

# **The status of difference: from epidermalisation to nano-politics**

**Paul Gilroy**

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# The status of difference: from epidermalisation to nano-politics

Paul Gilroy

O my body, make of me always a man who asks questions! **Frantz Fanon**

If you wore a pair of size 34 jeans, you were buying a size 40 just 'cause we don't want our jeans fitting up in our crotches. They ain't designed for black people. Black people got certain physiques--black men and black women. Those other companies design with a preppy kind of customer in mind, not black people. That is where I come into the picture. People see black people as trendsetters, they see what we're on and they wanna be onto the same thing, figuring its gonna be the next big thing. They try to take things away from us every time. Slang we come up with ends up on T-shirts. We ain't making no T-shirts. **Karl Kani**

It is indeed the case that human social and political organization is a reflection of our biological being, for, after all, we are material biological objects developing under the influence of the interaction of our genes with the external world. It is certainly not the case that our biology is irrelevant to social organization. The question is, what part of our biology is relevant? **Richard Lewontin**

As biology has re-emerged as the key principle of racial explanation, the (multi)culture wars have become entrenched. The tribunes of absolute homogeneity oppose the apostles of equally absolute diversity in ways that leave the claims of biological determinism unanswered. Outside of the earthworks these two sizeable groups have constructed and the terminal attrition that has produced them, it is difficult to keep multi-culture in focus long enough to say anything serious and analytical. Formerly radical forces operating under the banners of ethnicity have been distracted by a calculus of particularity which projects authentic cultural identity as the simple product of either sameness or difference. Though politically opposed, the absolutists on both sides of the colour line share many assumptions about what culture is and the nature of its claims upon us. In pursuit of their common disciplinary interests, they devise protectionist tactics but renounce the more difficult missions that involve the possibility of a *cultural* politics that can repudiate socio-biological claims.

Liberal pluralism, simple relativism and orthodox ethnocentrism may try to claim the prize of multi-culturalism exclusively for themselves, but that overloaded, pivotal concept does not refer to some readily identifiable

philosophical or political stance. Its meaning is still being determined in a wide-ranging, conflictual and, at present, open process. These conflicts encompass the questions of cultural integrity and cultural value but move beyond them releasing an unanticipated energy that delivers us right to the heart of thinking about contemporary democracy. A better understanding of multi-culture is essential both to the rehabilitation of democracy and to the struggle against biological determinisms.

The pattern of these hostilities has been dictated by controversies over the idea of nationality, the changing character of the nation state and the forms of sameness they require. These, in turn, fuel anxiety over the difficulties involved in maintaining cultural and biological purity in answer to the corrosive effects of differentiation manifested, above all in the presence of post-colonial peoples--always out of place--at the hub of the old imperial networks. Underlying all of these fears is one further question: whether today's inescapable encounters with difference might be understood as having any sort of positive value.

Elements of the large political and ethical agenda for which the discourses of multi-culturalism provide a timely index are also revealed by the sheer intensity of discussions conducted around "political correctness"; the rational, moral and aesthetic heritage of western civilisation; the future of the educational system and the role of imperial public institutions like the museum in collecting, rationalising, displaying and reproducing both culture and civilisation. Multi-culturalism is accented quite differently in all these areas of policy and politics. It has recently appeared in corporate and liberal, publicly insurgent and privately transgressive modes. It is being engaged variously to address fears about the canon of western thought, to evaluate the contemporary authority of scientific endeavour and aesthetic value and to illuminate the crisis of the humanities in which crossing boundaries and questioning where borderlines have been placed (between cultures and scholarly disciplines) have suggested promising routes towards new forms of knowledge. Most fundamentally, in a time of planetarisation and accelerated technological development when the politics and significance of location, presence and proximity are being actively recomposed, multi-culturalism has been deployed to interrogate the significance of nationality as a principle of social cohesion and to criticise unthinking attempts to place and maintain Europe as the innocent and privileged centre of history's unfolding.

The stubborn imprecision of multi-culturalism has only enhanced the concept's capacity both to name the special forms of jeopardy that endanger the nation today and, on the other side, to help in defining emergent, utopian alternatives to the congruency of bleached out culture with the fading borders of the nation state.

Uncoupled from its associations with unbridgeable, absolute difference and reconfigured with a wider sense of the unevenly-developed power of sub-national (local) and supra-national relations, multi-culturalism can force nationalisms and bio-social explanations of race and ethnicity into a defensive posture. Their legitimacy, the scale upon which they imagine solidarity and their foreclosure of human agency are being questioned in the name of the cosmopolitan multi-culturalism constituted where the historic link between culture and nation is broken.

The very recurrence of the term multi-culturalism in so many discrepant settings connects them and suggests that they may be presenting the symptoms of a common, underlying crisis. With the addition of that fateful prefix: "multi", layer upon layer of conflict was spun around the central concept of culture. It has emerged from that cocoon as a master signifier: as powerful today as justice, right, freedom and reason must have been long ago.

There is more to multi-culturalism than its role as a special sign used to display and articulate the manifold pressures acting on the nation state from within and without. I want to approach it here speculatively, not as a clearly delineated goal or a reified state to which one can be finally committed but as an aesthetic and even ethical principle routed through certain distinctive historical experiences of modernity and confirmed by the special promise and hetero-cultural dynamism of contemporary metropolitan life. Perhaps we can consider what it would mean to embrace rather than flee from multi-culturalism's political implications particularly where they offer resources in the coming conflict with ambitious biological determinism. That accommodation with politics need not involve the betrayal of creativity and artistic autonomy.

Though it is seldom openly acknowledged, for most of us in Europe these telling arguments over culture and difference and the relationship of nationality to power and history re-animate the lingering after-images of the colonial and imperial past. The residual significance of these fading outlines on the retina of the national imaginary is signalled by too many sullen responses to the supposedly disruptive presence of post-colonial peoples at the conflictual core of metropolitan social life. For critics and other brave souls prepared to navigate the roughest waters of contemporary cultural politics, that half-forgotten imperial history is still present and potent, though it remains latent, mostly unseen, like rocks beneath the surface of the sea. The traces of imperial modernity--its contested social memory--may be apprehended only intermittently but they can still produce volatile material even if, these days, it is still cultural differences rather than the

straightforward biological inferiority of those (post)colonial peoples that creates alarm and defines the threat they represent to brittle, monocultural identity.

Reinvented as much as remembered, the filtered imperial past gets invested with a new power to soothe. It supplies comfort against the shock of Empire's loss and the realisation of national decline. Across Europe, memories of imperial greatness are one potent and neglected element in the resurgent appeal of confident neo-fascisms as well as the populist strategies devised by governments to undermine their electoral appeal. They are also powerfully active in the anthropological, nineteenth-century definitions of humanity that still supply the ground upon which judgements of truth, beauty and goodness are routinely made<sup>1</sup>. The enduring effects of this legacy are an urgent issue for critics for it is art and culture rather than science and reason that have supplied the best fuel for culturally-oriented racism and confirmed its distinctive vision of absolutely incompatible ways of life. We must ask whether the production and reception of art might now contribute something valuable to a self-consciously post-anthropological understanding of both culture and humanity? Vernacular forms of artistic practice have already disrupted the stable standpoints from which pronouncements on these important matters are made. The image world of corporate multi-culture seems poised to do something similar.

### **It's in the mix--culture, post-anthropology**

Avowedly post-modernist thinkers stay closest to the modernist project where they have questioned the figure of Man and identified its role as an integral trope in the modern ideologies of inhumanity that appeared during the colonial and imperial periods. This image of Man has been denounced as a dismal code for the duplicity that bonded rationality with terror. The problematic relationship between modernity and barbarism, progress and catastrophe that was elaborated in the Nazi period has become paradigmatic here. At present it would be inappropriate and indeed impossible to announce a final verdict on its significance. In this unquiet zone, the quest for the wholesome finality of a new beginning is an immoral one and there are many important political and ethical issues at stake in how that period of authoritarian irrationalism and rational authoritarianism should be remembered and commemorated. I want to suggest two things: that acknowledgements of its uniqueness should not become prescriptive and that recognising its special character should not mean that we expel it from history and thereby cut its significant ties to modes of government and social discipline that are routinely considered normal and comprehensible if not exactly benign. Adorno's rigorous speculations about the forms of artistic

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<sup>1</sup> Annie E. Coombes Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination Yale University Press, 1994.

creation that might be appropriate after Auschwitz are a valuable source of further insights. Similar concerns can be voiced in a different key today not only when we remember those horrors in a fashion that shows the immorality in seeking to place them exclusively behind us, but where we appreciate the continuing vitality of fascisms which seek to harness the national principle in the fell service of absolute ethnicity and its occult faiths.

Supplementary challenges to the moral authority of civilisation and enlightenment aspirations arise from re-situating European fascist ideology and social practices in the context of imperial and colonial domination and in appreciating their ties to some distinctively new world varieties of white supremacist thought<sup>2</sup>. The history of eugenic movements that were once so adept at crossing national boundaries provides a deeply-troubling instance of this important trans-local perspective and some preliminary sense of its value.

Today's racialised political conflicts remain deeply connected to the mentalities that produced fascisms and the moral and economic logics that sanctioned them. The glittering career of Jean-Marie Le Pen is only one reminder that this is not just a British disease. In many countries, hostile responses to difference and fascistic enthusiasms for purity are dormant within the most benign patriotic rhetoric and the glamour of national sameness it promotes. These difficulties arise from present conditions and the nature and meaning of any links to past horrors are elusive. I want to suggest that some formidable moral and political challenges reside in the responses of European societies to contemporary racism and anti-semitism and that disputes over cultural value and the ethnic integrity of national cultures are central to them. These problems are posed by fortress Europe's official multi-nationalism and by its indifferent and intolerant attitudes to the presence of refugees, asylum seekers and "immigrants" many of whom turn out not to be immigrants at all, but rather settler citizens who have enjoyed a disturbingly intimate and long-standing relationship to the history and culture of their unhomey homelands. A suitably complex account of Europe's successive encounters with evil, ignorant and primitive peoples generates neither a sequence of discrete episodes in some totalising narrative of unreason nor the conclusive proof that heroic liberal, democratic and humane values will always, inevitably triumph over "dark" forces.

Assessing the status of difference in Europe and for Europe generates important deliberations over what that supra-national order will become. Current attempts to recreate Christendom in the teeth of anti-modern Islamic fundamentalism have also given pride of place to culture. It is the essential

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<sup>2</sup> Edward J. Larson Sex, Race and Science, Johns Hopkins, 1995; Stefan Kühl The Nazi Connection, Oxford, 1994.

medium in which the crusades of tolerance against its swarthy foes are now registered. The bodies of women provide the stage on which this drama is enacted<sup>3</sup>. These debates have many facets but discussions of art and culture have provided one important opportunity in which the meaning and potential value not of different cultures, but of cultural heterogeneity itself, is being tested out and worked through. Some of the key questions identified in these conversations so far are these: can we improve upon the idea that culture exists exclusively in localised national and ethnic units--separate but equal in aesthetic value and human worth? What significance do we accord to the histories of imperialism and white supremacy that are so extensively entangled with the development of modern aesthetics, its storehouses, collections and museums and their anthropological assumptions? How, if we can reject the over-simple diagnoses of this situation offered by ethnic absolutism, might we begin to frame a trans- or cross-cultural criticism? What role does expressive cultural creativity play in mediating or even transcending racialised or ethnically-coded differences? What recognition do we give to the forms of non-national and cross-cultural practice that are already spontaneously underway in popular-cultural or disreputable forms many of which have supplied important resources to the trans-national social movement against racism?

Some time ago when the military struggles to liberate Africa from colonial rule where still in train, one Caribbean migrant to Europe, Frantz Fanon, the Martiniquean psychiatrist and militant, addressed some these questions in an altogether different but nonetheless recognisable form:

It is a question of the third world starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe's crimes, of which the most horrible was committed in the heart of man, and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity. . . For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.<sup>4</sup>

Leaving aside for a moment the important issue of whether multiculturalism could be one of these new concepts, we must reckon with the fact that Fanon comprehended this urgent obligation via a binary code almost as pernicious as the manichean dualisms that he sought to supplant. His overly stern liberationist perspective was an organic product of militarised social life in the colonial city. There, he noted that the zones inhabited respectively by

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<sup>3</sup> Vron Ware "Moments of Danger" History And Theory Beiheft 31, 1992, pp115-137.

<sup>4</sup> Frantz Fanon Wretched of The Earth pp 254-255.

coloniser and colonised were opposed but could not be reconciled “in the service of a higher unity”<sup>5</sup>. The distinctive political order and spatial rules which configured colonial segregation would be expressed most comprehensively in the apartheid system. They allocated people to two great camps--close but non-synchronous worlds--that encountered one another only rarely. Fanon tells us that contact between them was mediated exclusively by the functional brutality of the police and the military which enjoyed an essentially permissive relationship to colonial government and colonial law.

Today, in Europe at least, there is less mitigation for this starkly dualistic diagnosis. The erstwhile barbarians are within the gates and may not live in a formally segregated ghetto or enclave. The frontiers of cultural difference cannot be made congruent with national borders. The cities do not belong exclusively to the colonisers and their kin. Isolated areas in which elements of colonial social life persist and thrive can be identified but these urban worlds draw their vitality and much of their appeal from varieties of cultural crossing--mixing and moving--that demand the proximity if not the presence of the Other. More than that, the cultures of the natives, not just their labour, can now be bought and sold as commodities. Their exotic achievements are venerated and displayed (though not always as authentic art) and the fruits of alterity have acquired an immediate value, even where the company of the people who harvested them is not itself desired. Elements of their culture are actively projected into the lives of the dominant group by cultural industries that make great profits from that operation. No less than in Fanon’s time, the occasional conflict between these groups is not to something that can be resolved prematurely, neatly or dialectically. It should certainly not be displaced onto a higher level or conjured away via the invocation of a more exalted unity. And yet, the expressive cultures that have grown up in these polyglot urban spaces--trans-national and trans-lational vernacular cultures--supply and celebrate a variety of inter-connection which not only acknowledges inter-dependency, but, at its insubordinate and carnivalesque best, has been known to project an immediacy and a rebel solidarity powerful enough to make race and ethnicity suddenly meaningless. That was one vital message signalled long ago by Rock Against Racism, and the mongrel social movement that created its surrogates in various different countries. Almost twenty years since it first appeared, that movement still moves but more quietly and in de-centred, less formal patterns. Its effects are still conveyed in the underground club and rave scene, in illegal broadcasting and in the alternative public sphere that surrounds these initiatives. The most visible parts of this counter-culture are still youth-based and assertively metropolitan in character but the whole movement cannot be reduced to those attributes. A profound incompatibility with the pervasive moods of colonial and imperial

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p.30.



nostalgia is more important in defining the forms of symbolic treason it promotes and the democratic possibilities they bring into being. A new style of dissidence is being reproduced where discrepant forms combine, conflict and mutate in promiscuous, chaotic patterns which require that the politics of influence, adaptation and assimilation be re-thought. Who, after all, is being assimilated into what? The implications of this complex cultural amalgamation are repressed and any political significance it may hold are routinely denied by spokespeople for all parties to this joyous transaction. It is this still-emergent means of living with and through difference which is domesticated, truncated and tamed in the parasitic corporate multi-culturalism of companies like Benneton, Coke and Swatch. The glamour of difference sells. We need a new genealogy of what used to be called youth cultures<sup>6</sup> that could link analysis of these contemporary political phenomena with older issues like the fears of their degenerative influence on European Youth in the 1930s and 40s. A different understanding of the place of "race" in Europe is waiting to be constructed from exciting material like Richard Wright's contentious speculations about the after-shock Fascism:

To the degree that millions of Europe's whites were terrorized and driven by Nazism, to that degree did they embrace the Negro's music and his literary expression. Here was a development that white America did not foresee or understand. Hence, the Negro became to a large measure for Europe the one and only human aspect of an other wise brutally industrialized continent.<sup>7</sup>

The main problem that we face in making sense of these and more recent developments, is the lack of a means of adequately describing, let alone theorising, inter-mixture, fusion and syncretism without suggesting the existence of anterior "uncontaminated" purities. These are the stable sanctified conditions that supposedly preceded the mixing process and to which presumably it might one day be possible to return. Whether the process of mixture is presented as fatal or redemptive, we must be prepared to give up the illusion that cultural and ethnic purity have ever existed, let alone provided foundations for civil society. The absence of an adequate conceptual and critical language is underlined and complicated by the absurd charge that attempts to employ the concept of hybridity are completely undone by the active residues of that term's articulation within the technical vocabularies nineteenth-century racial science.

The density of mixed and always impure forms demands new organic and technological analogies. Its poetics is already alive and at large. Notions of

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<sup>6</sup> Roger Hewitt "Us and Them in the late space age" *Young*, Vol. 3, No, 2, May 1995, 23-34.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Wright "The American Problem-Its Negro Phase" in D. Ray and R.M. Farnsworth (eds) *Richard Wright Impressions And Perspectives* Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1971, p12

mixing are being celebrated that owe nothing to the world of biology and everything to the skilful work of black hands on phonograph turntables released from one role as passive reproductive apparatuses and made productive through the act of doubling which fosters a new creativity and ushers in an infinite sense of musical time. The problematic of origins appeared at an important point in the story of modernist racial and cultural typologies. It becomes irrelevant where the old dead skins of ethnic and racial particularity have been shed though it cannot be repeated too often that deconstructing “races” is not the same thing as doing away with racisms.

It is not so much that the multiple origins of these densely compound forms are unknowable but rather that the obligation to discover them which was once so urgent appears now to be pointless and is disconnected from their legitimation and from their enjoyment. We do know where Hip hop, Reggae, Soul and House originated and the historical, technological and cultural resources from which they were constituted yet this information does not help either to place them or to assess their contemporary consequences. The modernist obsession with origins can be left behind as itinerant, symbiotic cultures are propagated by unforeseen means and proceed by unknown routes to unanticipated destinations. Travelling itself contributes to a sense of multiplicity for which utopian--technically placeless--patterns of cultural use constituted around popular musics provide the most pertinent example. Chaotic cultural dissemination in more and more elaborate circuits itself enjoys a complicated relationship to the technologies that have conquered distance, compressed time and solicited novel forms of identification between the creators of cultural forms, moods and styles and various groups of users who may dwell far from the location in which an object or event was initially conceived. This art is dispatched in provisional and unfinished forms that anticipate further input and flow in a communicative economy in which creative recycling rather than immoral disposability is the regulative norm. With its biblical force somewhat diluted, the idea of diaspora can be useful here. It complements the antiphonic imaginary of the hidden public sphere that was formed around making and using black music. Diaspora allows for a complex conception of sameness and ideas of solidarity that do not repress the differences within the dispersed group in order to maximise the differences between one “essential” community and others.

Diaspora’s discomfort with carelessly over-integrated notions of culture and its rather fissured sense of particularity can also be made to fit with the best moods of politicised postmodernism which shares an interest in understanding the self as contingently and performatively produced. Diaspora introduces the oppositions between becoming and being, geography and genealogy. Identity conceived diasporically, resists reification in petrified but authentic forms. The tensions around origin and essence that the diaspora

brings into view, allow us to perceive that identity should not be fossilised in keeping with the holy spirit of ethnic absolutism. Identity too becomes a noun of process. Its openness provides a timely alternative to the clockwork solidarity based on outmoded notions of “race” and disputed ideas of national belonging<sup>8</sup>.

The history of these subaltern political cultures’ tangled associations with the rise, consolidation and gradual globalisation of the cultural industries is also germane. The corporate multi-culturalism noted above has simulated their celebrations of difference and set a tame version of their alluring patterns of cultural disaggregation to work as part of its marketing strategies. These vernacular cultures have an ambivalent relationship with the corporate world and often articulate an open hostility towards it. The citation and simulation of these cultures do not reproduce their ethical investment in face to face, body to body, real-time interaction. The distinctive privilege accorded to the process of performance and its antiphonic rituals s already under-pressure from the de-skilling of instrumental competences. Digital technology has precipitated a different notion of authorship and promoted a sense of culture which cannot be confined to legal and habitual codes that imagine it to be individual property. This loosening of proprietary claims has also given the advertisers and iconisers an additional license to plunder and appropriate the vigour of racialised counter-cultures. The solidarity of proximity yields to the faceless intersubjectivity of communicative technologies like the internet. The marketing of sports and sports-oriented commodities and the forms of heroism these operations require becomes a vitalist counterpart to the sedentary practice of staring into a screen.

These are the perilous conditions in which investments in authentic otherness emerge as a new home and vehicle for alternative values supposedly unsullied by capitalism, techno-science and commerce. Some of Europe’s oldest romances with the primitives and the noble savages are being rekindled. What is euphemistically called “world music” supplies this moment with a timely soundtrack and though we can appreciate the hunger for cultural forms that stand outside the immorality and corruption of the overdeveloped world, imprisoning the primitive other in a fantasy of innocence can only be catastrophic for all parties involved. The danger is compounded when the interests of the romantic consumers begin to converge with those of people inside the minority communities who want to enforce a particular definition of invariant (and therefore authentic) ethnicity for their own dubious disciplinary reasons. Linguistic, traditional and local particularities may be in danger from the levelling effects of corporate multi-culturalism but in responding to that threat we do not have to choose

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<sup>8</sup> I see strong affinities here with the argument outlined by Rosi Braidotti in “Sexual Difference as a Nomadic Political Project” in her Nomadic Subjects Columbia University Press, 1994.

between fetishising and therefore capitulating to unchanging difference and its simple evacuation or erasure. There is a greater danger when absolutism is blindly endorsed by cultural institutions that fall back on an ossified sense of ethnic difference as a means to rationalise their own practice and judgements in a parody of pluralism which recalls segregationism. This is especially true in situations where analytical criteria have been de-stabilised by the critique of their ethno-historical specificity. The authenticity factor fits all too readily with the impossible logic of ethnic representativeness.

These difficult and overly abstract arguments become more vivid if we bring forward an example. Bob Marley's planetary stardom springs to mind because of the recent acknowledgements of what would have been his fiftieth birthday. It provides an appropriate moment to reflect upon changes to the political and moral economy of our planet's popular culture in the post/neo-colonialist period. Do we comprehend Bob best, as a Jamaican, Caribbean, African or Pan-African artist? as all of the above, as a diaspora figure, as a voice of the poor and the underdeveloped world? On what scale of cultural analysis do we make sense of his reconciliation of technology with mystical anti-modern forces. How do we combine his work as an intellectual, as a thinker, a political voice, with his portrayal as a primitive hyper-masculine figure, unclothed, shrouded in ganga smoke or on the soccer field with his idren? Are we prepared now, so many years after his death, his canonisation and mythification, to set aside the new forms of minstrelsy on offer in all those coffee table books about the gullies of Jamaica? Is he now a world figure whose career traversed continents and whose revolutionary political stance won adherents because of its ability to imagine the end of capitalism as readily as it imagined the end of the world?

In Bob Marley's image there is something more than domestication of the other and the accommodation of insubordinate Third Worldism within corporate multi-culturalism. Something remains even when we dismiss the presentation of Bob's rebel difference as spectacle and a powerful marketing device in the global business of selling records, tapes, CDs, videos and their associated merchandise. However great Bob's skills, the formal innovations in his music must take second place behind its significance as the site of a revolution in the structure of the global markets for these cultural commodities. The magic of alterity was set to work to animate his image and increase the power of his music to seduce people for whom the idiom of his speech remained inaccessible<sup>9</sup>. That magic required that Bob was purified, simplified, nationalised and particularised. Bob's authenticity as a Jamaican, and a "Rastafarian" rather than a dread, was manufactured and moulded not to validate his political aspirations or dissident status but to invest his music

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<sup>9</sup> The conservative "Eurosceptic" member of parliament for Southend, Sir Teddy Taylor, provides an interesting example of this kind of relationship with Marley.

with an aura of carefully calculated transgression that still makes it utopian: saleable and appealing all over the planet. Otherness was invoked and it operates to make the gulf between his memory and his remote “crossover” audiences bigger, to manage that experiential gap between over-developed and developing so that the pleasures to be had in consuming him and his work are somehow enhanced. It is only recently that the figure of Bob’s long-ignored white father has been brought forward and offered as the key to interpreting his son’s worldly achievements and comprehending the pathological motivation to succeed that took him out of Trenchtown<sup>10</sup>. The phase in which Bob was represented as exotic and dangerous is over. The prodigal, benign, child-like Bob Marley can now be brought home into the family.

I wonder what would Dr. Fanon have said about this complex intercultural formation and its powerful appeals to ever larger numbers of white users of black culture? Bob’s very existence as the child of two phenotypically dissimilar people in a colonial regime that both fostered and prevented their intimacy supplies a curious symbol of the wilful and profane patterns of human desire that empty racial categories of their content at a single stroke. Like Fanon’s, Bob Marley’s life brought about a complex connection between Africa and new world blacks. This was symbolised by his participation in the Zimbabwe independence celebrations and confirmed more recently by the bonding of Caribbean and African American styles that he aspired to accomplish but which it has taken another 20 years to complete. What is laughably, minimally referred to as his “international appeal” conveys the strange fact that all over the planet against the laws of cultural absolutism, people have been able to discover in his Jamaican vernacular and its corona of political symbols a means to make sense of their own ambitions, desires and dreams of a better world.

In our period Fanon, whose work yields so many precious insights, becomes less than helpful precisely because his thinking remains bound to a dualistic logic we must now abjure in asking what the analysis of culture and the development of cultural politics (and policy) might contribute to the new humanism he called for thirty years ago. It is not now or rather not only, a matter of the Third World initiating a new, less triumphalist humanism which can be its own special gift to civilisation but of building upon the narratives and poetics of cultural intermixture already alive in popular cultures in order to see how those polar positions have already been rendered redundant. I am suggesting then that in considering the status of difference we work to adopt self-consciously and heuristically, a future-oriented stance. Making the most of our historic opportunity to re-think the whole question of how value is assigned to cultural forms and ethnic differences we can accentuate perverse

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<sup>10</sup> Chris Salewicz Bob Marley Songs of Freedom Bloomsbury, 1995.

contingencies of racialised value. This should be done, not so that we can say with an affected pseudo-toleration that everything is somehow suddenly as good as everything else, but so as to be able to speak with confidence from somewhere in particular and develop not only our translation skills but the difficult language of comparative (not homologising) judgement. This programme is premised upon the idea that any discoveries we might make could transform our understanding of the cultures from which we imagine ourselves to speak as well as the cultures we struggle--always imperfectly--to judge.

### **the negro is only biological**

Performance-centred expressive culture has a special contribution to make in challenging those fashionable views of the body as cipher of absolute difference which block the path to a more future-oriented mode of reflection. Against their authoritarian hopes, the body emerges from that vernacular culture bearing ironic confirmation of the essential similarity of species being. Until the colour of skin has no more significance than the colour of eyes there will be war, but after that? Before we demand that artists accept the poisoned chalice of this new obligation and ask them to undertake the impossible mission involved in communicating a new humanism in their manipulation and display of similarity embodied on a new scale, there is a little more to say about the body, the patterns of solidarity and identification established by the body-world and the processes of epidermalisation that occur there.

We must remember, first of all, that the black body does not speak for itself. Some people see a scar on tortured flesh. Others prefer to perceive the more pleasing outlines of a chokeberry tree. Toni Morrison's Beloved from which that striking image is taken, seems to me to suggest that, even if forgetting incorporated memories is impossibly difficult, the decision to set aside the claims of the flesh and break their special compact with the past need not always be unethical or illegitimate. Secondly, we must question the ways in which the body has emerged as an anchor in the stormy tides of identity politics. The body has become the means by which individual freedom and racial solidarity are bound to life itself. This black body is a body that is no longer to be supervised by the soul which was once imagined to outlive it. There is no soul here, it has been banished by the fatal affirmation of carnal and corporeal vitality. Disturbingly, the enthusiasm with which this has been undertaken recalls something of Fanon's observation about the importance of fantasies of bodily potency and activity in the motionless, manichean colonial setting--white supremacy's world of statues:

The first thing the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits. This is why his dreams are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression. I dream I am

jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one stride, or that I am followed by a flood of motor cars that never catch up with me. . . the native never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the morning until six in the evening.<sup>11</sup>

It should be obvious that these are no longer *only* the natives' dreams. Similar corporeal schema have been solicited, projected and mediated by new technological means and cultural industries that encompass but substantially exceed the power of the radio which captured Fanon's attention as a means of conducting revolutionary sensibilities into the counter-public sphere of anti-colonial Algeria. The leaping male native is particularly visible in the image world of corporate multi-culture. His exceptional prowess lends its magical qualities to the sale of commodities like sports shoes and clothing which promote complex forms of intimacy and mimicry across the line of colour.

There is one expression that through time has become singularly eroticised: the black athlete. There is something in the mere idea, one young woman confided to me that makes the heart skip a beat.<sup>12</sup>

The same investment in black vitality is associated with a view of the body as confirmation of racialised particularity. This appears in various forms but it is always in conjunction with the new genetic and biological determinisms that are being voiced, not only by the Bell Curve ideologues with their clockwork bio-social science, but in comparably pernicious forms by a diverse range of opinion from within the black communities themselves. The occultist presentation of melanin as the measure of black superiority is the most pressing example here:

What makes BLACK CULTURE? Why do BLACK HUMANS express themselves uniquely and differently from non-BLACK human species? Why do we dance, sing, dress, walk/run cook, laugh/cry, play the game of football/basketball, think work etc. differently from other races? If you compare BLACK CULTURES around the world, you will become pleasantly aware that BLACK HUMANS are not different! From one end of the globe to the other end of the globe, you will find black humans are Expressive, colorful, creative, industrious, generous, cocky . . . just like your neighbour across the street or across town. All "Industries" created and designed by the BLACK HUMAN (and from his culture) will be "RICH" in essence and depth! Even when the BLACK HUMAN is

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<sup>11</sup> Frantz Fanon wretched of The Earth Penguin, pg 40.

<sup>12</sup> Black Skin White Masks pg 158.

poor, the resources he has to work with may be limited but the produce that he produces will be well prepared and EXPRESSIVE!<sup>13</sup>

I puzzled for a long time over these curious sentences which articulate yearning for a lost scale of sociality as readily as they convey a taste for the vain alchemy of hyper-similarity and absolute invariance. Work is notably present in this grim utopia from which all difference has been expelled, a utopia that adds veracity to the oldest of racist stereotypes and re-energises a worn out victorianism. The tropes of “humanism” are striking too. Less surprisingly, the masculine prowess of the ball court and other popular representations of sporting excellence supply a key figure. They create a climate in which black superiority appears plausible. At last we can know *why* white men can’t jump. But this is not the transcendence of race--washed away by the force of male bonding--as it was in the film of that name. It is partly a reconciliation with older patterns for reifying race through the icons of black physicality. Most modern techniques for organising the relationship between body and soul are renounced in the reduction of the body to its chemically programmed superiority. These expressive, colorful, creative, industrious, generous, cocky, racial selves are nothing but body, “The negro is only biological” says Fanon. It is not a matter of black identity being chained to the body for that too would introduce the possibility of separation--of breaking the chains.

And yet even among the most ardent “melanists” the technologies of the racialised self make their inevitable appearance. People have to be induced, taught how to recover and re-member the potency of melanin in their bodies, to listen once again for the ways in which their bodies broken down here into the units of their cells, call out to them and to each other the siren song of collective--never individual--racial memory.

The rate at which one loses touch with Melanin’s powerful influence on the spiritual self is directly related to the amount of European socialisation and ‘education’ received . . . the avenues to our Melanin centres are partially blocked by our adoption of western diets, environmental pollution, and ways of thinking. Since Melanin acts like an antenna or highly tuned receiver, it will resonate in sympathy with whatever is going on in your environment. So if you surround yourself with negative forces (in your family, workplace, social life, or bad food you consume), they will alter physiologically and neurologically that which acts to preserve your Melanin.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Carol Barnes Melanin The Chemical Key To Black Greatness pg 53.

<sup>14</sup> G. Peart “More Than The Colour of My Skin” Science Focus, The Alarm, 9, November 1994, pg. 25.



The article from which the above quote has been extracted discusses the role of melanin in transmitting messages from sound sources, especially low bass frequencies. With that observation in mind we can approach the planetary schemes of black popular culture once again, this time through the activities of R. Kelly, the hairless crooner from Chicago who has built a career for himself at the intersection of the emergent youth cultures based on sports and computing and those still residually based on music and dance. Last year, Kelly celebrated the eloquence of the black body with his song "Your Body's Calling". Its characteristic affirmation of the body's communicative powers should remind us that black flesh can be made to speak in a variety of tongues, sometimes simultaneously, even contradictorily. Is the dwindling idiom of Jamaican eschatology favoured by Marley but lost somewhere in the passage of Caribbean dance-hall music into the African American vernacular any more dynamically physical than that of the contemporary Jeep culture for which Kelly is a spokesman? Borne along on nostalgia for his 50th birthday, Marley's music has spent more weeks at the top of the Billboard chart than "Bat Out of Hell", "Sergeant Pepper" and "Dark Side of the Moon". The ancient prophecy that there will be war until the colour of a man's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes springs to mind again here and not just because it's recognisably anti-colonial humanism continues to find new favour with peoples all over the globe. Unlike the integral body favoured by the disreputable female freaks and wholesome male athletes who have supplied Kelly's inspiration in equal measure, that powerful phrase sets the body against itself in pursuing the project of stripping white supremacy of its rationality. For Marley, the black body is not whole or integral. It cannot speak with one voice. Eyes and skin, body components of equivalent status, transmit opposed messages about the material truths of race and their signification. The contested process of signification is the principal issue. Tupac Shakur's body, which has recently acquired a special status in calculating the health and vitality of racialised community, can be used as further evidence here<sup>15</sup>. That body now languishing in jail following a trial for sodomy had to be tattooed before it would communicate the intensity of meaning that Tupac thought appropriate. In the word life that is inked into his abdomen the letter "i" is formed by a bullet and a cartridge case.

The bio-political impulse to present the body as a cipher of solidarity is common to a wider range of black political thought than these quirky examples suggest. It connects the out and out occultism of those who believe that melanin guarantees black superiority to the less obviously biologicistic writings of hipper, more respectably scholarly folks who might even oppose

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<sup>15</sup> For example, Dr. Khallid Muhammad has described Tupac thus "I love Tupac Shakur because he is a child of destiny. He is a brilliant warrior. You can't kill him, he just shakes the bullets off." Quoted in Tracey L. Walters "Thinking Of A Master Plan" The Source ,69, June, 1995, pg 49.

some of the political positions adopted at the meeting point of eighteenth century racial science and Americo-centric nationalism. The body and its semiosis has become a battle royal in which different interests fight for the pleasure of annexing its special communicative powers in their contending representational regimes.

There is a growing vogue for theories of racial particularity centred on the idea of common attributes coded into black flesh. We are often urged to discover those codes by undertaking what a recent fashion spread from the magazine *Image* (empowering the man of color) describes as “the internal journey” in a tableau that presents a selection of this season’s menswear in a simulated African environment. A few pages later, the full import of this implosion was made explicit in an image that had also been reproduced on the cover of the magazine. Michael Gunn’s words make the dimensions of this black masculine empowerment clear. It is patriotic, religious, masculinist and exclusively oriented towards the past.

My country tis of thee  
This is what 400 years has done to me  
I’m the man you brought here by force.  
I’m the man who worked your fields.  
I’m the man who fought wars I didn’t even create.  
I’m the man who cleaned toilets I couldn’t even use  
Notice I don’t desecrate the flag  
I hold it up trying to hold on to the idea of the “American Dream”  
But the marks on my body give proof of my existence here.

A more sophisticated version of some of the same ideas appears in a polite neo-nationalist polemic against “anti-essentialist, post-identity discourses” contributed by Elizabeth Alexander to the catalogue of the recent *Black Male* exhibition at the Whitney Museum<sup>16</sup>. As with the melanists, the central theme of her essay, on Rodney King, Emmett Till and Frederick Douglass, is the role of the race’s embodied social memory. Following Hortense Spillers, Alexander identifies a “text carried in the flesh” comprised of “ancestral” memories of terror. It would appear that the traditional symbolic potency of mere blood is insufficient these days. Somehow, this hidden “text” endows black flesh with special cognitive capacities. It fixes the limits of the racial collectivity as a whole and allows Alexander, avowedly beyond “the biological reductions of “race” and the artifactual constraints of “culture”” to “talk about ‘my people’”. The people constitute an entirely undifferentiated political and historical subject. They can be roused from their an-aestheticised state by

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Alexander “Can You Be Black And Look At This?": Reading The Rodney King Video” in *Black Male Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (ed.) Thelma Golden, Whitney Museum, 1994. Also reprinted in *Public Culture*, Vol.7, no.4, 1994,

watching George Holliday's eighty-one second video tape of Rodney King being beaten, not by a righteous moral and political anger at this all too familiar injustice but because their common embodied memory demands it of them.

The late Eazy E's body supplies another contested exhibit in the bleak landscape of this dark continent. And the discomfiting work of remembering Eric Wright, originator of gangsta rap, provides an interesting supplement to Alexander's procession of heroes. I don't know how many times Eric watched that historic videotape, but the melanin in his cells didn't stop him from supporting the claims of Officer Theodore J. Briseno--one of Rodney King's assailants. Unlike the melanists, Alexander does not explore the issue of how that common memory might be forgotten and the social mechanisms that bear upon its repression and erasure. Browsing through the edition of The Source that commemorates Eazy's life and contribution to black culture raised for me the difficult problem of what distinguishes the memory work organised around his life and death from the social and cultural processes to which Alexander draws attention? Couldn't the "story-telling tradition" of which Alexander is clearly proud be amended to include this complex narrative of individualism, indifference and self-destruction and the resulting contest over the contemporary and future meanings of blackness that it indexes? Isn't the narrating Eazy's life and the forms of antiphony that it instantiates rather more significant than the damaged male body at its centre? Frank Williams' observation that

There was no politically correct shit with N.W.A. nor overt messages of Black empowerment, which dominated hip-hop at the time. It was straight up drinking, getting women and unloading your gat on some bustas.

gives some clues about the problems of slotting Eazy into a pantheon like Alexander's. Just as it did for the melanists, the black body appears in her argument in itself. It is a whole repository of meaning, a conductor of racial memory that refuses to be differentiated by class or gender, wealth or health. It is the final, special, ultimate, absolute truth of black identity which Alexander names the "bottom line". All those problematic intra-racial divisions opened up by Eazy's death from AIDS and his more problematic celebrity, uncomfortable questions like poverty, politics and power, can be conjured away at a single stroke. Racial politics becomes a matter of intertextuality as the Rodney King tape intersects with the memory tape carried in black cells<sup>17</sup>. Gender, privilege, hierarchy, wealth and health, none of them matter

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<sup>17</sup> An alternative account of the significance of Rodney King is articulated by Willie D on his "Fuck Rodney King" Priority Records, 1992. Eric Lott has offered a powerful defence of the record in his "Cornel West In The Hour of Chaos in Race Matters" Social Text, 40, 1994 pp-39-50.

anymore. The body will take care of everything when solidarity is triggered into action by the sight of all that battered black male flesh. Flesh that has been damaged by disease is less alluring, more uncanny in its impact. For all its complicity with the corporate pimping of black culture The Source makes the social work of co-memoration complex and difficult. Though the masculinism integral to crossover sales blocks any radical outcomes, the magazine used Eazy's death to produce a discussion over precisely how he should be remembered and what forms of solidarity might arise from that activity:

Guru: Eazy E should be remembered as an entrepreneur . . .

Method Man: I feel like it's bad because he went the way he went, but it can be good if it gets the message out to the rest of us that this disease can hit home. There are a lot of brothers out there playing Russian roulette with their dick. . .

Masta Ace: . . . I bought his first record a few months ago. When I listen to it now, certain lines have a whole new meaning. When I hear him say, "It's about fuckin' this bitch or that bitch . . ." it means something totally different now . . . I think one trend you'll see is lots of rappers are gonna start getting married.<sup>18</sup>

I wonder what Dr. Fanon would have made of these strange postures? Looking at them through the colonial frame would he have identified the comforting unanimist scenario advocated by critics like Elizabeth Alexander as a fantasy of the privileged, of a guilty elite somewhat akin to that produced in colonial settings in the form of the native petit bourgeoisie? Surely he would have noted that the longed for, racialised unity is only perceptible, only plausible, from afar? As a medical practitioner he might have been sensitive to the change of scale evident in the shift away from the epidermal signification of difference towards the quality of differentiation projected onto the cells themselves. Alexander's epigraph is taken from the work of Saul Schanberg a medical researcher at Duke University. It communicates her levelling impulse perfectly in the claim that "memory resides nowhere, and in every cell." The suggestion is not clarified in her piece. Schanberg presumably means every cell in a single body, whereas her essay suggests that every cell in the black body politic enjoys the same recollective faculty. The homology between cells and racial subjects breaks down when we appreciate that cells are not inter-changeable even in one body and further that the differences between cells taken from different people, even those with similar phenotypes, may be telling particularly in the era of AIDS. Perhaps these small but decisive differences point towards a different conception of the significance of phenotypes in relation to genotypes and beyond that to the redundancy of eighteenth-century racial typologies?

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<sup>18</sup> The Source 69, June 1995, pg 56.

### **class and guilt, the other g thaang**

Contemplating these attempts to resolve the crises of racial sameness and solidarity by appealing to the power of the body drew me into a more benevolent attitude towards the subversive profanity of black vernacular culture. Eazy, Snoop, Willie D and their insubordinate peers have adopted a deliberately vulgar and disorderly stance which resists discipline and pushes all the time towards the borderzones where the stubborn divisions of region, class, sex and gender reassert themselves and refuse to be translated into invariant, epidermal, cellular or nano-political inscriptions. The boyz and girlz from the hood will not be drafted into the program of racial recovery proposed by their betters in the bourgeoisie. In contrast to the transcendent essentialism of hyper-similar cells and racial memory, gangsta consciousness is fiercely territorial. The form of solidarity it favours, if solidarity is recognised at all, is spatialised. The gs locate and adhere to the lived boundaries of community. This agenda assumes an absolute minimum of a priori racial unity. It prompts our understanding of what solidarity adds up to in a dog eat dog world. MC Eiht, besides whom Snoop and Eazy E sound tender and tame puts it like this:

Muthafuckas is successful now, right now. Everybody in this muthafucka got the mentality we don't give a fuck about what nobody say. Nigga gonna make his money, he gonna live like he wanna live. When that day come if a nigga got to die, that's the day. For the community--it always seems to me that eveytime a nigga get to a certain level he got to come back to the community and he got to put community centers etc. That justifies him saying, "Okay, I love the community and I'ma do something for where I'm from." I ain't dead, muthafucka. That's me. When I was in the muthafuckin neighborhood, I ran with the niggas. Niggas didn't put no money in my pocket, niggas wasn't givin' me no dope. Niggas wasn't doing shit for me except sayin', "He the homie." So for my community, I'ma make the music that my niggas like but I ain't gonna sit up here and go build me a child center over here and build me this over there 'cause that's fuckin bullshit. I'm in this shit for me . . . I ain't no political muthafucka. I ain't talkin about muthafuckin' stop the violence. I ain't talkin about the Black movement 'cause that shit ain't going on in the hood. Ain't no muthfucka comin' up with no bean pies standin' on my corner."<sup>19</sup>

The ghetto-centric individualism of the poor defeats the convenient bio-essentialism of the elite. You *choose* to be a gangsta and you can renounce the affiliation at any time. Eiht states the consequences of this changed orientation clearly when he derides the black voices raised against gangsta

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<sup>19</sup> "Gangsta Rap Summit : "Reality Check" The Source 57, June 1994, pg 72.

rap in these terms: “Them color-coated ass--I don’t even call them Black, they ain’t Niggas to me”<sup>20</sup>.

Similar class divisions have been revealed in equally bitter intra-racial conflicts arising from vernacular discourse on sex. The body figures here too. But again, it is not presented whole, as an organic vehicle for of common racial memory. Like the dog and the bitch whose nihilistic bonds have been celebrated most powerfully by The Notorious BIG, the gangsta is driven by instinct--a form of memory not susceptible to regulation. Snoop laments the fact that he cannot help but chase that cat. Nature is not the friend, guide or ally that it appears to be in the memorialising discourse of the pseudo-scientists. It is a curse, another indefinitely suspended sentence. Just as it was in the Marley fragment, the body is fragmented, zoned. Moving beyond Marley’s suggestive distinction between eyes and skin, particular parts of the body are prized. Selected zones are affirmed and celebrated because the space over which power can be exercised just keeps on shrinking and because they are closer to the disguised animal dimensions of vitality than the purified, automatic body favoured by melanists and memory merchants. Here we must consider the way that the dog thaang involves encountering your sexual partner nose to tail. The way that it responds to the summons that Blackstreet eulogise as a “booti call”. This is not only a restatement of the traditional hedonism articulated in previous vulgar reclamations of the black body from the troubled worlds of work and labour or its celebration as a locus of resistance, pleasure and desire. It is something more potent that reorders the hierarchy of body zones and organs in a pattern that moves decisively beyond the old oscillations between sex and violence which James Baldwin identified as alternate fillings for the shell of black cultural expression. The re-evaluation of the booti/butt/batty is one element in the same desperate quest firstly to centre black particularity in the body. bell hooks and Carolyn Cooper have pointed out that in different locations, the butt cult encompasses bids to re-valorise the abject bodies of black women. The authoritarian aspects of the nationalist movements also require that we recognise its obvious attempts to manage and contain the disruptive possibilities that emanate from homoerotic desire, introjected and otherwise. The anal penetration that is simultaneously affirmed and disavowed in Hip hop’s proliferating injunctions to “grab your ankles baby” has no single fixed or eternal meaning. It acquires a variety of different accents in specific discursive settings. It is, after all, the fundamentalists who have made deviation from compulsory heterosexuality into a betrayal of racial authenticity. DJ Shabba Ranks whose pronouncements in the area of sexual morality go beyond homophobia into a more complicated realm of ambivalence shows how taboos regulating sexual practice have come to specify the limits of the racial collectivity: “I don’t care what they want to say

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<sup>20</sup> Reality Check p.70.

about me, so long as no one can say that I suck a pussy or fuck a batty”<sup>21</sup>. The scar/chokeberry tree point can be made again in order to underline the mutability and multi-accentuality of the body as a “Material/semiotic actor” even where.

In this vernacular, blackness has not been written into or even on to the body, for the body is not stable or still long enough to permit that act of inscription. It is not what the body is or carries that counts but rather what the body does in its relationship to other bodies. A mind/body dualism is not being covertly reinstated through appeals to memory over which a guilty, privileged “colonial” elite can preside. Blackness emerges as more behavioural, dare I say cultural? It can be announced by indicative sexual habits and bodily gestures. Under some circumstances, it can even be acquired in simple economic processes. Identity as sameness and solidarity is definitely not essentialised. Items can be purchased that lend an eloquent uniformity to the mute body on a temporary, accidental basis. This is not an internal journey after all but a journey to the mall preferably undertaken in an appropriately ostentatious form of transport.

Style and fashion offer something of the same forms of mechanical solidarity conferred by the uniform of the bourgeois male which works a different racial magic for the Nation of Islam. In both cases, the unclothed body is not considered sufficient to confer either authenticity or identity. Clothing, objects, things, commodities provide the only entry ticket into stylish solidarities powerful enough to foster the novel forms of nationality found in collectivities like the Gangsta Nation, the Hip hop Nation and of course, The Nation of Islam . This is not nihilism for there is an axiology here--the axiology of the market. So much for *cultural* difference. The African-American clothes designer, Carl Williams who sells his designs under the trademark Karl Kani which is tattooed into his upper right arm, has told us that “appearance is everything” and he should know. His name is a question to which his clothing and accessories answer yes<sup>22</sup>.

Inside the black communities, as old certainties about the fixed limits of racial identity have lost their power to convince or even make sense of the extreme divisions produced by de-industrialisation, an ontological security capable of answering a radically reduced sense of the value of black life, has been sought in the naturalising powers of the body: clothed and unclothed, fragmented or whole. The old compensatory themes that answered black powerlessness: sex and gender have been changed by the rise of body-centred nano-politics. The freaky programme of sexual play and recreation

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<sup>21</sup> Rob Kenner “Top Rankin” *Vibe*, October 1994, p76.

<sup>22</sup> Scott Poulson-Bryant “Karl Kani--Design of The Times” *Vibe*, October, 1994, pp59-63.

celebrated by artists like R Kelly and his UK black counterpart Wayne Marshall appears as an alternative to the mechanical solidarity of race whether this is articulated through the austerity of the Nation and its surrogates or the fantasy of masculine hyper-similarity projected through the culture of black sporting excellence and the heroism cultivated there by marketing men and women. Sex is more disorderly and unstable than the conventional images of black vitality that have been complicit for so long with the core of white supremacy. Shabba's example reveals exactly how sex has to be trained, domesticated, diverted and technologised into appropriate channels in order to ground the family and thus the nation. The body emerges in the double role of actor and contested object. It is being claimed by various regimes of representation and desire which create distinct forms of identification and usher in widely differing political possibilities that are not so conveniently arranged as to be mutually exclusive. Fashion spills over into the sports cult which bleeds into the dreams of chemically-programmed black superiority. Items of clothing are trafficked between the public, crossover world and its hidden black counterparts. The discourses playing on, coding, materialising black flesh promise power but can readily revert to simple racist type especially where excessive physical strength banishes cognitive capacities and wanton, equally excessive sexuality supposedly defines us outside the official syntax of gender. These dangers are not confined to the effect they may have on white spectators but can also be felt where blacks begin to live, not with, but through them and the doubtful forms of empowerment they can offer.

I should underline that simply counterposing the discourse of the black body produced under the sign of sport and its peculiar regime of compulsive consumption against the alternative summoning of the body to the celebration of black sexuality is an oversimplification. Sport provides a specific context for the representation of manly black vitality. It is also a site of significant homo-social, homo-erotic and homo-sexual identification. Though it overlooks the racial economy of masculine signs Mark Simpson's path-breaking exploration of these issues in the popular culture surrounding English soccer points towards the analyses of other team games played by men<sup>23</sup>. His work complements a stimulating but eccentric essay "Ball Games As Symbols: The War of the Balls" originally published in 1976 by the African American social psychologist Frances Cress Welsing. This essay skirts the occultism of some of her recent works but in gesture that shadows Simpson's problems with "race", she refuses to engage the issue of male homosexuality in sports culture<sup>24</sup>. Building on the insights these works provide will mean making a longer investigation into the power of what might be called

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<sup>23</sup> Mark Simpson "Active Sports: The anus and its goal posts" in Male Impersonators, Cassell, 1994.

<sup>24</sup> Frances Cress Welsing The Isis Papers The Keys To The Colours Third World Press, 1991.



racialised homophilia--love of the same--and its associated patriarchy and fraternalism. It will also require consideration of the distinctive erotic charge expressed by the manipulation and synchronisation of the body in authoritarian movements and their solidarity-producing performative technologies: ritual drill, physical training and spectacular displays. Turning towards popular sport need not undermine the grace and style of black athletes. It is about placing their activity and its simulation in the world of corporate multi-culture in an economy which for example, specifies that basketball can be sold as “the world’s game” because it offers the right sort of multi-ethnic, trans-local dramaturgy. Exploring the relationship between those investments in sporting power and the fantasies of empowerment which animate the popular cultures found among the colonised and their racialised kin is an urgent enterprise. We need to open up the interface between sports, music, video and the sale of black culture to ever larger audiences far removed from the locations in which those cultures were made. These are often, though not always audiences whose enthusiasm for the fruits of alterity and the glamour of difference, especially when offered in appropriately gendered form, may not be matched by any equivalent enthusiasm for the people that produce the culture in the first place. The same obsession with masculine activity power and vitality that appears as an imaginary resolution of the crisis of black solidarity where the political community is reduced to the dimensions of a basketball court, is also right at the centre of selling black cultures, styles and creativity simultaneously to a “crossover” audience and an audience of insiders. Magazines, like Vibe and The Source, in some cases serviced by prominent black commentators, have been at the forefront of this crossover operation. A glance at the Vibe pages on the internet will attest that these are not parochial matters. Imaginary blackness is being projected outwards, facelessly, as the means to orchestrate a truly global market in leisure products and as the centrepiece of a new corporately-directed version of youth culture centred not on music and its antediluvian rituals but upon visuality, icons and images. Retreating into the certainties of essential black embodiment will not deal with the cataclysmic consequences of that shift. This emergent trans-local culture is giving the black male body a make over. We are witnessing a series of struggles over the meaning of that body which intermittently emerges as a signifier of prestige, autonomy, transgression and power in a supra-national economy of signs that is not reducible to the old-style logics of white supremacy. Faced with that and with de-industrialisation, the proliferation of intra-communal divisions based upon wealth and money, sexuality and gender, the black elite may find it expedient to fall back on exceptionalist narratives and essential identities. It may even reconstruct them through a variety of political languages. melanin, memory, authoritarian nationhood and Afro-centrism or a combination of them all. I comprehend those responses but I wonder how much they are about a privileged group mystifying its own

increasing remoteness from the lives of most black people whose priorities, habits and tastes can no longer be considered as self-legitimizing indicators of racial integrity. The body is being used to restore that fading integrity in ways that abrogate the historic responsibility of intellectuals (not academics) to make it communicate the precious, fragile and contingent truths of black sociality. In the face of re-born bio-powers, is it possible to articulate an alternative, post-anthropological understanding of culture that has anything like the same explanatory power?