The Idea of Black Culture

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A RETURN TO THE IDEA OF BLACK CULTURE MUST BE CONSIDERED today in a critical climate that is not hospitable to the topic, even though hospitality and accommodation have never been attributes of the context in which the idea was either engendered or understood. An aspect of the problematic for the investigator, then, is to get in sight a horizon of inquiry that will enable, if not necessarily vouch for, a project that is, by very definition, anachronistic from several points of view. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that a powerful repertory of refusals that make the topic a virtual impossibility now blocks one's view: (1) the recession of the subject, historical and otherwise; (2) a dimensionless present, on an analogy with television; and so, (3) the impoverishment of history; (4) the decline of the concept and practices of the nation-state, except that current U.S. foreign policy, the dramatic rise of post-Soviet states, and China's sensational emergence on the contemporary world stage would all urge a serious rethinking of such claims; (5) the "exhaustion of difference"; (6) the new impulses of a globalization so complete, we are led to believe, that locality, or the "local" itself, apparently vanishes as a discrete moment of

perception; and paradoxically, (7) an Afrocentric conceptual space that so collapses the distance between a putative African Diaspora and the cultures of the African Continent that little differentiation is interposed between them. Any coeval attempt, then, to revise the project of black culture as a conceptual object and as a practical devise toward the achievement of social transformation must confront these fully blown symptoms of impediment that appear to have surged up from the reactive forms of the post-1960s world.

One of the symptoms that I have identified here—"the exhaustion of difference"—along with the rest of the repertoire, might be taken as a feature of the critical framework that enables such a project as this one, at the same time that it significantly alters the topic away from the binaristic impulses that might have inspired the question in the first place. Published in 2001, Alberto Moreiras's *The Exhaustion of Difference,* the title that I have purloined here, inquires into the epistemic conditions that would make it possible to situate *Latin-Americanist* cultural studies (Moreiras 2001). We might linger here a moment because this text offers a brilliant synthesis of theoretical reflection on the new epistemes, among which I would locate the inquiry I am embarked on, and which runs parallel, as an instance of an emergent social formation in *discourse,* to the one that I have in my sights. Furthermore, it poses the kind of resistance that a project like "the idea of black culture" must answer. One of the crucial demonstrations that *The Exhaustion of Difference* carries out, in its exemplarity, is the dancing the value of dialectical engagement applied as a brake to closural motions along a trajectory of conceptual points: this interminable motion has its drawbacks, as well, not the least of which is its tedium, perhaps another rendering of "exhaustion," but the reward here is that the split between positions—that scissiparous effect that is false, in truth—is avoided as the case unfolds. The challenge, then, to mount the division and ride it, rather than repose in any particular nuance, can never be entirely won, but the effort is worth the expense and identifies precisely the kind of problematic that the new epistemes have wanted to tackle; the process of dialogic or dialectical movement between punctualities also suggests that analysis often proceeds from the position-taker driving her point against another

that is, perhaps, only the reverse of her putative own, or its complement, or one peremptory side of a split that could possibly be sutured with an apparent other, if a dialogical rhythm or current could be created and sustained between the m. Dialogism in this instance might arrest the advance of the "straw man."

One of the other most persistent refusals of *black* cultural conceptualization is, ironically enough, Afrocentrism itself, which comes at the question from a very different angle than that of the "exhaustion of difference." If anything, Afrocentrism is the radical embrace of difference, with a "difference," as it places in confrontation *Afrocentrism* and *Eurocentrism*. Its most prominent theorizer, Molefi Asante, proposes in his 1987 text, *The Afrocentric Idea*, that Afrocentricity means "placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior" (Asante 1987, 6). He goes on: "The Afrocentric analysis reestablishes the centrality of the ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) civilization and the Nile Valley cultural complex as points of reference for an African perspective in much the same way as Greece and Rome serve as reference points for a European world" (9). Asante traces his own intellectual ancestry back to W. E. B. Du Bois (the intellectual parent of divergent positions on blackness and Africanity) and Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegalese thinker and politician, who, following certain cues laid down by the classical writers—Herodotus, eminent among them—places ancient Egypt in a parental relationship to Greece. Martin Bernal's two-volume *Black Athena* systematically examines the research protocols of the eras of European scholarship that place Greece in the forefront of European civilization, and it is a matter of interest that Asante appears to accept the Hegelian provenance of Greece as it is unfolded in *The Philosophy of History*. In any case, the break or gap that the concept of the "black Atlantic"[1] proposes, or that the ideologies of Pan-Africanism put forth, is so sutured, so sewn up, in Afrocentricity that the cultures of the Diaspora and of the continent become, by negligible detour, a single project, or as one pair of commentators might have put it, inhabitants of the same "theoretic continent" (Diouf and Mboji 1992, 118).

But as powerfully inscribed as the trend line of refusals may be and as persistently repeated as its rumors and fables, its scriptures and strictures

and convictions may tell us it is, it appears inadequate to the everyday requirements of a fictitious subject, to the unrecordable and indeterminate excesses of the social fabric, and to the memorial structure that writes itself into human activity from language acquisition to the conscious pursuit and expression of the arts. In other words, where one *lives*, it seems that the rumors do not matter. And it is precisely that split of motives between current systems of thought (written in indelible despair)—in some ways, wholly reconciled to the technological supremacy that Herbert Marcuse identified several decades ago in his "one-dimensional man," and wholly attuned to such apparatuses, in which case "culture" is not faring very well, while particular expressions of it, as in "black culture," are no longer name-able—and those spaces of habitation that are organized and unfolded as if in an autonomy of values that is going to haunt any discussion of social formations that are assigned a cultural valence. At first glance, there is a problem here of first and second level stresses, or to put it another way, before we can venture an idea about the "idea of black culture," we must reestablish an outlook on the "idea of culture." On second thought, how-ever, the first and second levels of stress actually converge, as we recognize that the getting together of these punctualities is not so much the question as it is the mining of that robust vein of an apparent singlicity that will allow several and sometime overlapping road beds to truck through it. The aim of this essay is to negotiate one of these roadways.

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Raymond Williams assured the reader some time ago that "culture" is "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (Williams 1976, 76). Williams's seminal *Keywords,* where he advanced these formulations more than three decades ago now, has engendered in our time a *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society,* whose initial invocation of Williams's virtual disavowal of the term *culture* tends to make one look rather foolish on this ground anyway: "There is now," the editors begin, "a good deal of hesitancy over the value of the word *culture*" (Bennett et al. 2005, 63). The editors then go on to quote from Williams's *Politics and Letters,* when, in response to an interviewer's interrogation—"Why did you

decide to adopt the term culture, in full consciousness of its accumulated semantic range, to denote a whole way of life—in preference to the term society . . . ?"—Williams answers

> I suppose I felt that, for all its difficulties, culture more conveniently indicates a total human order than society as it had come to be used. I also think by this time I had become so used to thinking with this concept that it was just a matter of persistence as much as anything else. After all most of the work I was doing was in an arena which people called "culture," even in the narrower sense, so that the term had a certain obviousness. But you know the number of times I've wished that I had never heard of the damned word. I have become more aware of its difficulties, not less, as I have gone on. (Williams 1979, 154)

The editors point out that the term culture, "a deeply compromised idea," in James Clifford's estimation, is nevertheless one that Clifford "cannot yet do without" (Bennett et al. 2005, 63). Perhaps conceding, then, a little something to the dubeity of "culture" (though I only pretend to be convinced, but would advisedly hedge my bets), we might think of the term as a crucial *placeholder*. In *Keywords*, Williams traces the complex semantic/career path of the term from its provenance in words having to do with the organic—from colere: to inhabit, cultivate, protect, honor with worship—to its generalized distinctions from the emergent civilizations of nineteenth-century industrial development. From Marx's *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, Williams elaborates on the "superstructure," or the difference to the "economic structure," and from this distinction, he derives three "broad active categories of usage" for culture, once it was no longer confined in reference to a "literal continuity of physical process . . ." (1976, 80): (1) "the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development"; (2) "the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group . . ." (80). And it is here that "culture" meets up with the anthropological and ethnographic postures, as "the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups

within a nation" (79). (Michel de Certeau argues in tracking the birth of exoticism and the elitist concept of "popular culture" in eighteenth-century France that "it is at the moment when a culture no longer has the means to defend itself that the ethnologist or the archaeologist appears" [de Certeau 1974, 54].)[2] Thirdly, culture in the scheme of *Keywords* is the "independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (80).

What Williams advances, then, is a "complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence" (80–81). Perhaps we could amend this outline to encompass a psychoanalytic component, which would be global and dispersed in its impact, that is to say, the *imaginary* of culture that is located in an indeterminate spatial and temporal progression (if we could even call it "progression"), sprouting sequences that cannot be marked or anticipated all the time, if at all. Along this dimension, culture does not have a name—it is not "black" or "white," "African," or "European," or any other *designation*—but as the poets have insisted about the work of the poem, the cultural imaginary does not *speak* its meaning, is content to be mute of explanation. It appears from this angle that culture is boundless and undifferentiated, as it seems lived as a second skin. Culture, as a term, might adhere to a certain stillness and predictability on *paper,* but beyond its nominal evocations, it is visible only in its effects, and its contents show forth a repertoire of implements, from the fantastic/imaginal to the actual/material that splinter in pluralness and considerable variation. From this vantage, there are, perhaps, only [black] *cultures.*

As familiar as these impression points may be, one returns to them over and over again, seeking an orientation to a topic that we know so well that we are actually ignorant of it. I believe that the aim is to "return" and know the place as for the first time. We appear to have reached a rather peculiar pass, wherein everything is culture (or so it seems), or everything mimics culture. Have we attained a height or depth that might be described as the dissolution of the political stage with the result that the state/ideological apparatuses are apparently internalized at the profoundest levels

of identity, as Louis Althusser sketched them? Is it now impossible to imagine and achieve, for reasons that Althusser elaborated, a radical social and democratic transformation of the social order? And would a revised and corrected notion of "culture" help to usher us there? In a 1965 essay, Herbert Marcuse argued that culture "is more than a mere ideology," insofar as a given society's "prevailing institutions and the relationships among the members of the respective society must show a demonstrable affinity to the proclaimed values. . . . " (190). In other words, what a society alleges its values are "must provide a basis for their *possible* realization" (190; emphasis Marcuse). In its professed goals, culture may be defined, he argues, as a "process of humanization, characterized by the collective effort to protect human life, to pacify the struggle for existence by keeping it within manageable bounds, to stabilize a productive organization of society," to develop the human intellectual resources, and "to reduce and sublimate aggressions, violence, and misery" (190–91). Marcuse proffers two qualifications in his argument, elaborated in "Remarks on a Redefinition of Culture," as well as in *One-Dimensional Man,* that other critics tend to elide so that a good deal of the commentary treats the "idea of culture" as an elliptical smoothness, but Marcuse penetrates to the heart of a difficulty that one probably would not recognize as a difficulty, unless, for whatever reason, her antennae had been awakened: he contends that the "validity" of culture "has always been confined to a specific universe, constituted by tribe, national, religious, or other identity" (191). On a related note, there "has always been a 'foreign' universe to which the cultural goals were not applied: the Enemy, the Other, the Alien, the Out-cast—terms referring not primarily to individuals but to groups, religions, 'ways of life,' social systems" (191). In the meeting with the Enemy, "culture is suspended or even prohibited, and inhumanity can often run its course" (191). We recognize in this description of culture and the cut that it inscribes on an analogy with the Kleinian "bad breast," which seems to be the only one available today in all sectors of the globe. But it is *only* in the "*exclusion* of cruelty, fanaticism, and unsublimated violence" that the "definition of culture as the process of humanization" is allowable (191; emphasis added). According to this reasoning, the Nazi warrior man-eater who boasted that he

flourished his weapon whenever the word was uttered anywhere in his vicinity hit the nail on the head, insofar as the "culture" to which he subscribed and would have the waking world surrender was not culture at all in its will to the pulverization and murder of the Other. Inasmuch as the term and certain of the practices pursued in its name are as often freighted with the most monstrous instances of perversion and misrule as not, then we are forced to admit its fragility, even its occasional dreadfulness; at the same time, its *corrective potential,* which Marcuse sketched, but no longer believed in by 1965, for sure, constitutes the analytical and transforming element that the investigator keeps an eye trained on. The ambiguity of culture, in its oscillating weather patterns, is hardly restful and comforting, but a degree of discomfort is the best that we will be able to manage here, with a fairly high quantum of "negative capability." But this imperfection may be sufficient to the case.

What is at stake in Marcuse's "Remarks on a Redefinition of Culture" is a reexamination of culture as it involves "the relation of values to facts," or "the means of society related to its self-professed ends . . ." (191). Even though Marcuse was making these arguments four decades ago, I am returning to them here not only to invoke the "two cultures" dispute—*culture* in reference "to some higher dimension of human autonomy and fulfillment" and *civilization* in reference to "the realm of necessity, of socially necessary work and behavior" (192)—but also in order to traverse the dispute in opening an interlocution between theorists of the black cultural problematic and thinkers of the "dialectical imagination," to invoke Martin Jay's work,[3] because it seems to me that "critical theory" and its aims toward praxis form a link between these disparate far-flung positivities across cultures, races, languages, temporal sequences, history and the geostrategic ground, and social formations; in seeking an interlocutory occasion between some of the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois and certain representative figures of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse prominent among them, I am neither suggesting nor seeking (nor yet do I suspect) an "anxiety of influence" of any kind—Du Bois, for instance, was three decades older than the oldest members of the Frankfurt School, just as his text *The Souls of Black Folk* precedes the founding of the Institute of Social Research by nearly a generation—but, rather, to consider

how the historical juncture that we currently occupy in its terrible frights and unmistakable failures might be informed by these respective and overlapping theorizations that both sought, for different reasons, a critical theory of culture and society; what they had in common was the encounter with the extreme, Du Bois, attempting to avoid despair at the very nadir of black life and development in the early decades of the twentieth century, and the Frankfurt School, whose members were forced to learn, in flight, "the fear of death, the sovereign master" (Hegel 1931, 237). The tremor throughout every fiber and to feel it everyday is not the usual circumstance, but within these respective biographical outlines, it was the gadfly that dispatched more than one German speaker across the ocean and black men and women to *write* and *think* as though their very lives depended on it.

What might Du Bois mean for a cultural worker today when she encounters these words from the 1903 *Souls of Black Folk:* "and, all in all, we black men [*sic*] seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness" (Du Bois 1999, 16)? Or when he expressed disappointment, toward the end of his long life, that black community had not become the vanguard that would usher the American Republic into a new heaven and a new earth? Du Bois died in Accra, estranged from the land of his birth, on the eve of the 1963 March on Washington; slated to have appeared on the podium that day, Du Bois might be said to have missed the moment of a certain fruition, but we have come round again and this time, as though there had never been a Du Bois or a march or an arduous struggle for human rights and social justice on U.S. soil; what were questions for him are not only no less poignant now, but all the more urgent in light of the oblivion that sweeps over the Republic like a terrible blight. In that regard, the interlocution that I am posing here crosses its wires between the imperatives of reading and the goad to action—in short, the defining dilemma of Du Bois's life and meditation.

Du Bois's visionary sense of black American culture as a potential critique of American business culture is regarded by one commentator as a weave of contradictions, sewn from the fabric of the historical order in which his ideas were engendered. Shamoon Zamir expands on these observations, arguing that Du Bois's cultural and ethical attitudes reflected

"his early Puritan upbringing, and his New England belief in culture as the moral regulator of the excesses and exploitations of the commercial world . . ." (Zamir 1995, 107). But to my mind, we may be able to recover Du Bois's entire cultural program on the other end of the century as a version of what Marcuse would call the work of *humanitas,* or the aim of culture, described as "modes of thought, imagination, expression essentially nonoperational and transcendent, transcending the established universe of behavior not toward a realm of ghosts and illusions, but toward historical possibilities" (194). By way of *humanitas,* Marcuse emphasizes the "cognitive content" of the cultural oeuvres, the intellectual "faculties and an intellectual aware-ness" that are not "exactly congenial to the modes of thought and behavior required by the prevailing civilization in advanced industrial countries" (193). This "cognitive content," set over and against operational modes of thought and behavior, would constitute and complement transformative aims analogous to the protocols of human reconstruction that Du Bois sketches throughout the body of *The Souls of Black Folk.*

On a related note, what has been described as the founding impulse of the Institute of Social Research— that is to say, the articulation of a "theory of society as a whole, a theory of the contemporary era" (Wiggershaus 1995)—bears broad affinity to Du Bois's systematic attempt, starting with *The Philadelphia Negro,* completed at the tail end of the nineteenth century, to apply the best available knowledge and methodology of his time (the era of the young social sciences in the United States) to the "Negro problem." The Atlanta University series, under Du Bois's direction from 1897 on, was designed to investigate every phase of black life; an idea originating in "the conferences on education, labor, and farming," annually hosted, starting in the early 1890s, by Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes (Lewis 1993, 218), the studies demarcate the first systematic analytical sequence on black social formation by the lights of the empirical social sciences. We might also recall that the Du Boisian standpoint, complicated to pin down because it is an eclectic mix of philosophy, history, and labor and economic theory, along-side Du Bois's training in languages and the classics, was partially concocted from aspects of German continental philosophy, via Kant and Hegel, and reinforced by two years of study at Berlin's Humboldt University, where Du

Bois spent his twenty-fifth birthday in 1893. When Du Bois suggests that the Negro's contribution to world cultures will be "spirit," I believe that we hear Hegelian echoes that reverberate, as well, in the formulation of the "double consciousness." In any case, the metaphysical complexion of Du Boisian social science seems wholly compatible with the import of cultural training that Du Bois draws out in "Of the Wings of Atalanta" and "Of the Training of Black Men," both featured in *Souls*, as well as in one of his most well-known essays outside the context of the latter—his 1897 "Conservation of Races," which might be considered the inaugural gesture of the founding of the American Negro Academy in 1897. As Marcuse defined the "aim of culture," Du Bois espoused the content of the "liberal arts" as a blue print for the cultural and historical apprenticeship of the liberated personality. While Du Bois's vocabulary was not that of the Frankfurt School, and as far as we can tell, he was not in sustained conversation with Marxist theoreticians, unless we want to count his late conversion to communism in the 1950s, his historical materialist perspective on the question of the "color line" and his keenly-felt global sense of the color problematic in relation to geostrategic forces were often far more sophisticated and thorough-going than the black nationalist embrace of Marxist currents of thought during the 1960s. For sure, Du Bois executed a Marxist critique, though it might not have been called that, from one end of his career to the other, and that he associated the growing commodification of American social, economic, and labor practices with a fatal misadventure cannot be doubted.

Michel de Certeau parcels out the functions of "culture" and "civilization," or what C. P. Snow elaborated as the "two cultures," in the following way: *le dur* and *le mou* (de Certeau 1974, 233ff), or the "hard" and the "soft" functions of social management; culture for de Certeau stands in for the "soft." It is social management leaving a remainder, or a scar, called culture, and this region "is silently exploited by the hard,"[4] even though the objective calculations have attempted to evade the unknown, the unanticipated— what a given practice will make of prefabricated signs and what the signs become for senders and receivers (233–34). This motility, set in motion by the unpredictable, skirts the borders of the calculated—in Marcuse's words, operational modes of thought; culture by these lights describes a "terrain

of neo-colonialism," and its fate was to become "the colonized of the twentieth century as contemporary technology installs its empires in culture not unlike European nations of the nineteenth century militarily occupied unarmed continents" (234).[5] This calculus of motives leads de Certeau to conclude that culture is the "cancerous, immoderate symptom of a society divided up between the technocritization of economic progress and the folklorization of civic expressions" (235).[6] One of the eventualities of this fracture is the privatization of citizenship, as Lauren Berlant makes the case (Berlant 1997), and this atomizing of the political process by corporatism effactually drives out the public sphere and the goals and concepts related to it. Certeau concludes the argument by contending that the multiform struggle between the "hard" and the "soft" evinces internal dysfunction: the appropriation of productive power by privileged organisms has as its corollary a misappropriation of social capital and the political regression of the country—that is to say, the vanishing or the evisceration of democratic power in determining the organization and configuration of work that a society performs for itself (235).[7] Though de Certeau acknowledges that his examples are drawn from the French scene, perhaps culture as the terrain of a pathology is even monotonous across the Western zone, rather like the bumps and swellings on a body, as he describes it (235).[8] The triumphant young wolves of the logic of development, he maintains, preside over the fear of insecurity, the hardening of ideologies, born of yesterday, and the regression of conservatives who revert to a religious language in which they no longer believe (235–36).[9]

Nowhere are these observations more uncannily displayed than in the United States of the early twenty-first century; marshaled between the mid-to-late 1970s, these arguments read like a primer of everyday life at this historical juncture in our national context. We could well add to the picture the new virtual realities of the cyberspace and the super-private bubble of solitude that it inflates, the dissolution of boundaries between civilian and military targets and installations, most dramatically expressed in the 9/11 attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and bombings in the Spanish capital, as well as London, and finally, the threat of the liquidation of advanced capitalism's "social contract" between citizen and

corporation, exemplified in the state's failure to protect the private property of investors in debacles such as those related to Enron and WorldCom. If the very notion of "investment" is no longer sacred, truly, America's real religion, then we know that we are somewhere else not entirely unlike that terrain on which a little girl named Dorothy from the state of Kansas arrived one fine day.

But whether or not one comes to ground here in the magical twinkle toes of innocence or the full-blown nightmare of a more mature state of consciousness depends not simply upon age, but upon the vantage from which one intercepts the inescapable picture—millions of citizens fed on the awful carrion of illusion and lies. And if that is where one is, then it might be said that, indeed, our national culture and its various subflows have not served us very well. This discouraging spectacle, fairly accurate to one's own sense of things, is described by Marcuse before Certeau as a "prevailing form and direction" evoked in the name of the "progress of civilization [calling] for operational and behavioral modes of thought, for acceptance of the productive rationality of the given social systems, for their defense and improvement, but not for their negation" (193; emphasis added). For Marcuse, it was the *cognitive content* of the "higher" culture whose work was precisely this negation, though such culture "was divorced from the toil and misery of those who by their labor reproduced the society whose culture it was" (193). In that way, the "higher" culture "became the ideology of the society," while, as ideology, he argues, it was "dissociated from the society, *and* in this dissociation it was free to communicate the contradiction, the indictment, and the refusal" (193). While cultural communication is technically multiplied—a computer in every pot—"vastly facilitated, much rewarded," it is also true that its "content is changed because the mental and even physical space in which effective dissolution can develop is closed" (194). Marcuse makes clear that by the "elimination of the former antagonistic content of culture," he is not addressing; "the fate of some romantic ideal succumbing to technological progress, nor the progressive democratization of culture, nor the equalization of social classes, but rather the closing of a vital space for the development of autonomy and opposition, the destruction of a refuge, of a barrier to totalitarianism" (194), in which condition he identifies the fate

of the "one-dimensional man." Marcuse's trenchant "Remarks" carries the force of closure, but one holds out for whatever fruits the ambiguous might disperse, or even Marcuse's own exercise of the paradoxical, expressed in the inaugural paragraphs of this essay: the *absence* of culture as a process of *humanization* "may well be an integral part of culture, so that the attainment or approximation of the cultural goals takes place *through* the practice of cruelty and violence" (191). This tight weave of impulses might explain "the paradox that much of the 'higher culture' of the West has been protest, refusal, and indictment of culture—not only of its miserable translation into reality, but of its very principles and content" (191)! One, therefore, works with the imperfections at hand and *enters* the contradiction, if possible. Terry Eagleton argues in *The Idea of Culture* that culture "signifies a double refusal: of organic determinism on the one hand, and of the autonomy of the spirit on the other. It is a rebuff to both naturalism and idealism, insisting against the former that there is that within nature which exceeds and undoes it, and against idealism that even the most high-minded human agency has its humble roots in our biology and natural environment" (Eagleton 2000, 4–5). Eagleton concludes his interrogation in a way that is far more sanguine than either Marcuse's or Certeau's inquiry into culture as pathological symptom, or a disproportion of social means. For Eagleton, culture is not only what we live for, but also what we live by, taking in "affection, relationship, memory, kinship, place, community, emotional fulfillment, intellectual enjoyment, a sense of ultimate meaning" (131). At the same time, Eagleton's culture "can also be too close for comfort," evincing an intimacy that "is likely to grow morbid and obsessional unless it is set in an enlightened political context, one which can temper these immediacies with more abstract, but also in a way more generous, affiliations" (131). He points out that culture "has assumed a new political importance," but in a critical move complementary to the one that other critics are currently making, Eagleton insists that culture has also grown "immodest and overweening" and that it is high time that we "put it back in its place" (131). In other words, high time for the retrieval of the space of the political.

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If we gather up these strands of argument about the "idea of culture," we could set them down with great profit, I believe, on the terrain of "black culture" because it seems that the latter—never, even yet, an official cultural entitlement or a bellwether of the established order—offers one of the most fruitful sites that would allow these positions to stand out in the boldest of tensions: as an analytical property, black culture—it would be more accurate to say black diasporic culture—is born in the penumbra of the official cultures that are historically emergent at a particular moment that we could quite rightly call modernity. But in a very real sense the *exclusion* that Marcuse singled out as a condition of culture—that the latter demarcates a universe defined by a certain kind of social formation and what is, therefore, excluded from it—is actually predicated on its others so much so that we can detect no time of priority and succession in this calculus of motives, but a simultaneity of one and other, the same and the difference, through and through; the result might be analogized to *scotoma* in a field of vision, "a blind or dark spot in the visual field."[10] (It would probably not do to ascribe the individual traits of ego to whole social formations, but it is nonetheless fascinating to ponder Freudian meditations on the scotomous affect and how plausible [or not] it might be in explaining what Robin Blackburn calls the "racialized perceptions of identity" [Blackburn 1997, 4], emergent on the threshold of the modern world system.) Although Althusser is addressing the problematic of *reading* in his references to the visual field, his arguments seem apt for a wider application: "In the development of a theory," he suggests, "the invisible of a visible field is not generally anything *whatever outside* and foreign to the visible defined by that field" (Althusser and Balibar 1979, 26), but, rather, the "invisible is defined by the visible as its invisible, its forbidden vision" (26; emphasis Althusser). Strictly speaking, then, this relationship or "economy" does not entail an oppositional procedure, nor even an adversarial one all the time, but identifies instead a *split* or an instance of *decalage* in a single movement that *misperceives* the conditions of its own production. What this "blindness" of sight might look like practically speaking might be described as historical amnesia at best or the disavowal of reality at the worst. In time, the *misprision* or the *misperception* will come to stand for the truth of things

and will be represented as truthful. Philosophers of, and commentators on, the Third-World/Africana field have argued that communities caught in the "blindness" of Western cultural "insight" have experienced clearly half of their historical apprenticeship and discursive career as a response to the effects and affects of the epiphenomena of "blindness." Meanwhile, the systematic inquiry into such response has been named "disalienation": in the opening pages of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967, 10–11); in V. Y. Mudimbe's invocation of the historical significance of *Presence Africaine* (1992, xxii); and in the complex maneuvers of Paget Henry's *Caliban's Reason* (2000, 1–18), an entire assessment of what Mudimbe calls the theoretical articulations of a "double mission" (xxii) is mounted in the context of contemporary reflection.

These thinkers sketch the work of "disalienation" in the case, for example, of the "Negro of the Antilles," Fanon's metaphor for the personality of the colonial-neo-colonial complex. Mudimbe meditates on the creation of *Presence Africaine,* the ongoing journal that began its career as the principal staging ground of "Negritude," during the 1940s in Paris, when young writers and creative intellectuals from the Caribbean and the sub-Saharan continent effectively explored the deterritorializations of Francophone cultures. The contemporary analysts examine in their work the historians, critics, and activists, originating from the African Diaspora, who advance the ensemble of protocols that come home under the rubric of Pan-Africanism. But if we regard the cultures in question as more than reactive and defending *against,* then how might we address their *intramural* dispositions?

In "Originary Displacement," Nahum Chandler advances an argument that focuses on the Du Boisian canon, but this extraordinary writing on the formation of subjectness in the historic African-American instance not only lends an angle on "disalienation," but essentially dislodges the logic of it in the close interrogation of the terms on which it is predicated (Chandler 2000). Chandler argues from W. E. B. Du Bois's "double consciousness" that African-American identity formation might be generalized not only to American identities, as such, but to "modern subjectivities in general" (251). Situating his own protocol squarely within the precincts of contemporary

continental and post-colonial epistemologies, Chandler scrupulously pursues the undoing of "uncritical presuppositions about African-American identity, principally through the itinerary of the concept of race (or the concept of purity) that organizes it" within Western disciplines of knowledge (251). Chandler's project here incorporates a reading of the *Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, first published in England in 1789. Chandler shows that even under the most extreme circumstance imaginable, such as the condition of enslavement, both *subjectivation* and *subjectivity* occur in *relation* between parties. Going from Equiano's ironical placating of positions from property-for-another to *property holder* (which transforms his relationship to human others, as well as things), Chandler concludes that we may look out for Equiano in the *interstitial* spaces between fixed positionalities, as in African diasporic and European. But Equiano and his narrative appear in the essay as an *exemplary* instance, both in its marginality with regard to the hegemon and in its potential centrality in *desedimenting* the conceptual cramp that fixes the subjectivities in place; if, then, Equiano is the "example" and by extension, the African American, of American and subject formation in general, then we could rightly say the following:

> Hence, to the extent that the commitment of any inquiry is to develop the most comprehensive understanding possible (and every inquiry, whether under the heading of science or interpretation, is enfolded from the moment it formulates a question in a speculative, and hence philosophical, discourse), the good (or best) example, that which makes "good" theory, is the "bad" (or difficult) example. (253)

Chandler, is, at once, on the disciplinary attack, in pursuit of a close reading, and inquiring into the concatenations of subject formation, concerning himself "With the suggestion of the possibility of a general desedimentation of a traditional conceptual premise that organizes the interpretation of the African American subject" (255). Bringing such premise into question "may assist further in opening a new way of thinking the question of the African American or African diasporic subject, the implications of which might

bear force on our understanding of the modes of constitution of any histori-
cal subject that might be called American, especially 'White' American, and
likewise for those we call modern or place under the heading of modernity
in general" (255). This writing powerfully moves through the "example,"
as well as an overview of certain exemplary historiographical texts, to one
of Chandler's key formulations on the strength of the desedimentive prin-
ciple—that is to say, the "figure of the other"—and how it gives rise "in
the movement of its production to the figure of the hegemon—in this case,
to the subject of whiteness" (257). We are thus conduced to the moment
of the "between" and its closural forestalling in the shock of this recogni-
tion—subject positionality "is constructed in relationship and not *before*"
(282; emphasis added). From margin to center, from elsewhere to the place,
Chandler's "desedimented" subject of history and critical inquiry now
names modernity formation itself; the making to tremble "by dislodging
the layers of sedimented premises that hold [a conclusion] in place" (257).
In brief, subordination and dominance are placeholders in this argument
for the most fragile of arrangements that are entirely open to overthrow, at
least from the place where the question is put.

If subordination, then, is already imminent in the hegemonic posture
and the hegemonic posture in the subordinate, there is no longer "black"
or "white" culture, per se, if there ever were, or the power monopoly
implied in the formulation, but, rather, "only differences of force" (282).
While I accept the main lines of Chandler's theorizations (which my own
writings tend to support), we are still left with the political, historical, and
material "supports" of "difference," perhaps even its illusory, fantastical
"evidences" that come to occupy the historical stage. Chandler maintains
that Du Bois's example, or Du Bois as exemplary figure, is "good to think
with" and that his "double consciousness" at once answers a general order
of cases and "the limits of the example as ensconced in its particular and
specific context" (254). To that extent, we should think that "black culture,"
which might be established as an "example," might take us back or ahead to
the problematic of culture in general and "as such."

It seems, then, that Du Bois and the latter-day theoreticians need
the specificity of context in order to articulate a generality of ontological

procedure so that, most generously to ourselves, we can both have our cake and eat it, too. In that case, the philosopher's "disalienation" may well constitute a kind of vestibular moment across which threshold "desedimentation" may do its work, and perhaps the intramural disposition of specific cultural projects and periods are configured on this dual dueling ground—that is to say, the coming close enough to one's own situatedness in order to "see" it (Du Bois's self-reflective capacity, for example, which marks a movement in "disalienation" and, furthermore, the theoretical and systematic *naming* of a self-becoming that is, in turn, movement in "desedimentation").

The diasporic cultures in question, then, have been summoned to unmake the conditions of alienation, simultaneous with the actual exploiting the force of it in order to make new, to bring into existence a repertoire of predicates that were not there before so far as we can see. Since we cannot easily separate these imperatives from each other, we would have to say that New World black cultures, as well as their parallel formations in other parts of the globe, are not only Creole forms adopted from the implements, both material and imaginative, of the near-at-hand, but that they are also "schizophrenic," if by that we mean compounded of a disposition that carries both its *statement* and *counterstatement,* that would both undo alienation and constitute its own standpoint. It would be fair to ask how this outcome is different from other cultural formations, and the point would be that it is not, except that the disalienation/alienation axis has been violently inscribed on the narratives that black and diasporic African cultures tell about themselves; in other words, black cultures seem to acknowledge that, in the words of abolitionist preacher Theodore Parker, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" (Branch 1988, 197). In another sense, we could say that black culture, having imagined itself as an *alternative* statement, as a *counter*statement to American culture/civilization, or Western culture/civilization, more generally speaking, identifies the cultural vocation as the space of "contradiction, indictment, and the refusal." It is striking that precisely because black cultures arose in the world of normative violence, coercive labor, and the virtually absolute crush of the everyday struggle for existence, its subjects could imagine, could *dare* to imagine, a world beyond the coercive technologies of their daily bread, but

meditating the historical possibilities steadily marks W. E. B. Du Bois's own immense labor of emancipation. "Spirit" across this canon was both the retreat, the "oasis," from the commercial impulses of mainstream civilization at the same time that it was the most intense encounter with the real. In short, the notion of *historical possibility* dominated the discursive field of Du Bois's work, as well as the entire interpretive enterprise of black cultural theorization. Because it was set aside, black culture could, by virtue of the very act of discrimination, *become* culture, insofar as, historically speaking, it was forced to turn its resources of spirit toward negation and critique. But a crisis is now at hand.

And here is the paradox: as black culture in its current avatar unfolds, it moves ever closer toward the posture that complements both democratic principles, at least on the face of it, and the imperatives of neoliberalist practices. As the "American Dream" is also a gleam in its eye, we experience black social formation today increasingly stressed and strutted toward the "civilization" and those intellectual technologies, growing discredited and moribund. As the object of Du Boisian and Marcusian analyses, these technologies bolster the dangerous regnancy of corporate media and supreme commercial value. Hearing the words in their ironic echo, one might well ask: what is the price of "Americanization" when one of the last bastions of critique falls away? When the imagined moral credibility of black now translates into an enablement of the most repressive practices among the world democracies today? In a sense, if there is no black culture, or no longer black culture (because it has "succeeded"), then we need it now; and if that is true, then perhaps black culture—as the reclamation of the critical edge, as one of those vantages from which it might be spied, and no longer predicated on "race"—has yet to come.

NOTES

1. The prestigious formulation of "The Black Atlantic" has been profitably advanced by Paul Gilroy (1993); Brent Edwards's more recent work probes the internal algebras of Black Atlantic traffic by way of the artistic and literary paths of diaspora (2003).

2. Translations from the French are mine: "La constation s'impose de nouveau: c'est au moment où une culture n'a plus moyens de se défendre que l'ethnologue ou l'archeologue apparaisent" (54).

3. Before Rolf Wiggerhaus's *Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance* (1995), Martin Jay's *Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923–1950* (1973) was one of the few, if any, extant English studies of this school of theory and praxis.

4. "En fait, cette région molle est silencieusement exploitée par son contraire, le *dur. . . .*"

5. "La culture est le terrain d'un néocolonialism; c'est le colonisé du xxᵉ siècle. La technocratie contemporaine y installe des empires, comme les nations européenes du xixᵉ siècle occupaient militairement des continents désarmés."

6. "Elle est le symptôme démesuré, cancéreux, d'une société partagée entre la technocratisation du progrès economique et la folklorisation des expressions civiques."

7. "Elle manifeste un dysfonctionnement interne: le fait que l'appropriation du pouvoir producteur par des organismes privilégiés a pour corollaire un désappropriation et une régression politiques du pays, c'est-à-dire l'evanousissment du pouvoir démocratique de déterminer l'organisation et la représentation du travail qu'une société fait sur elle-même."

8. "Là déjà, dans le secteur culturel les symptômes pathologiques s'accumulent, comme les boutons et des enflures sur les corps."

9. "Ainsi les défis et les révisions déchirantes liés à la logique du développement favorisent à la fois l'ambition de jeunes loups, énarques et gestionnaires du réformisme; le poujadism et les corporatismes provoqués par le peur de l'insécurité; le raidissement d'idéologies nées en d'autre temps, ou la régression des conservateurs vers des langages religieux auxquels ils ne croient plus."

10. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, s.v. "Scotoma."

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