Editorial/Subscription
Third Text
303 Finchley Road
London NW3 6DT
Tel: 071-435 3748

Subscriptions
Rates for four issues

Individuals

UK	£16
Europe	$35
International (airmail)	$45

Institutions

UK	£30
Europe	$55
International (airmail)	$70

Cheques are payable to Kala Press

Distribution
Central Books
99 Wallis Road
London E9 5LN

Ubiquity Distributors, Inc.
607 Degraw Street
Brooklyn, NY 11217
USA

Marginal Distribution
Unit 103, Lower Mall
277 George St. North
Peterborough
Ontaria Canada K9J 3G9

Manic Ex-poseur
P.O. Box 39
World Trade Centre
Melbourne VIC 3005
Australia

ISSN 0952-8822

Contributors:

Paul Gilroy teaches at Sussex University. His next book, *The Promised Land*, will be published by Radius next year.

Sean Cubitt lectures in Media and Cultural Studies at Liverpool Polytechnic, and is the author of *Timeshift: On Video Culture* (Routledge).

Eugenio Dittborn is an artist. He was born in 1943 in Chile and lives and works in Santiago de Chile.

Jane Cousins is a freelance writer and critic. She is currently living and working in New York.

Luis Camnitzer is from Uruguay. He is an artist and writer, and Professor of Visual Arts at SUNY, Old Westbury, New York.

Sehnaz Hanslot and **Margherita Sprio** are artists currently doing postgraduate studies at the Slade School of Art.

David A Bailey is a photographer and writer.

Osvaldo Sánchez is Associate Professor of Fine Art at the Instituto Superior de Arte, Havana, Cuba.

Manthia Diawara is Professor of Film and Literature and Associate Director of the Center for the Study of Black Literature and Culture at the University of Pennsylvania.

Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker is the former director of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada. She now works as an independent curator and critic.

Third Text and **Jimmie Durham** extend their profound apologies to **Kaylynn Sullivan Two Trees** for any pain or distress caused by an error in the essay 'Cowboys and ...' published in *Third Text* No 12 (page 20). Ms Two Trees has informed us that she is not, as stated, "a white woman", but "a mixed-blood African-American/Native-American".

We acknowledge the financial assistance of the Arts Council of Great Britain.

Third Text is published by Kala Press, typeset by Emset, London, and printed by Whitstable Litho, Kent.

It Ain't Where You're From, It's Where You're At...*

The Dialectics of Diasporic Identification

Paul Gilroy

Music is our witness, and our ally. The beat is the confession which recognises, changes and conquers time. Then, history becomes a garment we can wear and share, and not a cloak in which to hide; and time becomes a friend.

James Baldwin

While we were in Lagos we visited Fela Ransome Kuti's club the Afro Spot, to hear him and his band. He'd come to hear us, and we came to hear him. I think when he started as a musician he was playing a kind of music they call Highlife, but by this time he was developing Afro-beat out of African music and funk. He was kind of like the African James Brown. His band had strong rhythm... Some of the ideas my band was getting from that band had come from me in the first place, but that was okay with me. It made the music that much stronger.

James Brown

No nation now but the imagination.

Derek Walcott

The subject of this paper is 'Culture and Resistance' and I want to begin by asking how resistance is itself to be understood. I think that our recent political

* I have taken the title of this essay directly from lyrics written and performed by Rakim (W. Griffin). In his recordings with his sometime partner Eric B, Rakim has persistently returned to the problem of diasporic identification and the connected issue of the relationship between local and global components of blackness. His 'I Know You Got Soul' (1987) was received as a classic recording in London's soul underground and since then, he has produced what I regard as the most complex and exciting poetry to emerge from the Hip Hop movement. The dread recording which directly inspired the production of this essay is called 'The Ghetto' and is included on the MCA (1990) album 'Let The Rhythm Hit Em'.

* I wish to thank my children for tolerating the repeated playing of this cut at bone breaking volume, Von Ware for her insight and Bell Hooks for the transatlantic dialogue which has helped me to frame this piece of work and the forthcoming book from which it derives.

history, as people in but not necessarily of the modern, western world, a history which involves processes of political organisation that are explicitly transnational and international in nature, demands that we consider this question very carefully. What is being resisted and by what means? slavery? capitalism? coerced industrialisation? racial terror? or ethnocentrism and European solipsism? How are the discontinuous histories of diaspora resistance to be *thought*, to be theorised by those who have experienced the consequences of racial domination?

I want to look specifically at the positions of the nation state, and the idea of nationality in accounts of black resistance and black culture, particularly music. Towards the end of this paper, I will also use a brief discussion of black music to ask implicit questions about the tendencies towards ethnocentrism and ethnic absolutism of black cultural theory. The problem of weighing the claims of national identity against other contrasting varieties of subjectivity and identification has a special place in the intellectual history of blacks in the West. Dubois' concept of 'double consciousness' is only the best known resolution of a familiar problem which points towards the core dynamic of racial oppression as well as the fundamental antinomy of diaspora blacks. How has this doubleness, what Richard Wright calls the 'dreadful objectivity'[1] which flows from being both inside and outside the West, affected the conduct of political movements against racial oppression and towards black autonomy? Are the inescapable pluralities involved in the movements of black peoples, in Africa and in exile, ever synchronised? How would these struggles be periodised in relation to modernity: the fatal inter-mediation of capitalism, industrialisation and a new conception of political democracy? Does even posing these questions in this way signify nothing except the reluctant intellectual affiliation of diaspora blacks to an approach which attempts a premature totalisation of our infinite struggles, an approach which has deep roots within the ambiguous intellectual traditions of the European enlightenment?

1 This phrase is taken from Richard Wright's novel *The Outsider*. In his book of essays, *White Man Listen* he employs the phrase 'dual existence' to map the same terrain.

In my view, the problematic intellectual heritage of Euro-American modernity still determines the manner in which nationality is understood within black political discourse. In particular, it conditions the continuing aspiration to acquire a supposedly authentic, natural and stable identity. This identity is the premise of a thinking 'racial' self that is both socialised and unified by its connection with other kindred souls encountered usually, though not always, within the fortified frontiers of those discrete ethnic cultures which also happen to coincide with the contours of a sovereign nation state that guarantees their continuity. Consider for a moment the looseness with which the term 'black nationalism' is used both by its advocates and by sceptics. Why is a more refined political language for dealing with these crucial issues of identity, kinship and affiliation such a long time coming?

This area of difficulty has recently become associated with a second, namely the over-integrated conceptions of culture which means that black political struggles are construed as somehow automatically *expressive* of the national or ethnic differences with which they are articulated. This over-integrated sense of cultural and ethnic particularity is very popular today and blacks do not monopolise it. It masks the arbitrariness of its own political choices in the morally-charged language of ethnic absolutism and this poses significant dangers because it overlooks the development of political ideology and ignores the restless, recombinant qualities of our affirmative political cultures. The critical political project forged in the journey from slave ship to citizenship is in danger of being wrecked by the seemingly insoluble conflict between two

distinct but currently symbiotic perspectives which can be loosely identified as the essentialist and the pluralist standpoints.

The antagonistic relationship between these outlooks is especially intense in discussions of black art and cultural criticism. The essentialist view comes in gender specific forms, but has often been characterised by a brute pan-Africanism that, in Britain at least, is now politically inert. It has proved unable to specify precisely where the highly prized but doggedly evasive essence of black artistic sensibility is currently located. This perspective sees the black artist as a leader. It is often allied to a realist approach to aesthetics that minimises the substantive political and philosophical issues involved in the processes of artistic representation. Its absolutist conception of ethnic cultures can be identified by the way in which it registers incomprehending disappointment with the actual cultural choices and patterns of the mass of black people in this country. It looks for an artistic practice that can disabuse them of the illusions into which they have been seduced by their condition of exile. The community is felt to be on the wrong road and it is the artist's job to give them a new direction, firstly by recovering and then by donating the racial awareness that the masses seem to lack.

This perspective currently confronts a pluralistic position which affirms blackness as an open signifier and seeks to celebrate complex representations of black particularity that is *internally* divided: by class, sexuality, gender, age and political consciousness. There is no unitary idea of black community here and the authoritarian tendencies of those who would 'police' black cultural expression in the name of their own particular history or priorities are rightly repudiated. Essentialism is replaced by a libertarian alternative: the saturnalia which attends 'the dissolution of the essential black subject'. Here, the polyphonic qualities of black cultural expression form the main aesthetic consideration and there is often an uneasy but exhilarating fusion of 'modernist' and populist techniques and styles. From this perspective, the cultural achievements of popular black cultural forms like music, are a constant source of inspiration and prized for their implicit warning against the pitfalls of artistic conceit. The difficulty with this second tendency is that in leaving racial essentialism behind by viewing 'race' itself as a social and cultural construction, it has been insufficiently alive to the lingering power of specifically 'racial' forms of power and subordination. Each outlook attempts to compensate for the obvious weaknesses in the other camp but so far there has been little open and explicit debate between them.

This conflict, initially formulated in debates over black aesthetics and cultural production, is valuable as a preliminary guide to some of the dilemmas faced by cultural and intellectual *historians* of the African diaspora. The problems it raises become acute, particularly for those who seek to comprehend cultural developments and political resistances which have had scant regard for either modern borders or pre-modern frontiers. At its worst, the lazy, casual invocation of cultural insiderism which characterises the essentialist view is nothing more than a melancholy symptom of the growing cleavages *within* the black communities. There, uneasy spokespeople of the black middle classes — some of them professional cultural commentators, artists, writers and film makers as well as career politicians — have fabricated a volkish political outlook as an expression of their own contradictory position. Though the neo is never satisfactorily explained, this is often presented as a neo-nationalism. It incorporates meditation on the special needs and desires of the relatively privileged castes within black communities, but its most consistent trademark

is the persistent mystification of that group's increasingly problematic relationships with the black poor who, after all, supply them with a dubious entitlement to speak on behalf of black people in general.

The idea of blacks as a 'national' or proto-national group with its own hermetically enclosed culture plays a key role in this mystification and, although seldom overtly named, the misplaced idea of a 'national interest' gets invoked here as a means to silence dissent and censor political debate.

These problems take on a specific aspect in Britain which still lacks anything that can be credibly called a black bourgeoisie. However, they are not confined to this country and they cannot be overlooked. The idea of nationality and the assumptions of cultural absolutism come together in various other ways.[2] For example, the archaeology of black critical knowledges in which we are engaged, currently involves the construction of canons which seems to be proceeding on an exclusively *national* basis — Afro-American, Anglo-phone Caribbean and so on. (This is not just my oblique answer to the pressure to produce an equivalent inventory of black English or British cultural forms and expressions). If it seems indelicate to ask who the formation such canons might serve, then the related question of where the impulse to formalise and codify elements of our cultural heritage in this particular pattern comes from, may be a better one with which to commence.

2 Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Classe* (Editions La Decouverte, 1988).

The historiography of canon formation raises interesting issues for the intellectual historian in and of itself. But if the way that these issues occur around the question of the canon appears too obscure, similar problems are also evident in recent debates over Hip Hop culture, the powerful expressive medium of America's urban black poor.

Rap is a hybrid form rooted in the syncretic social relations of the South Bronx where Jamaican sound system culture, transplanted during the '70s, put down new roots and in conjunction with specific technological innovations set in train a process that was to transform black America's sense of itself and a large portion of the popular music industry as well. How does a form which flaunts and glories in its own malleability as well as its trans-national character become interpreted as an expression of some authentic Afro-American essence? Why is Rap discussed as if it sprang intact from the entrails of the Blues?[3] What is it about Afro-America's writing elite which means that they need to claim this diasporic cultural form in such an assertively nationalist way?*

3 Nelson George, *The Death Of Rhythm and Blues*, Omnibus, 1988.

Hip Hop culture has recently provided the raw material for a bitter contest between black vernacular expression and repressive censorship of artistic work. This has thrown some black commentators into a quandary which they resolve by invoking the rhetoric of cultural insiderism and drawing the distinctive cloak of ethnicity even more tightly around their shoulders. It is striking, for example, that apologists for the woman-hating antics of the Two Live Crew, have been so far unconcerned that the vernacular tradition they desire to affirm, has its own record of reflection on the specific ethical obligations and political responsibilities which constitute the unique burden of the black artist. This

* I am prepared to defer to black Americans who argue that it is probably necessary to be both defenders and critics of 2 Live Crew. However, watching the MTV video of their hit single 'Banned In The USA' I found it difficult to accept the way in which the powerful visual legacy of the black movement of the '50s and '60s had been appropriated and made over so that it became readily and unproblematically continuous with the group's own brand of American patriotism.

may have generational, even authoritarian implications, because the 'racial' community is always a source of constraint as well as a source of support and protection for its artists and intellectuals but, leaving the question of misogyny aside for a moment, to collude in the belief that black vernacular is *nothing* more than a playfully parodic cavalcade of Rabelaisian subversion decisively weakens the positions of the artist, the critical commentator[4] and the community as a whole. What is more significant is surely the failure of either academic or journalistic commentary on black popular music in America to develop a reflexive political aesthetics capable of distinguishing the Two Live Crew and their ilk from their equally 'authentic' but possibly more compelling and certainly more constructive peers.* I am not suggesting that the self-conscious racial pedagogy of artists like KRS1, The Poor Righteous Teachers, Lakim Shabazz or The X Clan can be straightforwardly counterposed against the carefully calculated affirmative nihilism of Ice Cube, Above The Law and Compton's Most Wanted. The different styles and political perspectives expressed within the music are linked both by the bonds of a stylised but aggressively masculinist discourse and by formal borrowings from the linguistic innovations of Jamaica's distinct traditions of 'kinetic orality'.[6] The debt to Caribbean forms is more openly acknowledged in the ludic Afro-centrisms of The Jungle Brothers, De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest which may represent a third alternative — in its respectful and egalitarian representation of women and in its ambivalent relationship to America. This stimulating and innovative work operates a rather different conception of black authenticity that effectively contrasts the local (black nationalism) with the global (black internationalism) and Americanism with Ethiopianism. It is important to emphasise that all three strands within Hip Hop contribute to a folk-cultural constellation where neither the political compass of weary leftism nor the shiny navigational instruments of premature black postmodernism** in aesthetics offer very much that is useful.

An additional, and possibly more profound, area of political difficulty comes into view where the voguish language of absolute cultural difference I have described, provides an embarrassing link between the practice of blacks who comprehend racial politics through it and the activities of their foresworn opponents — the racist new Right — who approach the complex dynamics of race, nationality and ethnicity through a similar set of precise, culturalist equations.

This unlikely convergence must also be analysed. It too leads rapidly and directly back to the status of nationality and national cultures in a post-modern world where nation states are being eclipsed by a new economy of power that accords national citizenship a new significance. In seeking to account for it we have to explore how the over-integrated, absolutist and exclusivist approach

4 Henry Louis Gates jnr., Rap Music: Don't Knock It If You're Not Onto Its 'Lies', *Herald Tribune* 20.6.90.

6 Cornel West, 'Black Culture and Postmodernism' in B. Kruger and P. Mariani (eds) *Re-Making History* Dia Foundation, 1989.

* I should emphasise that it is the assimilation of these cultural forms to an unthinking notion of nationality which is the object of my critique here. Of course, certain cultural forms become articulated with sets of social and political forces over long periods of time. These forms may be played with and lived with as though they were 'natural' emblems of racial and ethnic particularity. This may even be an essential defensive attribute of the interpretative communities involved. However, the notion of nationality cannot be borrowed as a ready-made means to make sense of the special dynamics of this process.

** Trey Ellis's piece on the new black aesthetic in *Callaloo* exemplifies the perils of this casual, 'anything goes' postmodernism for the black arts movement. It was striking how, for example, profound questions of class antagonism within the black communities were conjured out of sight. Apart from his conflation of forms, which are not merely different but actively oppose one another, Ellis does not seriously consider the notion that the NBA might have a very particular and highly class specific articulation within a small and isolated segment of the black middle class which struggles with its own dependency on the cultural lifeblood of the black poor.

accords national citizenship a new significance. In seeking to account for it we have to explore how the over-integrated, absolutist and exclusivist approach to the relationship between 'race', ethnicity and culture places those who claim to be able to resolve the relationship between incommensurable discourses, in command of the cultural resources of the group as a whole. They claim this vanguard position by virtue of an ability to translate from one culture to another, mediating decisive class oppositions along the way. At this point it matters little whether the black communities are conceived as entire and self-sustaining nations or proto-national collectivities. Black intellectuals have persistently succumbed to the lure of those romantic conceptions of 'race', 'people' and 'nation' which place themselves rather than the people they supposedly represent, in charge of the strategies for nation building, state formation and racial uplift.

This point again underscores the fact that the status of nationality and the precise weight we should attach to the conspicuous differences of language, culture and identity which divide the blacks of the diaspora from each other, let alone from Africans, are unresolved within the political tradition that promises to bring the disparate peoples of the black Atlantic world together one day. Furthermore, the dependence of those black intellectuals who have tried to deal with these matters on their figuration within the canon of occidental modernity — from Herder to Von Trietschke and beyond is surely salient. Dubois's 1880 Fisk graduation address on Bismarck is an interesting example here. Reflecting on it years later in *Dusk of Dawn* he wrote:

> Bismarck was my hero. He made a nation out of a mass of bickering peoples. He had dominated the whole development with his strength until he crowned an emperor at Versailles. This foreshadowed in my mind the kind of thing that American Negroes must do, marching forward with strength and determination under trained leadership.

This model of national development has a special appeal to the "bickering peoples" of the black Atlantic diaspora. It is integral to their responses to modern racism and directly inspired their efforts to construct nation states on African soil. The idea of nationality occupies a central, if shifting place in the work of Crummell, Blyden, Delaney and Douglass. This important group of enlightenment men, whose lives and political sensibilities can ironically be defined through the persistent criss-crossing of national boundaries, often seem to share the decidedly Hegelian belief that the combination of Christianity and a nation state represents the overcoming of all antinomies. The polymath Delaney, who sets less store by Christianity than the others and is still routinely cited as the father of black nationalism expresses this cogently in his 1852 book, which begins significantly by comparing blacks in America to the disenfranchised minority 'nations' of Europe.

> That there have (sic) in all ages, in almost every nation, existed a nation within a nation — a people who although forming a part and parcel of the population, yet were from force of circumstances, known by the peculiar position they occupied, forming in fact, by deprivation of political equality with others, no part, and if any, but a restricted part of the body politics of such nations, is also true... Such then is the condition of various classes in Europe; yes, nations, for centuries within nations, even without the hope of redemption among those who oppress them. And however unfavourable their condition, there is none more so than that of the coloured people of the United States.[7]

7 *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered*, Philadelphia, 1841.

Richard Wright's later, repeated warnings that blacks "can be fascists too"[8] also spring to mind, possibly as a post-modern coda to this distinctly modern line of thought. As I hinted in the brief discussion of Hip Hop culture, these problems of nationality, exile and cultural affiliation accentuate the fragmentation and inescapable differentiation of the black subject. The fragmentation to which they refer has recently been compounded further by the questions of gender, sexuality and male domination which have been made unavoidable by the struggles of black women. I cannot attempt to resolve these tensions here, but the dimension of differentiation to which they refer provides an important frame for what follows and I hope they will not be overlooked in our discussion. As indexes of differentiation, they are especially important because the intra-communal antagonisms which appear between the local and immediate dimensions of our struggles and their hemispheric even global dynamics can only grow. Black voices from within the overdeveloped countries may be able to resonate in harmony with those produced from Africa or they may, with varying degrees of reluctance, turn away from the global project of black advancement once the symbolic political, if not the material and economic, liberation of Southern Africa is completed. The open letter to Kwame Nkrumah which concludes Wright's important and neglected book *Black Power* is a complex piece of writing that seems to me to pre-figure some of these alarming possibilities. Delany's 1859 report of the *Niger Valley Exploring Party* (another text apparently excluded from the emergent official canon of Afro-American letters) is also germane to the dialectics of diasporic identification. Delany, who was as you no doubt know a doctor, interestingly describes the sequence of clinical symptoms he experienced as his elation at arrival in Africa gave way to a special and characteristic form of melancholy:

> The first sight and impressions of the coast of Africa are always inspiring, producing the most pleasant emotions. These pleasing sensations continue for several days, more or less until they merge into feelings of almost intense excitement...a hilarity of feeling almost akin to approaching intoxication...like the sensation produced by the beverage of champagne wine....The first symptoms are succeeded by a relaxity of feelings in which there is a disposition to stretch, gape and yawn with fatigue. The second may or may not be succeeded by actual febrile attacks...but whether or not such symptoms ensue, there is one most remarkable...A feeling of regret that you left your native country for a strange one; an almost frantic desire to see friends and nativity; a despondency and loss of the hope of ever seeing those you love at home again. These feelings, of course, must be resisted and regarded as a mere morbid affection (sic) of the mind...When an entire recovery takes place, the love of the country is most ardent and abiding.[9]

The ambivalence of exile conveyed by these remarks has a long history. At this point, it is necessary to appreciate that discomfort at the prospect of fissures and fault lines in the topography of affiliation which made pan-Africanism such a powerful structure of feeling is not *necessarily* eased by references to the diaspora. This powerful idea is frequently wheeled in when we need to appreciate the things that (potentially) connect us to each other rather than think seriously about our divisions and the means to comprehend and overcome them, if indeed this is possible.

I am making a point about the type of theorising we need to develop and a point about the practical conduct of our political lives. Both these aspects come together in the question of contemporary South African politics and they have a bearing on how we might begin to consider the struggles inside that

8 Wright's famous introduction to *Native Son*: How Bigger Was Born & *The Outsider* include fulsome statements of this warning.

9 *Report of The Niger Valley Exploring Party*, p 64.

country in relation to the tempo of struggles around South African liberation which we conduct in this country and elsewhere. Here too, of course the issue of popular music as a vehicle for political sensibility which transcends nationality is central and unavoidable.

I want to make all these abstract and difficult points more concrete and accessible by turning to some of the lessons to be learned from considering the musical traditions of blacks in the West. The history and significance of these musics are consistently overlooked by black writers for two reasons. Firstly because they escape the frameworks of national or ethnocentric analysis and secondly because talking seriously about the politics and aesthetics of black vernacular cultures demands a confrontation with the order of 'intra-racial' difference. These may be to do with class, gender, sexuality or other factors, but they provide severe embarrassment to the rhetoric of racial and cultural homogeneity. As these internal divisions have grown, the price of that embarrassment has been an aching silence.

To break that silence, I want to examine the role of black musical expression in reproducing what Zygmunt Bauman has called a distinctive "counter culture of modernity". The shifting relationship of music-making to other modes of black cultural expression requires a much more sustained treatment than I can give it here. However, I want to use a brief consideration of black musical development to move our critical thoughts beyond an understanding of cultural processes which, as I have already suggested, is currently torn between seeing them as either the expression of an essential, unchanging, sovereign racial self or as the effluent from a constituted subjectivity that emerges contingently from the endless play of racial signification conceived solely in terms of the inappropriate model which *textuality* provides. The vitality and complexity of this musical culture offers a means to get beyond the related oppositions between essentialists and pluralists on the one hand and between tradition, modernity and post-modernity on the other.

Black music's obstinate and consistent commitment to the idea of a better future is a puzzle to which our enforced separation from literacy and the compensatory refinement of musical art supplies less than half an answer. The power of music in developing our struggles by communicating information, organising consciousness and testing out, deploying, or amplifying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency, individual and collective, defensive and transformational, demands attention to both the formal attributes of this tradition of expression and its distinctive *moral* basis. The formal qualities of this music are becoming better known,* so I shall concentrate here on the moral aspects and in particular, on the disjunction between the ethical value of the music and its ethnic significance.

In the simplest possible terms, by posing the world as it is against the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be, this musical culture supplies a great deal of the courage required to go on living in the present. It is both

* Anthony Jackson's dazzling exposition of James Jamerson's bass style is, in my view, indicative of the type of detailed critical work which needs to be done on the form and dynamics of black musical creativity. His remarks on Jamerson's use of harmonic and rhythmic ambiguity and selective employment of dissonance were especially helpful. To say that the book from which it is taken has been geared to the needs of the performing musician rather than the cultural historian is to indict the current state of cultural history rather than the work of Jackson and his collaborator Dr Licks. See 'An Appreciation of The Style' in (ed) Dr Licks, *Standing In The Shadows of Motown*, Hal Leonard, 1989.

produced by and expressive of that "transvaluation of all values" precipitated by the history of racial terror in the new world. It contains a theodicy but moves beyond theodicy because the profane dimensions of that racial terror made theodicy impossible.*

I have considered its distinctive critique of capitalist social relations elsewhere.[10] Here, because I want to suggest that its critical edge includes but also surpasses anti-capitalism, I want to draw out some of its inner philosophical dynamics and place emphasis on the connection between its normative character and its utopian aspirations. These are interrelated and even inseparable from each other and from the critique of racial capitalism.[11] Comprehending them requires us to link together analysis of the lyrical content and the forms of musical expression as well as the often hidden social relations in which these deeply encoded oppositional practices are created and consumed. The issue of normative content focuses attention on what might be called the politics of fulfilment[12]: the notion that a future society will be able to realise the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished. Reflecting the primary semantic position of the Bible, this is primarily a discursive mode of communication. Though by no means literal, it relates mainly to what is said, shouted, screamed or sung. The issue of utopia is more complex not least because it strives continually to move beyond the grasp of the merely linguistic, textual or discursive. It references what, following Seyla Benhabib's suggestive lead, I propose to call the politics of transfiguration. This emphasises the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors. It points specifically to the formation of a community of needs and solidarity which is magically made audible in the music itself and palpable in the social relations of its cultural consumption and reproduction.

The politics of fulfilment practiced by the descendants of slaves, demands that bourgeois civil society lives up to the promises of its own rhetoric and offers a means whereby demands for justice, rational organisation of the productive processes, etc, can be expressed. It is immanent within modernity and is no less a valuable element of modernity's counter-discourse for being so consistently ignored. Created under the nose of the overseer, the utopian desires which fuel the politics of transfiguration must be invoked by other deliberately opaque means. This politics exists on a lower frequency where it is played, danced and acted, as well as sung about, because words, even words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by the screams which still index the conspicuous power of the slave sublime will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth. The wilfully damaged signs which betray the utopian politics of transfiguration therefore partially transcend modernity. This is not a counter discourse but a counter culture that defiantly constructs its own critical, intellectual and moral genealogy anew in

10 *There Ain't No Black in The Union Jack — The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, chapter 5, Hutchinson, 1987.

11 Cedric Robinson *Black Marxism*, Zed Press, 1982.

12 This concept and its pairing with the politics of transfiguration have been adapted from Seyla Benhabib's inspiring book *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, Columbia University Press, 1987.

* I am thinking here both of Wright's tantalising discussion of 'The Dozens' in the essay on the 'Literary Tradition of the Negro in the United States' in *White Man Listen* and also of Levinas' remarks on useless suffering in another context: '...useless and unjustifiable suffering (are) exposed and displayed...without any shadow of a consoling theodicy...' see 'Useless Suffering' in (eds) R Bernasconi and D Wood *The Provocation of Levinas* Routledge, 1988. Jon Michael Spencer's thoughtful but fervently Christian discussion of what he calls the Theodicy of the Blues is also relevant here. See *The Theology of American Popular Music* a special issue of *Black Sacred Music* 3, 2, Fall 1989 (Duke University Press). I do not have space to develop my critique of Spencer here.

a partially hidden public sphere of its own. The politics of transfiguration therefore reveals the internal problems in the concept of modernity. The bounds of politics are extended precisely because this tradition of expression refuses to accept that the political is a readily separable domain. Its basic desire is to conjure up and enact the new modes of friendship, happiness and solidarity that are consequent on the overcoming of the racial oppression on which modernity and the duality of rational western progress as excessive barbarity relied. Thus the vernacular arts of the children of slaves give rise to a verdict on the role of art which is strikingly in harmony with Adorno's reflections on the dynamics of European artistic expression in the wake of Auschwitz:

> Art's Utopia, the counterfactual yet-to come, is draped in black. It goes on being a recollection of the possible with a critical edge against the real; it is a kind of imaginary restitution of that catastrophe, which is world history; it is a freedom which did not pass under the spell of necessity and which may well not come to pass ever at all.[13]

These sibling dimensions of black sensibility: the politics of fulfilment and the politics of transfiguration are not co-extensive. There are significant tensions between them but they are closely associated in the vernacular cultures of the diaspora. They can also be used to reflect the doubleness with which I began and which is often argued to be our constitutive experience in the modern world: in the West but not of it. The politics of fulfilment is content to play occidental rationality at its own game. It necessitates a hermeneutic orientation that can assimilate the semiotic, verbal and textual. The politics of transfiguration strives in pursuit of the sublime, struggling to repeat the unrepeatable, to present the unpresentable. Its rather different hermeneutic focus pushes towards the mimetic, dramatic and performative.

13 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Routledge, p 196.

It seems especially significant that the cultural traditions which these musics allow us to map out, do not seek to exclude problems of inequality or to make racial justice an exclusively abstract matter. Their grounded ethics offers, among other things, a continuous commentary on the systematic and pervasive relations of domination that supply its conditions of existence. Their grounded aesthetics is never separated off into an autonomous realm where familiar political rules cannot be applied and where as Salman Rushdie puts its, "the little room of literature" can continue to enjoy its special privileges as a heroic resource for the well healed adversaries of liberal capitalism.[14]

14 Salman Rushdie, *Is Nothing Sacred?*, The Herbert Read Memorial Lecture 1990, Granta.

I am proposing then, that we re-read and re-think this tradition of cultural expression not simply as a succession of literary tropes and genres, but as a philosophical discourse which refuses the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics. The traditional teaching of ethics and politics — practical philosophy — came to an end some time ago, even if its death agonies were prolonged. This tradition had maintained the idea that a good life for the individual and the problem of the best social and political order for the collectivity could be discerned by rational means. Though it is seldom acknowledged even now, this tradition lost its exclusive claim to rationality, in part, through the way that slavery became internal to western civilisation and through the obvious complicity which both plantation slavery and colonial regimes revealed between rationality and the practice of racial terror.

Not perceiving its residual condition, blacks in the West eavesdropped on and then took over a fundamental question from that tradition. Their progress from the status of slaves to the status of citizens led them to enquire into what

the best possible forms of social and political existence might be? The memory of slavery, actively preserved as a living intellectual resource in their expressive political culture, helped them to generate a new set of answers to this enquiry. They had to fight — often through the invocation of spirituality — to hold on to the unity of ethics and politics sundered from each other by modernity's insistence that the true, the good and the beautiful had distinct origins and belong to different domains of knowledge. First, slavery itself and then their memory of it induced many of them to query the foundational moves of modern philosophy and social thought whether they came from the natural rights theorists who sought to distinguish between the spheres of morality and legality, the idealists who wanted to emancipate politics from morals so that it could become a sphere of strategic action, or the political economists of the bourgeoisie who first formulated the separation of economic activity from both ethics and politics. The brutal excess of the slave plantation supplied a set of moral and political responses to each of these attempts.

The history of black music enables us to trace something of the means through which the unity of ethics and politics has been reproduced as a form of folk knowledge. This sub-culture often appears to be the intuitive expression of some racial essence but is in fact an elementary historical acquisition produced from the viscera of an alternative tradition of cultural and political expression that considers the world critically from the point of view of its emancipatory transformation. In the future, it will become a place which is capable of satisfying the (redefined) needs of human beings that will emerge once the violence — epistemic and concrete — of racial typology is at an end. Reason is thus reunited with the happiness and freedom of individuals and the reign of justice within the collectivity.

I have already implied that there is a degree of convergence here with other projects towards a critical theory of society, particularly Marxism. However, where lived crisis and systemic crisis come together, Marxism allocates priority to the latter while the memory of slavery insists on the priority of the former. Their convergence is also undercut by the simple fact that in the critical tradition of blacks in the West, social self-creation through labour is not the core of emancipatory hopes. For the descendants of slaves, work signifies only servitude, misery and subordination. Artistic expression, expanded beyond recognition from the grudging gifts offered by the masters as a token substitute for freedom from bondage, therefore becomes the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation. Poiesis and poetics begin to co-exist in novel forms — autobiographical writing, special and uniquely creative ways of manipulating spoken language and above all, the music.

Antiphony (call and response) is the principal formal feature of these musical traditions. It reaches out beyond music into other modes of cultural expression, supplying, along with improvisation, montage and dramaturgy, the hermeneutic keys to the full medley of black artistic practices from kinesics to rhetoric. The intense and often bitter dialogues which make the black arts movement move offer a small reminder that there is a 'democratic' moment enshrined in the practice of antiphony which anticipates new, non-dominating social relationships. Lines between self and other are blurred and special forms of pleasure are created as a result. Ellison's famous observation on the inner dynamics of jazz uses visual art as its central analogy and can be extended beyond the specific context it was written to illuminate:

> There is in this a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself. For true jazz

> is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment...springs from a contest in which the artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the canvasses of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus because jazz finds its very life in improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazz man must lose his identity even as he finds it...[15]

By way of a conclusion, I want to illustrate these arguments further by very briefly bringing forward two concrete historical instances in which the musical traditions of the black Atlantic world acquired a special political valency. These examples are simultaneously both national, in that they had a direct impact on British politics, and diasporic, in that they tell us something fundamental about the limits of that national perspective. They are not, of course, the only examples I could have chosen. They have been selected somewhat at random, though the fact that they span a century will, I hope, be taken as preliminary evidence for the existence of fractal[16] patterns of cultural and political affiliation which will need further elaboration and detailed critical consideration. Both in rather different ways, reflect the special position of Britain within the Black Atlantic world, standing at the apex of the semi-triangular structure which saw commodities and people shipped to and fro across the ocean.

The first relates to the visits by the Fisk University Jubilee Singers[17] to England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland in the early 1870s under the philanthropic patronage of the Earl of Shaftesbury. The Fisk Singers have a profound historical importance because they were the first group to perform Spirituals on a public platform, offering this form of black music as mass entertainment.[18] Their success is especially significant amidst the changed cultural and ideological circumstances that attended the "re-making" of the English working class in the era of imperialism.[19] In explicit opposition to minstrelsy which was becoming an established element in popular culture by this time,[20] the Fisk Singers constructed an aura of seriousness and projected the memory of slavery outwards as the means to make their musical performances intelligible and pleasurable. The choir had taken to the road seven years after the founding of their alma mater to raise funds. They produced books to supplement the income from their concert performances and these volumes ran to over 60,000 copies sold between 1877 and the end of the century. Interestingly, these publications included a general historical account of Fisk and its struggles, some unusual autobiographical statements from the members of the ensemble and the music and lyrics of between 104 and 139 songs from their extensive repertoire. In my opinion, this unusual combination of communicative modes and genres is especially important for anyone seeking to locate the origins of the polyphonic montage technique developed by Dubois in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

The Singers' text describes Queen Victoria listening to 'John Brown's Body' "with manifest pleasure", the Prince of Wales requesting 'No More Auction Block For Me' and the choir being waited upon by Mr and Mrs Gladstone after their servants had been dismissed.[21] These images are important, although the choir's performances to enormous working class audiences in British cities may be more significant for contemporary Anti-racism struggling to escape the strictures of its own apparent novelty. It is clear that for their liberal patrons, the music and song of the Jubilee Singers offered an opportunity to feel closer to God while the memory of slavery recovered by their performances entrenched the feelings of moral rectitude which flowed from the commitment to political reform for which the imagery of elevation from slavery was

15 Ralph Ellison *Shadow and Act*, p 234. There are in Ellison's remarks the components of a definitive response to the position of Adorno in 'Uber Jazz'; see also Susan Buck Morss *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, (Free Press), pp 108-110.

16 I am thinking of fractal geometry as an analogy here because it allows for the possibility that a line of infinite length can enclose a finite area. The opposition between totality and infinity is thus recast in a striking image of the scope for agency in restricted conditions.

17 The radical historian Peter Linebaugh has recently discussed the etymology of the word jubilee and some of the political discourses that surround it: 'Jubilating' *Midnight Notes*, Fall 1990. Reviews of the Singers' performances in England can be found in *East Anglian Daily Times* 21.11.1874 and the *Surrey Advertiser* 5.12.1874.

18 John M. MacKenzie (ed), *Imperialism And Popular Culture*, Manchester University Press, 1986.

19 Gareth Stedman Jones 'Working-class culture and working class politics in London 1870-1900: Notes on the remaking of a working class', in *Languages of Class*, (Cambridge, 1983).

emblematic long after emancipation. The Jubilee Singers' music can be shown to have articulated what Dubois calls "the articulate message of the slave to the world" into British culture and society at several distinct and class-specific points. The Spirituals enforced the patrician moral concerns of Shaftesbury and Gladstone but also introduced a specific moral sensibility into the lives of the lower orders who, it would appear, began to create Jubilee choirs of their own.*

My second example of diasporic cultural innovation is contemporary though it relates to the song 'I'm So Proud' originally written and performed by the Chicagoan vocal trio The Impressions at the peak of their artistic and commercial success in the mid 1960s. The Impressions sixties hits like 'Gypsy Woman', 'Grow Closer Together', 'Minstrel and Queen' and 'People Get Ready' were extremely popular among blacks in Britain and in the Caribbean. In Jamaica, the male vocal trio format popularised by the band inaugurated a distinct genre within the vernacular musical form which would eventually be marketted internationally as Reggae.** The Wailers were only one of many groups that patterned themselves on The Impressions and strove to match the singing of the Americans for harmonic texture, emotional dynamics and black metaphysical grace. A new version of The Impressions' hit 'I'm So Proud' has recently topped the Reggae charts in Britain. Re-titled 'Proud of Mandela' it was performed by the toaster Macka B and the Lovers' Rock singer Kofi who had produced her own version of the tune itself patterned on another soft soul version issued by the American singer Deniece Williams in 1983.

I want to make no special claims for the formal, musical merits of this particular record, but I think that it is exemplary in that it brings Africa, America, Europe and The Caribbean seamlessly together. It was produced in Britain by the children of Caribbean and African settlers from raw materials supplied by black Chicago but filtered through Kingstonian sensibility in order to pay tribute to a black hero whose global significance lies beyond his partial South African citizenship and the impossible national identity which goes with it. The very least which this music and its history can offer us today in an analogy for comprehending the lines of affiliation and association which take the idea of the diaspora beyond its symbolic status as the fragmentary opposite of an imputed racial essence. Foregrounding the role of music allows us to see England, or perhaps London, as an important junction point on the web of black Atlantic political culture. A place where, by virtue of local factors like

20 An 'Eva-gets Well' version of Uncle Tom's Cabin was doing excellent business on the London stage in 1878. See also Robert C. Toll *Blacking Up The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford, 1974); Barry Anthony, 'Early Nigger Minstrel Acts in Britain' *Music Hall*, 12, (April 1980); and Josephine Wright 'Orpheus Myron McAdoo' *Black Perspective in Music*, 4, 3, (Fall 1976).

21 These events are described in Gladstone's diaries for the 14th and 29th July 1873. Apart from the Singers' own text, there is a lengthy description of these events in the New York *Independent* 21, 8, 1873. See also Ella Sheppard Moore 'Historical sketch of The Jubilee Singers', *Fisk University News*, October 1911, p 42.

* In his essay on the Fisk Singers in Britain, Doug Seroff cites the example of the East London Jubilee Singers of Hackney Juvenile Mission a 'Ragged School' formed after an inspirational visit by the Fisk Singers to Hackney in June 1873. John Newman, the manager of the Mission, 'felt that such singing from the soul should not be forgotten, and speedily set to work to teach the children of the Mission the songs the Jubilee singers had sung' see (ed) R Lotz and I Pegg *Under The Imperial Carpet. Essays in Black History 1780-1950*, Rabbit Press, Crawley, 1986. Listening recently to my seven year old son's primary school singing 'Oh Freedom' in furtherance of the multi-cultural and anti-racist educational policies of the Borough of Islington was confirmation that slave songs are still being sung in inner London schools in the 1990s.

** The phenomenon of Jamaican male vocal trios is discussed by Randall Grass, 'Iron Sharpen Iron — The Great Jamaican Harmony Trios' in (ed) P Simon, *Reggae International*, Thames & Hudson, 1983. Key exponents of this particular art would be The Heptones, The Paragons, The Gaylads, The Meditations, The Itals, Carlton and The Shoes, Justin Hines and The Dominoes, Toots and The Maytals, Yabby Yu and The Prophets, The Gladiators, The Melodians, The Ethiopians, The Cables, The Tamlins, The Congoes, The Mighty Diamonds, The Abysinnians, Black Uhuru, Israel Vibration and, of course, The Wailers whose Neville O'Reilly/Bunny Livingstone/Bunny Wailer does the best Curtis Mayfield impersonation of the lot.

the informality of racial segregation, the configuration of class relations and the contingency of linguistic convergences, global phenomena such as anti-colonial and emancipationist political formations are still being sustained, reproduced and amplified.