how multiculturalism often invites us to think about politics and belonging, often by first separating us from the knowledge and circumstances that have compelled us to think in the first place. Your periodization in the *CJC* article you mention (McNeil, 2021b) suggests that different aspects of this history of multiculturalism get mobilized in different contexts and circumstances, and this is important for illuminating the recent surge in anti-racist discourses.

I have heard repeated Will Kymlicka's (2015) idea that it is easier to study multiculturalism at the federal level and found myself asking why that is so. I find myself wondering if it isn't an effect of the state's decision to insert itself so insistently into the many different ways of embodying multiculturalism. The notion didn't need to "overflow" from the question of supporting the conviviality of multi-cultures into the positioning of the nation as the primary association or ground upon which cultures should understand themselves as interacting. So, I wonder if what Kymlicka presents to us as a kind of methodological convenience is actually an extension of a governmental strategy. I think it's a fascinating possibility that is raised by the history you narrate. The ease with which a banal discourse of multiculturalism circulates is an interruption of other approaches to multi-cultures and an anxiety over multi-culture as a medium of the critical thought.

In this respect, I admire how your concept of "shy elitism" attends to the circulation of critical thought. If we accept what I'll loosely call the neoliberalization of multiculturalism, then the legacy of a governmental interest in "race relations" both encourages and spills into corporate and commercial relationships. There is a brand that's developed as an economic strategy, as an appeal to international business, as a way of thinking about migration, which you have discussed, and with that comes this intensification of systems for producing visible and measurable indicators of multicultural success. Your work discusses how an apparatus develops for issuing official citations, publicized recognitions, reputable awards, celebrated prizes, high-profile ceremonies, and so on. So, shy elit-

ism isn't a lack of ostentation. It suggests, in part, a symbolic engagement that circumscribes more systematic engagements with the more difficult aspects of belonging and living together.

It reminds me of Gilroy's (1993b) comment about the "elephants' graveyard" (p. 6) and the way Black thought might be absorbed into race relations' approaches to make culture legible to the state, which is one way that challenging ideas are recast as an expression of intractable policy issues that are then made to appear as unresolvable or unchanging.

I've thrown a lot at you here ... is there something you'd like to pick up on or respond to?

DM: Maybe I'll just pick up on your point about citation. Part of what I like about Gilroy's (1993b) *Black Atlantic* is that it's a heuristic text that doesn't tend to overexplain. Gilroy (2014a) wrote it as he went in search of a "proper job" (p. 208) as a scholar, and there are all of these signposts to help guide the reader through the text, but it remains a book that's radically illuminating rather than systematic. Like John Berger, Gilroy is sifting through historical raw material to open up new freedoms rather than weighing down the book with the weight of evidence that would seem necessary to a professional historian (Dyer, 1986).

For example, a number of historians and postcolonial theorists have taken issue with *The Black Atlantic* (Gilroy, 1993b) for its failure to demonstrate a systematic engagement with Marxist theory and Black radical tradition. I think Robin Kelley (2000) talks about his surprise that *The Black Atlantic* doesn't substantively engage with Cedric Robinson's (2000) *Black Marxism*, for example, even though they explore much of the same ground. But this seems to miss the point that Gilroy is substantively engaging with Robinson by exploring much of the same ground. Gilroy's participating in an ongoing conversation with Robinson by developing case studies of W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright who, along with C.L.R. James, are the three figures whose lives and circumstances are studied in depth in *Black Marxism* (Robinson, 2000). He's just refusing to signpost all of his intellectual debts in capital letters. He's taking seriously Du Bois' ability to insert hidden clues for gentle and careful readers. He's starting one of his chapters with a quote from Jean-Paul Sartre about Richard Wright's ability to steer a path that avoided the pitfalls of didacticism. I mean, even though *The Black Atlantic* only has one footnote that mentions Edward Said's essay on travelling theory, that shouldn't obscure the fact that it's modelled on Said's (1978) *Orientalism* (Gilroy 2014a).

Again, I don't want to overstate this point. There's a danger that by not citing certain people, and leaving the work of foregrounding your influences to interviews, some readers may assume that you are the originator of certain ideas and concepts. I was a bit dismayed that a book published by Tate Liverpool about an

Afro Modern exhibit claimed Gilroy coined the term *Black Atlantic*, rather than put it into wider academic circulation, for example (Barson & Gorschlüter, 2010). I know how important it is for people going through books and museums and galleries to have some names they can investigate further. It's not like I haven't been conditioned to associate footnotes with the professional practice of historical writing! I just think we might want to talk a bit more, rather than less, about citational practices that seem a bit rote or superficial. There are plenty of reasons why Henry and her colleagues can spend more time talking about whether Black writers have received prestigious awards than the content of their work (Tator, Henry, & Matthis, 1998), why Gilroy (1993b, 2014) quips that there are a lot of people who are well-known without being well-read, and [why he] worries that a lot of people judged *Against Race* (Gilroy, 2000) based on its title rather than its content. I remember working with colleagues on an event, and they started discussing how excited they were to have a scholar visit our campus. I asked what they were particularly interested in engaging with, what they thought about the scholar's books, and so on, and they said, oh, we haven't read them! All they knew was that they were an important voice from a prestigious university. It'd be interesting, I think, to consider how such invitations and events intersect with the marketing strategies of university presses as well as academic networks and citational practices that sometimes slime into cronyism.

CR: Yes. I'm thinking a lot recently about how a recognition of work displaces or sets narrow terms for reckoning with it, about how the challenging aspects of history and thought are translated or brokered—or of multiculturalism as a brokering mechanism for ideas. In thinking about some of the criticisms found in Rosemary Brown's work, and especially in the "race relations" sociologies that Henry developed, I'm struck by the criticism of Black radical thought as too abstruse, too philosophical, and maybe too impressionistic, as you have said. Yet, at the same time, there are frequent hints that such thought is a threat. It is positioned as inappropriate to Canadian contexts. It's a danger to social cohesion, or a certain kind of cohesion. These concerns appear to me as part of a brokering system for separating ideas or culture from the transformative politics that critical thought is often prefiguring. At any rate, I find this a curious juxtaposition. Such work is too difficult to understand and too dangerous if understood.

DM: Yeah, there's this cocktail of dismissiveness, pity, and envy that's concocted in response to Black radical thinkers who are deemed too utopian, too ineffectual, too esoteric to translate their theoretical discourse to broader publics. There's also this fear and loathing attached to Black activists who are deemed to be threats to academic discussions and debate. The archives of the League for Socialist Action/Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière at Library and Archives Canada have a lot of material that presents revolutionary praxis in this Janus-faced way. It has

pretty extensive notes and reports that frame Ato Sekyi-Otu as a theoretician who calls on comrades to do more and more reading before they act, and portray Rosie Douglas as an activist who demands action first, reflection later. These advisory warnings about Black intellectuals are also prominent in the accounts of small-l liberals. The liberal historian Robin Winks (1971), whose history of Black Canada is often cited and found in the Black Studies/Black History section of Chapters, Indigo, and other corporate bookstores in Canada, was open to praising Frantz Fanon as a talented writer for example, but he'd invariably combine such recognition of individual genius with a note that all too many Black radicals were hijacking Fanon's work to meet the emotional and political needs of collective organizations he deemed didactic and dogmatic (Winks, 1999). He's often recycling the interpretations of Tom Wolfe (1970) about Black radicals "mau-mauing" or violently intimidating and guilt-tripping white liberals.

Black radical thought is also a spectre that haunts Henry's work. Sometimes she recycles liberal discourse about the destruction wrought by dogmatic Black radicals and groupthink (Henry, 2013). Sometimes she's using the term "Black intellectual elite" to suggest that the life of the mind is something that diverts attention away from the serious, material issues of describing Black experiences with racism in the modern world (Agnew, 2007). It's an approach that turns many cultural studies projects on their head. It's very different from Gilroy's (2009) comment that we might unsettle narrow scholasticism by learning from Bob Marley and other vernacular intellectuals who misappropriated the bureaucratic language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to put it in the hands of people fighting outside of conventional politics to create a world with a more human face.

I was interested by Henry's self-fashioning as an applied researcher who was invested in social scientific expertise and evidence-based research or, at the very least, was determined to defend her work against the charge that it was too anecdotal, impressionistic, or speculative. Her early work has all these calls for data collection, statistical analysis, methodological notes, et cetera. Then, when her work moves into more critical discourse analysis, it's not really looking at how terms are contested. It's claiming that it's necessary to translate cultural studies and postmodernism to people who find it confusing. It's constructing glossaries that define and confine terms rather than acknowledging that terms acquire quite discrepant and even contrary meanings over time and across space.

CR: You touch on so many important themes here. As a first thought, it helps me think about Obama's recent comments on defunding the police, which seem concerned mainly with which knowledges shape the problem space for thinking about policing. But I'm thinking too about how Frances Henry's work and *The Equity Myth* (Henry, Enakshi, James, Kobayashi, Li, Ramos, & Smith,

2017) is mobilized to situate much of the anti-racist work within our university system. I understand the strategic importance of having acceptable forms of data to document racial discrimination in institutional settings. But I feel this form of equity work is often un-reflexive about separating discourses of race and racism from the modes of thought and embodied experience that are compelling institutional change. If we locate equity work too firmly in data collection, if this is our primary orientation, then it feels we participate in efforts to disqualify modes of thought that are intrinsically challenging to institutional routines. I don't want to go too far with this claim ... but I am struck by how your history of multiculturalism prepares us to think about it.

DM: Yeah, I've been thinking a lot about how we might place the history of multiculturalism in productive dialogue with thinkers who help us to distinguish policy and politics. Over the past couple of years, I've been on various panels discussing systemic racism in academia or other artistic or cultural institutions. When the question of what is to be done to eradicate racial hierarchies comes up—actually, that's not how it tends to be framed, it's usually couched in more bureaucratic or legalistic language to be something like, what are some significant changes or remedial directions for our EDI [equity, diversity, and inclusion] action plans?—I've often repeated David Graeber's (2004) point that the notion of policy presumes a state or governing apparatus that imposes its will on others and is the negation of politics. I think Graeber and Gilroy were colleagues at Yale in the early 2000s before they both moved to London, and Gilroy's (2005) *Postcolonial Melancholia* makes some similar points when he notes that a lot of what passes for politics in the mainstream media isn't politics. It's policy work, something concocted by some form of elite that presumes it knows better than others how their affairs ought to be conducted. It's not attending to the rich diversity of activities through which people make, preserve, and amend the general rules under which they live.

The experiences of Graeber and Gilroy at Yale [where Graeber's contract was not renewed and Gilroy (2014a) came to believe that he was identified as an outsider and pushed out from African American political and social thought], help us perceive some of the challenges in pursuing radical political and intellectual projects within Ivy League universities. At the same time, I'm interested in the dissonant, against-the-grain tendencies that we can access and amplify within these institutions. Just like Oxbridge can't be reduced to the Churchill archives and bunting, Harvard can't be reduced to the [John Kenneth] Galbraith archives and walking along the Charles River. It's also home to the quasi-anarchic reflections Gilroy developed for *Emergency*, a short-lived journal of the radical imagination in the U.K., while he was working as research officer for Greater London Council. I appreciated digging into this archive at Harvard for my book on Black

cultural criticism and learning about how he was working collaboratively with radical egalitarians. In his academic articles, Gilroy (1990) is asking pointed questions about erstwhile socialists and feminists who've drifted into academic boardrooms and workshops on race relations. In his interventions for *Emergency*, Gilroy (1983/1984) is not only challenging an emergent Black middle-class to clarify how they advance the interests of the communities that they purport to serve—he's writing against the race relations experts and journalists that refuse to acknowledge the possibility that protestors burning a police car might be attacking discernible local institutions and the everyday networks of local activity to make a political point.

Black cultural criticism

CR: Your research works in a sustained way with media critics. And media criticism is often approached as a medium of critical thought that blends different genres, lives, knowledges, and styles. I appreciate how you avoid reifying media as a fixed object of study or scholarly critique. And, of course, it strikes me that Gilroy was a journalist, and Austin too, and Sylvia Wynter, and that you too have produced media criticism, including a podcast with Armond White. I wonder if you might discuss your approach to media with us.

DM: Hmm. This is a good question. I often find myself turing to media to unpack abstract ideas about collective liberation. At the same time, I'm interested in using cultural theory to challenge some rather uncritical and unanalytical media narratives that perpetuate exaggerated individualism.

I'm thinking about how to bring together tales of individual self-fashioning with collective liberation as I edit the introduction to *Thinking While Black* (McNeil, in press). In the book's opening pages, I'm reflecting on my formative experiences with the British media as a child in Merseyside during the eighties. One way of doing so is reflecting on my experiences with the British media as a child in Merseyside during the eighties. The region's shipping and manufacturing industries had collapsed, its unemployment rates were around 20 percent, and multiracial groups of young people had targeted discernible local institutions and the everyday networks of local activity in what British opinion leaders described as riots. Cabinet meetings chaired by the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher discussed putting Liverpool into "Detroit-style managed decline" (Gilroy, 2021, p. 16). Journalists portrayed people from Merseyside, particularly people from the port city of Liverpool, as "scheming scallies," "Northern monkeys," and jobless yobs with little or no education. In 1989, the *Sun* newspaper, a tabloid owned by Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp organization, falsely accused Liverpool supporters of stealing from dead bodies, urinating on police officers, and assaulting frontline workers who were trying to save lives during a fatal human crush at a football ground. Such lies prompted a decades-long boy-

cott of the paper in my home community (Scraton, 2016). I mean, the *Sun* had the highest circulation figures in the U.K., but it wasn't carried in our newsagents. We weren't interested in trying to reform it. We just didn't want to see it, handle it, or deal with it. It was toxic waste.

I also open the book with some brief reflections about what it felt like to come to Canada as a graduate student in the early 2000s and figure out a climate that seemed more comfortable with passive aggression than righteous indignation. I was a bit dumbfounded by the attempts of Canadian journalists to win friends and influence people in the United States while also emphasizing the vulgarity and violence of American history and culture, to be honest. I remember just gazing, open-mouthed, at headlines that took much delight in Americans recognizing Canadian artists—there was one on a monitor in a subway that said, the Canadian “Nelly Furtado will sit in the front row of the American Grammys”—and feeling disgruntled by the attempts to give Canadians some plausible deniability against the charge that they had anything approaching the levels of racism or racial violence that bedevilled the U.S. I think a lot of people remember Stephen Harper (2009) saying that there was no colonialism in Canada at the G20, but I was also tuning into British radio shows to hear prominent Canadians such as David Cronenberg (2014) suggest that slavery and racial violence had not sullied their home and native land.

After a while, I just tuned out from much of the Canadian media. I'd read the newspaper clippings in the archives. I'd go back and work through the *Globe and Mail* in the archives, seeing these malicious attempts to frame Caribbean migrants as illiterate anarchists and dangerous threats to Western civilization (Anonymous, 1975a, 1975b). I'd read the editorials in the *Toronto Sun* in the seventies that droned on about affirmative action, political correctness, and the civilizing mission of British imperialism. But I couldn't bring myself to read, watch, or listen to Canadian media in the 2000s that was veiling the overt racism of the past without managing to move beyond platitudes and banality. I had more than enough suffering supporting Everton Football Club. I didn't need to put myself through any more misery by reading Margaret Wente and co.

When I consciously disentangled myself from the Canadian newspapers that provoked me into writing, I started looking around for alternative media outlets that might inspire me. I ended up stumbling across Armond White's reviews for the *New York Press*, and began studying his distinctive approach to film, race and American culture. Around the same time—it must have been the winter of 2001 or the spring of 2002—I read *The Black Atlantic* (Gilroy, 1993b) and *Against Race* (Gilroy, 2000). So I was reading Gilroy's reflections on the ethics and aesthetics of Black Atlantic cultures in parallel with White's resistance aesthetics. I was moving between Gilroy's analysis of, say, the eloquent torso of Tupac and White's allusions to the self-fashioning and historical sensibil-

ity of a gay porn star called Dred Scott, who inscribed one side of his chest with a tattoo saying *Black* and the other with a tattoo saying *White*. I was reading Gilroy's analysis of the exotic figures on billboards and magazines that cynically suggested that some safe degree of difference from a white norm might be highly prized as a sign of inclusivity and global reach in the library, and then going into a cramped graduate computer room to read White's take on the marketing of mixed-race actors who claimed to be making a film for all the "ethnically ambiguous" kids who didn't see themselves on screen.

In the book about the political aspirations and cultural achievements of these Black critics, I think about how they've brought together a dazzlingly eclectic range of high and low cultures over the past fifty years. I read White (1995) as an anti-academic intellectual who critiques cautious and compromised "academic eggheads" (p. 310) as well the cultural production of ignorance, and I describe Gilroy as an extra-academic intellectual who distances himself from narrow and timid scholasticism while becoming what he playfully describes as a "domesticated foe" (Bell, 1999, p. 23) of academic disciplines such as sociology. But they're both intellectuals dissatisfied with the bureaucracy and hype of knowledge industries. They're both children of Amiri Baraka, Toni Morrison, and a Black arts movement. They both believe in Black popular modernism and expressive cultures like jazz and film that speak to audiences fractured along the experiential fault lines of gender, race, and class. White joins the *First of Month* editorial collective, for example, which is described as one of few leftist publications that could be read at both Columbia University and Rikers Island by *Time Out* magazine, and Gilroy expresses his frustration with the transformation or recycling of jazz into a classical tradition for corporate patrons of the Lincoln Arts Center in New York (Shelby & Gilroy, 2008).

While probing their tastes and ideas for their historical origins, intellectual coherence, philosophical commitments and political implications, the book records how they made incisive contributions to public spheres that countered the exclusionary violence of much public space in the United States and the United Kingdom. Armond White's disrupting what he calls straight, white middle-class world as arts editor for *City Sun*, a Brooklyn-based Black newspaper that had the tagline, "speaking truth to power." His reviews of art and culture would emerge in one of the few New York papers to carry continuing, in-depth African news in the eighties. They would be read alongside advertisements for workshops and panels about the culture wars featuring prominent intellectuals such as Edward Said, Cornel West, and Sylvia Wynter, and events such as the Biko Lives Festival, which celebrated the life and legacy of Steve Biko, an anti-Apartheid activist-intellectual and theorist of Black consciousness. Gilroy's record reviews and concert previews appeared in *City Limits*, a left-wing arts listing magazine in London that was founded by journalists dissatisfied with

Time Out's response to industrial action in the early eighties. His music criticism drew attention to the dangers of vapid American products, celebrated musicians who provided us with tools to contest male contempt for child-rearing, and demonstrated the power of rebel music that developed the struggles of Black working-class communities. They'd be published alongside adverts for Irish freedom festivals, conferences on socialist economics, fora on workers' education, and other initiatives that demonstrated the interrelationship and interdependence of cultural production and radical politics. Looking at the contributions of White and Gilroy to such papers and magazines helps situate them within a radical tradition and add some formative context to their distaste for what they consider the hollowness of mainstream, middlebrow journalism. To give one example, they are always alive to the pitfalls of the journalistic cliché, "so-and-so is ahead of the times." As young soul rebels, they'd dance around journalists who used such clichés and point out that no one is ahead of the times—they're just ahead of mainstream acceptance. Then they'd circle back and suggest that the middle-class, middle-aged journalists who use such phrases, and the editors who tolerate them, are invariably sheltered figures who are behind the times.

After probing their tastes and ideas for their philosophical commitments, political implications, intellectual coherence and structures of feeling in the seventies and eighties, I ask, well, what happens when White and Gilroy enter into middle age and drop the "young" from "young soul rebels"? Do they start to feel that they are behind the times? Do they stop going out to listen to live music or feel less pleasure when they go to concerts and performances? How are they working within and against these marketing machines that say, hey, why bother doing the difficult work of connecting the exhilarating and stimulating knowledge in these public spheres when you can just buy a book by bell hooks, Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates Jr., or some other entrepreneurial intellectual? Why bother doing the work of reading radical intellectuals when you can follow Barack Obama (1995) and sneer about ineffectual figures peddling Communist newspapers on the fringes of college towns?

CR: Yes. You are also bringing some important intergenerational questions forward here, and I think, for example, about the differences between what you just described and the way David Scott (2004) works to read and bring radical knowledge together with a changing relation to the present. And, of course, you write on how Gilroy and White have responded and adapted to these changes. It is such an interesting pairing or juxtaposition. You seem drawn to examples of critical intellect that aren't sanctioned, aren't licenced by prestige presses, aren't protected by academic credentials or institutional power. I think of White's resistance to what the film critic's circle becomes and how, as you've pointed out,

this resistance is often reduced narrowly to whether or not his actions at a gala were deserving of him getting kicked out. And then when he is de-platformed by Rotten Tomatoes because his style of criticism is jamming a platform designed to promote the industry, the discussion doesn't address what it means to have an aggregator of criticism assume cultural authority. The question is framed by frustrations that White's review of Jordan Peele's movie *Get Out* ruined its perfect Rotten Tomatoes rating. It seems White's style is resisting incorporation into commodified modes of criticism for debasing our relationship to popular film.

DM: That's right, although it's probably worth mentioning that White (1972) comes to this challenge to commodification and the culture industry via a notion of Black consciousness that he associates with a "belief in God, belief in family, self-trust, growth from the past and loyalty." He's writing for the *South End*, the student newspaper of Wayne State University that John Watson and other members of a Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement had transformed into an imaginative vessel for the Black radical tradition in the late sixties. But most of his work for the *South End* in the seventies appears after Watson and other Marxist-Leninist editors had been pushed out by the university administration. His reviews wouldn't cite [Theodor] Adorno or [Max] Horkheimer to critique the culture industry, nor did they engage with C.L.R. James, Cedric Robinson, James and Grace Lee Boggs, or other theorists that are often cited in discussion of a Black radical tradition. He's occasionally referencing some of W.E.B. Du Bois' early work, but his reviews for the *South End* are mainly drawing on prominent journalists and filmmakers that he perceives as American existentialists who explore the violent reality and consequences of alienation. He aspires to move behind the veil of American segregation and sit with the likes of Du Bois, Pauline Kael, Norman Mailer and Robert Altman (McNeil, 2020). Noting these aspirations helps us to avoid some of the oversimplified narratives of academics and critics who say that White used to be radical writer worth reading before he joined the *New York Press*, an alternative weekly that was founded by the libertarian Republican Russ Smith, and turned into a post-9/11 conservative (Martin, 2008). His work over the past fifty years has blended conservatism, radicalism and anti-liberalism. He's expressed contempt for lazy commercialism and appreciated talented and imaginative pop artists who use commercial music videos, films, and advertisements in the *City Sun* and the *New York Press*. Whether writing for the *South End* in the seventies or the *National Review* in the 2020s, he's tried to hold capitalism to account for our spiritual well-being while exposing the spurious radicalism of hustlers who play with revolution.

In contrast, Gilroy is placing secularism at the cornerstone of his notion of modernity, and thinking about how messages of liberation overflow from reli-

gious containers into secular and profane venues. He's also open to sounding a bit Adornian and saying that every music video he watches leaves him a little dumber and a little worse (Gilroy, 2014b)! So, I'm thinking a lot about the boundaries of acceptable discourse in academic and media institutions and how to communicate and make available the histories and struggles of writers with dissonant, against-the-grain tendencies. Anyone who does a Google search for Armond White will find lots of articles and blogs declaring that White is a post-9/11 conservative who can't be taken seriously. Someone who did a search on Google books or Google scholar for Paul Gilroy would probably encounter lots of articles declaring that he was a bit of an old fogey who thinks that Black music has declined. Or maybe some footnotes that position him as a British intellectual who talks about the decline and deskilling of African American music for European audiences. There's less work that historicizes their writing, and considers how their late style relates to their political and cultural aspirations as young soul rebels in the seventies and eighties.

CR: I really admire this attention to the historicity of the self-fashioning of scholars, of style, of the way you give readers a feel for cultural currents from which these thinkers compose their hopes, their sense of possibility, their politics. I can see that there's an art or craft to it. I was trying to find words to describe your approach just before we met. There is a generous agonism in which you think along with the thinkers you study for much longer durations or periods of time than is often the case. I say agonistic because you aren't impatient with the place of conflict or seeking to dispense or resolve it. I get a feel for the problem space they are shaping, reshaping, refusing, modifying, recreating, and your way of participating in that as a critic that doesn't hold their thought at a distance as a condition of engaging with it.

DM: Thanks, Chris. I like that notion of generous agonism or agonistic respect to address Gilroy's desire to assert and contest a European identity as well as White's ability to prod the tastes and boundaries of a liberal public sphere. They have a rebel spirit that is always a little dissatisfied with polite academic discussions in which we politely nod, demonstrate our political correctness, and list some fashionable names rather than talk about the challenging content of the work. They're also willing to express their discomfort with calls for safe spaces and the guardians of political bubbles that they associate with cheap, therapeutic approaches to race thinking rather than richer, healthier challenges to racism (Gilroy & Bechler, 2016; Penn, 2015). What I've valued in reading their political, artistic, aesthetic, and activist work is how it refuses to be pinned down into any facile or reductive schemas. Their writing is alive to the pitfalls of these camps of celebration or condemnation, as well as media outlets and platforms that attempt to reduce our responses to culture to thumbs up or thumbs down. They

don't seem particularly interested in the types of rhetorical moves that writers often use in an attempt to win readers over to their point of view—they don't spend an inordinate amount of time documenting how they have “worked out” a position or try to erase all of the caustic energy or rage from their writing to appear more reasonable to middle England or middle America, for example—they seem more interested in putting images and ideas out there and inviting us to adapt them to our local concerns. They may find some personal attacks a bit beyond the pale, but they've retained their faith in a humanist community whenever they've been able to associate disagreement and debate with solidarity, collegiality, and love, rather than barriers to them.

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