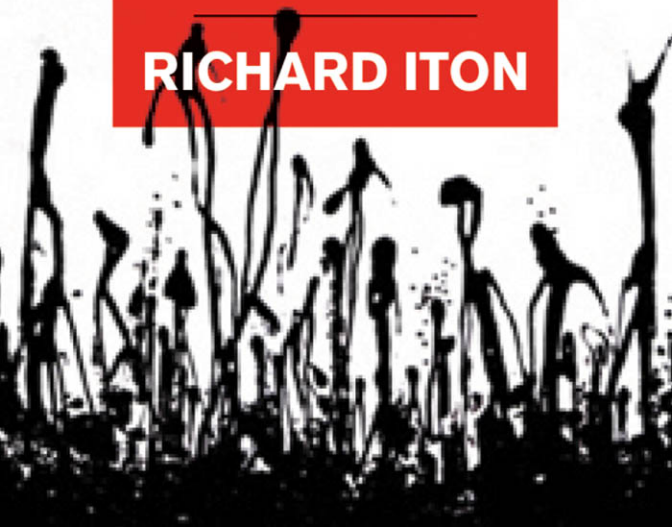
IN SEARCH OF THE BLACK FANTASTIC

POLITICS & POPULAR CULTURE IN THE POST-CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

RICHARD ITON



IN SEARCH OF THE BLACK FANTASTIC

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For Ms. Laura Buscoigne
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CONTENTS

1 Known Rivers/New Forms, 3

2 Remembering the Family, 30

3 Nation Time, 81

4 Let Them Only See Us, 101

5 Variations on the Solidarity Blues, 131

6 Round Trips on the Black Star Line, 195

7 Not as Others, 259

8 Space Is the Place, 284

Notes, 291

Acknowledgments, 409

Index, 412

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IN SEARCH OF THE BLACK FANTASTIC

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Most certainly the black element is indispensable in developing a race's artistic genius. This is my point of departure. —Count Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau (1855)

The Negro is primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake. His *metier* is expression rather than action. He is, so to speak, the lady among the races. —Robert E. Park (1924)

I as a black writer, must in some way represent you. Now, you didn't elect me, and I didn't ask for it, but here we are. —James Baldwin (1963)

[M]y Negro friends recognize a certain division of labor among the members of the tribe. Their demands are that I publish more novels. —Ralph Ellison (1964)

1

KNOWN RIVERS/NEW FORMS

It is a familiar dilemma. How do the excluded engage the apparently dominant order? Does progress entail that the marginalized accept mainstream norms and abandon transformative possibilities? These questions, of course, become more complicated once we recognize that the excluded are never simply excluded and that their marginalization reflects and determines the shape, texture, and boundaries of the dominant order and its associated privileged

communities. The identities of the latter are inevitably defined in opposition to, and as a negation of, the representations of the marginalized, and in certain respects, the outside is always inside: invisible perhaps, implicated and disempowered, unrecognized but omnipresent. In this context, how do the outcast imagine and calibrate progress, and assess options?

For blacks in the United States and elsewhere, this outside/inside dynamic has often been experienced asymmetrically: as political disfranchisement on the one hand and overemployment in the arenas of popular culture on the other.[1] Accordingly, in trying to map out the most effective strategies for emancipation, African Americans have had to try to understand the precise nature of the linkage between popular culture and this thing we call politics. What kinds of politics can cultural actors make if blacks, as it is commonly asserted, have a unique relationship with the cultural realm, a positioning that has been celebrated by some, and cursed and refused by others? My aim here is to identify exactly how we might situate popular culture in general, and black popular culture in particular, in relation to both the formally and informally political. Second, I want to consider the implications of reading culture as politics in the context of the post–civil rights era.[2]

One of the most intriguing aspects of contemporary black politics is the relationship among the realms of formal political activity involving black elected officials and organized interest groups; state-focused "protest" organizations such as the National Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Rainbow Coalition, and the National Action Network; extrastate mobilization characterized by the programs of the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam; and the media of religiosity and popular culture. With the significant increase in organic and sympathetic elected representation following the end of Jim Crow, one might expect that the means by which African American interests are conceived and articulated (and the urgency with which they are expressed) would change. It is interesting that—despite the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which suggested a commitment to policies of anti-discrimination, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, legislation that significantly enhanced black voting power—the realms of protest activity, extrastate and often nationalist engagement, and African American religiosity and popular culture have continued to be politically relevant. In other words, at the same time that blacks markedly increased their access to the arenas of formal political decision-making, and despite expectations that legalistic triumphs would orient most political energies toward these arenas, informal politics has continued to play a major role in mobilizing and shaping (and containing and

circumscribing) black politics.[3] In particular, the negotiation, representation, and reimagination of black interests through cultural symbols has continued to be a major component in the making of black politics.

The expectation that progress on the legal front would and should bring about the routinization of black politics partly rested on the implicit assumptions that integration was the logical path to follow, that all African Americans would benefit from the opportunities made available in the new era, and that mainstreaming the means by which blacks made their politics would increase their ability to transform the public agenda. "[T]he civil rights movement will be advanced only to the degree that social and economic welfare gets to be inextricably linked with civil rights," wrote Bayard Rustin, the key strategist of the later phases of the civil rights campaign, in *Commentary* in 1965. He was making this observation at a time when a certain degree of optimism was justified. The major foundations of the Jim Crow order had been toppled, and for the first time since Reconstruction it seemed possible that a progressive and racially inclusive coalition might prevail in American politics. Rustin also predicted that a civil rights/labor/liberal coalition would be able to bring about "revolutionary" and "radical change," given that adequate "forms of political democracy [now] exist[ed]" in the United States. Beyond the "peripheral" gains of the civil rights movement, Rustin suggested that a deliberate move to exploit these opportunities would result in the full "package deal": "employment, housing, school integration, police protection, and so forth." In order to realize these possibilities, Rustin urged that the movement cease "confus[ing] political institutions with lunch counters," downplay protest, recognize compromise as inevitable, and embrace political action within the Democratic Party.[4]

Rustin's formulation hardly represented an "adjust[ment] to the status quo" and indeed offered what could only be seen as a comprehensive proposal for remaking the American republic.[5] His argument, though, was predicated on a model of the routine that clearly overlooked—and, given his own strategic commitments at the time, deliberately chose to minimize—the limits of legal discourse, the racialized foundation and irrational character of American politics, and the extent to which protest politics, and informal politics in general, were hardly unique to black communities. Not surprisingly, the civil rights/labor/liberal coalition collapsed by the end of the decade, and Rustin's confidence regarding the progressive capacity of American democracy proved to be largely misplaced.

Among blacks, even before this point, there was some uncertainty about the wisdom of placing so much faith in the institutions of the state and the

formal political realm. Underlying this doubt was the perception that the transition to "politics" might not work equally well for all. Although class issues would prove to be the first visible axis of conflict—as indicated by the debate regarding the importance of launching a poor people's movement—other fronts would soon open up as well. For those not granted access and whose circumstances were not materially improved by the developments of the era—and, of course, those who were never persuaded by the integrationist argument in the first place—informal politics, other-directed politics, and protest politics would be important strategic options. Cultural politics, albeit in a modified form, would also continue to represent a significant aspect of black expression, despite optimism regarding the progressive possibilities of working within the "rules of the game." Indeed, one can read what some might cast as a continued overinvestment in cultural politics (and the various forms of informal and protest politics) as a response to the perceived inadequacies of the American state (and the nation-state as a general concept); the shortcomings of the civil rights movement on a variety of fronts, including most prominently class, gender, and sexuality; and the restructuring of the sentimental economy that had previously sustained solidaristic attachments among different black subconstituencies.

For African Americans, partly because of their marginal status and often violent exclusion from the realms of formal politics, popular culture was an integral and important aspect of the making of politics throughout the pre–civil rights era and the civil rights era itself—"a time when it was almost impossible," film historian Donald Bogle contends, "to keep politics and aesthetics apart."[6] Indeed, in the absence of any significant space for black participation in the institutionalized realm (outside of, perhaps, the machine politics associated with the city of Chicago), the notion that politics and art might not be intimately connected was rarely suggested. In this context, the cultural products that mainstream outlets created and propagated—such as the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century, films including *The Birth of a Nation*, Al Jolson's *Jazz Singer*, and *Gone with the Wind*, and the radio version of *Amos 'n' Andy*—often provoked criticism and outrage on the part of blacks who interpreted the promotion of images they saw as unfavorable, as a roadblock to their struggle for equal citizenship.

"Art was at one time the only voice we had to declare our humanity," the actor, playwright, and director Ossie Davis suggested in the late 1990s. Furthermore, he asserted, "Art among us blacks has always been a statement about our condition, and therefore it has always been political." Making spe-

cific reference to Marian Anderson's concert at the Lincoln Memorial on April 16, 1939 (after she was prevented from playing Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution), Davis wrote: "It was for me an act of definition as well as defiance, with its own salute to the black Struggle. It married in my mind forever the performing arts as a weapon in the struggle for freedom. It made a connection that, for me and thousands of other artists, has never been severed. It was a proclamation and a commitment. . . . That voice focused me and gave me my marching orders. It reminded me that whatever I said and whatever I did as an artist was an integral part of my people's struggle to be free."[7]

Given the recognized connection between the cultural and political realms, it is not surprising that both W. E. B. Du Bois and Walter White of the NAACP wrote novels; that labor leader A. Philip Randolph initially came to New York City inspired by Du Bois's pioneering fusion of culture and politics, *The Souls of Black Folk*, to become engaged in radical politics and to become a stage actor; or that political leaders of the pre–civil rights era felt comfortable and indeed obligated to comment on African American cultural efforts.[8] As a consequence, actors involved in protest and electoral activity made frequent efforts to shape the contributions (or, if necessary, silence the voices) of individuals working in the various cultural arenas. In a 1928 *Negro World* editorial, Marcus Garvey stated, "Our race, within recent years, has developed a new group of writers who have been prostituting their intelligence, under the direction of the white man, to bring out and show up the worst traits of our people." Specifically, Garvey castigated Paul Robeson for his participation in the film version of *Show Boat* and for allowing "his genius to appear in pictures and plays that tend to dishonor, mimic, discredit and abuse the cultural attainments of the Black Race," and characterized Claude McKay's vernacular-based and sexually explicit *Home to Harlem* as "a damnable libel against the Negro."[9] Du Bois, cofounder of the NAACP, was also among the most vociferous critics of McKay's novel, and his review in the NAACP's *Crisis*—wherein he reported that the book "nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I felt distinctly like taking a bath"—prompted McKay to reply that Du Bois was too removed "from contact with real life" to make such judgments and to contend that Du Bois had mistaken "the art of life for nonsense and [was trying] to pass off propaganda as life in art!"[10] Indeed, by that point Du Bois had developed his own clear views about the proper relationship between art and politics. In a piece published in 1926, entitled "Criteria of Negro Art," he argued: "[A]ll art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in

utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda."[11]

THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY: POPULAR CULTURE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Although many artists might claim that their work is not "political"—"Nothing about politics," asserted Luther Vandross, arguably the most gifted male vocalist of his generation, "I don't write about politics"—that they are driven purely by aesthetic considerations, or that they seek to entertain and provide escape from "reality" for their audiences, political intention adheres to every cultural production.[12] Sometimes such stances are a response to the perception that "politics" narrowly understood—that is, formal politics and the individuals who operate in that domain—is inherently corrupt and corrupting, and devoid of real substance. In this spirit, South African vocalist Miriam Makeba states, "I've always said, 'I don't sing politics; I sing the truth.' I sang about the suffering we endured. It was not political, it was *honest*."[13] Artists might also claim not to be "political" to avoid the unwanted scrutiny of the state and other associated authorities in the realm of formal politics. As often, these kinds of assertions are meant to refer to the artist's disengagement from the issues driving formal political activity, although songs about romance and novels about family life, for example, certainly are political in the broadest sense. Love itself, the subversive gift, is an important public good, and loving is a significant political act, particularly among those stigmatized and marked as unworthy of love and incapable of deep commitment.

The suggestions that art and politics should be divorced also depend on a notion of the aesthetic as a realm that by definition should not be implicated with the political. Accordingly, in 1994, critic Arlene Croce disparaged the work of dancer-choreographer Bill T. Jones, and specifically his piece "Still/Here" focusing on the devastation wrought by the AIDS crisis, as "utilitarian art" inspired by "sixties permissiveness . . . [the] campaigns of the multiculturalists, the moral guardians, and the minority groups." Throughout her review, Croce implied that art should be separated from "community outreach," and that there is something improper about infusing art with political intention.[14] In contrast, it can be argued that the "art for art's sake" position depends on an arguably false and impossible dichotomy. Political communication is not

divorced from the same kinds of considerations that determine our responses to artistic work: imagine Malcolm X, for instance, without his comic timing and his sense of humor. There are aesthetic grammars that determine the relative success of political interactions and the impact of political communication in the cultural realm: signs, styles, and performances whose qualities transcend the political and artistic realms. In other words, the suggestion that aesthetics cannot be divorced from politics does not imply that we cannot make aesthetic judgments regarding creative and political work; the point is that aesthetic judgments should not be confined to the artistic realm and cannot be detached from political considerations. Accordingly, we should not resist the erasure of the lines distinguishing the politics of poetry and the poetics of the political.[15] Intentional silences also have significance: to *say nothing* suggests acceptance of, or satisfaction with, existing arrangements, and implicitly represents the expression of a political preference. If we agree that politics is, among other things, a contest about what matters and ought to be subject to consideration and debate, we will recognize both the assertion of the aesthetic and the suggestion that art is a self-contained realm "above" politics as political arguments of a particular normative type (similar to the corresponding claims that are made with regard to science).[16]

The specific relationship between popular culture and black politics also has to be understood in the broader context of the uncertainty about the status of black citizenship and specifically the question of whether African Americans are permanent outsiders, the penultimate American other.[17] Among the allegedly queer characteristics of black political behavior that provoke this type of reaction are the supposed overdependence of blacks on (male) charismatic leadership (e.g., Marcus Garvey, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson); the implication that blacks, unlike other groups, vote as a bloc (for the Democratic Party) and that this is somehow irrational and evidence of a lack of sophistication; the ritualistic engagement in demonstrations, protest marches, and, perhaps, riots; and the ongoing significance of the black churches in the making of black politics.[18]

Regarding this last aspect, there has been a long-running debate concerning the merits of African American religiosity and the predominant role of "the black church." This discourse can be traced back to the Marxist supposition that religion merely assisted in the obfuscation of class realities and prevented the working classes from understanding the true nature of their situation. This *opiate theory*, as Fredrick C. Harris writes, "insists that Afro-Christianity

promotes otherworldliness functioning as an instrument of political pacification," and rejects the assumptions of the *inspiration theory,* which would include the civil rights movement among the political accomplishments of the black church (the frequency with which churches were targeted and destroyed by opponents of the civil rights movement obviously supports this interpretation).[19] It is not surprising, then, that Du Bois would claim "Our religion holds us in superstition" or that black ministers would be depicted as hustlers and sellouts in the films of Oscar Micheaux (e.g., *Within Our Gates* [1919], and *Body and Soul* [1924] starring Paul Robeson, a minister's son) and the comedy of Pigmeat Markham (e.g., *The Crap Shootin' Rev*).[20] "The majority black church did not support [Martin Luther] King's leadership," adds Houston Baker, in reference to the situation after World War II. "[I]ndeed, the multimillion-member National Baptist Convention relentlessly *opposed* a civil rights agenda."[21] There is also, of course, Adolph Reed Jr.'s depiction of the implications of a black politics driven by black religiosity and a dependence on faith-based institutions, in his discussion of Jesse Jackson's 1984 campaign for the presidency: "This model of [clerical] authority is fundamentally antiparticipatory and antidemocratic; in fact it is grounded on a denial of the rationality that democratic participation requires." At another point he observes, "Exceptionalist approaches to black politics typically are fed by the mystique of black churchliness and religiosity, which postulates a peculiarly racial basis of participation and representation."[22]

The suggestion that popular culture, and the various manifestations of "Saturday night's" activities, should be seen as relevant to black politics provokes many of the same reactions and potentially legitimate concerns as have assertions regarding the political significance of the black churches, black church life, and Sunday morning's rituals. At the most basic level, there is the contention that an emphasis on black popular culture as a political medium encourages exceptionalist understandings of African American political behavior. In this normative matrix, investigations and certainly celebrations of any linkages between the two realms might reinforce the notion that blacks lie outside of the (standard, masculinist) American mainstream. "[T]he ideology of race," as Hortense Spillers notes, "is founded upon the fundamental assumption that one is not a 'man'" (or, more broadly, as Valentin Mudimbe has observed, "the colonial library disseminates the concept of deviation as the best symbol of the idea of Africa").[23] "Normal" Americans, then, make their politics by collecting information through rational and regularized processes. Blacks, in contrast, pursue means that are irregular, inappropriate, probably

ineffective, and possibly in the eyes of some (e.g., the always anxious comprador class) improper, embarrassing, and shameful. On this point, Reed contends that a focus on popular culture

> boils down to nothing more than an insistence that authentic, meaningful political engagement for black Americans is expressed not in relation to the institutions of public authority—the state—or the workplace—but in the clandestine significance assigned to apparently apolitical rituals. Black people, according to this logic, don't mobilize through overt collective action. They do it surreptitiously when they look like they're just dancing. . . . This is don't-worry, be-happy politics.[24]

Certainly, to the extent that an emphasis on the cultural realm can encourage facile commodification, accommodation, and incorporation into status quo arrangements as the intriguingly expressive, the exotic, or the interesting and entertaining other, such a strategy can produce conservative outcomes.

Claims about the political salience of black popular culture also raise concerns about the degree to which these practices can be routinized. Although performances need not be insincere or merely calculating, and are sometimes simply a matter of amplification (making one's intentions and message as clear as possible), popular culture thrives on, and indeed demands, nuance, dadaesque ambiguity, and contrapuntality as it resists fixedness in its moves between the grounded and the fantastic. "The work that I do frequently falls, in the minds of most people, into that realm of fiction called fantastic, or mythic, or magical, or unbelievable," the novelist Toni Morrison suggests. "I'm not uncomfortable with these labels."[25] Going further, Ralph Ellison contends: "The novel at its best demands a sort of complexity of vision which politics doesn't like."[26] While intentions are not always easily known, the effects of a vote or a decision can be more clearly ascertained. The inclination in formal politics toward the quantifiable and the bordered, the structured, ordered, policeable, and disciplined is in fundamental tension with popular culture's willingness to embrace disturbance, to engage the apparently mad and maddening, to sustain often slippery frameworks of intention that act subliminally, if not explicitly, on distinct and overlapping cognitive registers, and to acknowledge meaning in those spaces where speechlessness is the common currency.[27] Moreover, popular culture's willingness not to know, its frequent preference for experience over explanation, and its deployment of omission as method and silence as meaning, as in the work of Ahmad Jamal, Miles Davis,

and Shirley Horn, mark its expressions and manifestations as distinct from the ambitions of the formally political. Finally, the ways the performative challenges the truth claims of the formally political and casts it as itself just another mode of performance explain many of the disjunctions between the two realms, and the characteristic disavowal of any intimate connection with the cultural on the part of the political narrowly understood.

It is specifically because of this disjunction between the political and cultural realms that one of the arguments Ellison and his intellectual progeny raise is so unconvincing: the obvious influence of African Americans on mainstream American culture (i.e., the blues and jazz) and the possibility that all Americans are cultural mulattoes do not translate into acceptance of blacks in the formal political structures of the (white) republic. Evidence of the implausibility of this position would include the dissonant cultural and political traditions that have developed in Memphis, the blues affectations of the late race-baiting Lee Atwater, and the code-switching abilities of former president Bill Clinton (indeed, *Juneteenth*, Ellison's posthumous novel, speaks to this kind of possibility). "We do have institutions," Ellison asserted in the early 1970s, "We have the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. *And we have jazz*."[28] While all three might share a certain bluesaic quality, the operations of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights have rarely been as amenable to the interests of African Americans, nor as reflective of their aspirations in practice, as the thing Ellison calls jazz. Furthermore, given the Ellisonian preference for jazz in its pre-bebop forms, this version of the blues aesthetic has had trouble recognizing the work of John Coltrane (post–*A Love Supreme*), Albert Ayler, Jimi Hendrix, Funkadelic, Rudy Ray Moore, Gayl Jones, and Toni Morrison as falling squarely "within the tradition."[29] The engagement with and interpellation via cultural representations of black life by (white) American citizens historically has been quite compatible with the marginalization and disfranchisement of African Americans as political subjects and potential members of the republican community. Just as the mythology of racial democracy in the Brazilian instance obscures as much as it reveals, the simple equation of the racial and ideological dynamics of the blues perspective and the jazz world with the operations of American democracy—a rhetorical stance frequently endorsed by Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, and Wynton Marsalis—cannot be supported empirically. Rather, the Ellisonian paradigm, especially in its later iterations, is seemingly energized by an urge to curtail the political, to push it out of the frame of the artistic and the creative, a move that itself necessitates a restriction of the imaginative and a denial of the full range of the possible,

intentional, and significant.[30] Ellison's rhetorical half-stepping, and his resistance to the aesthetic bleeding into the political, and vice versa, suggest, ironically, a fear of engaging the real complexities and fluidities he reserves as the domain of the creative, and a reluctance to acknowledge and struggle with the rigidities of the formally political world.

Let me now take up the broader underlying question of the anxiety about African American exceptionalism. At the most superficial level, this concern overlooks the reality that the realms of formal political activity and cultural expression are joined in a number of complicated and mundane ways, not just in the making of black politics but in the making of politics in general. That being the case, nervousness with regard to the possibility of black difference and the related desires to maintain respectability need, then, to be contextualized, and their roots and implications understood.[31]

These desires not to be excluded from the community of the "normal," often underwritten by a particular form of vindicationist spirit, can translate into an avoidance of struggle and the abandonment of transformative possibilities. The ambition to be included in mainstream spaces can necessitate accepting alienation and subordination as the price of the ticket (to use James Baldwin's term).[32] If modernity, that bundle of cultural, political, philosophical, and technological iterations and reiterations of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution, "requires an alterity," as Michel-Rolph Trouillot suggests, if it implies and requires antonymic and problematic others—if it, to put it bluntly, needs "the nigger"—can those others constituted and marginalized in this manner viably challenge their circumstances without questioning the logic and language of their exclusion?[33] The apparent absence of a thickly transformative dialectic within modernity's matrix (e.g., the Hegelian blueprint); its seeming inability to shake itself free of its embedded sexism and racism; its primal tendency to read issues that make race salient as pointing toward either the premodern or antimodern; and the ways it makes, excludes, and yet exploits and contains black bodies, raise doubts about the feasibility of any simplistic reconciliation of the modern and the black (however constructed), and the more superficial depictions of the Afro-modernity and Afro-modernism projects.[34]

Given these constraints, the labor that has been devoted to making the texts of modernity self-evident and operational and the "commonsensical" exclusions and misrepresentations that render "civilization" feasible need to be exposed and acknowledged. Accordingly, those actors who are committed to changing substantively the situation of blacks are required to make plain,

to borrow from Achille Mbembe, modernity's capacity to "legitimize the violence of its irrationality in the very name of reason," to contemplate abandoning any attachment to the "rules of the game," and to seek strategies, and employ whatever means available, that might destabilize and transcend the norms and assumptions underpinning the projects of modernity, despite their attractiveness, ubiquity, and apparent inescapability.[35] Among these understandings would be the privileging of the national that renders "the modern nation-state"—the "paramount structural effect of the modern social world," as Timothy Mitchell observes—natural, convenient, coherent, and appealing; and the fencing off of the aesthetic from the political.[36] The complex of imperatives imposed on nonwhites regarding economic function, cultural identity, sexuality, and civil status are constructions that those engaged by the discursive traditions and agenda that define black communities must recognize; resist through the circulation of competing narratives; and, beyond that, hopefully transcend.[37]

At one level, what I am making is a simple language claim. If modernity is more than just a flat trope representing the "new" (in other words, a benign temporal marker), if it is in fact "premised," as Wendy Brown contends, "on the notion of emergence *from* darker times and places," and accordingly continues to reconstitute peoples of African descent as subaltern others—even demanding such an arrangement—then endorsing the term would not seem to allow much room for blacks to imagine a significant improvement in their circumstances.[38] I am working here with the assumptions that underpin Toni Morrison's suggestion that "[M]odern life begins with slavery," and Paul Gilroy's conceptualization of the black Atlantic as being necessarily a counterculture of modernity.[39] In other words, in the language game staked out by the modern, blacks are uniquely locked into a relationship that allows few possibilities for agency, autonomy, or substantive negotiation. One could argue that no word in and of itself has a fixed connotation and that the meanings attached to particular terms can be challenged and revised—witness Savion Glover's efforts to redefine the art of tap dancing and free it from any embedded minstrel subtexts. While there is some validity to this point—the suggestion that the meaning of terms can float—one has to question the probability that the term "modernity" can be divested of its progressive assumptions and hierarchical designs. "Concepts have a way of carrying their etymologies with them forever," submits Walter Ong.[40] Furthermore, whether investing energy in these kinds of rehabilitative endeavors is sensible, given the range of other work that needs to be done, is open to debate, as is the wisdom of seeking emancipation through reaction.

At another level, I am obviously talking about more than just a simple language claim. There is a corresponding set of material institutions and practices that reflect the ambitions and horizons that the language envisions and demands: processes, mechanisms, and arenas that are viscerally addicted to ascriptive rankings, unavoidably colonial in their appetites, and immune to deep egalitarian reimagining and restructuring. It is these dynamics that have trifurcated black sensibilities—among various invented, static and stigmatized pasts; unevenly across the centers and margins of contemporary life; and, in response to the multiple crises that mark the modernity/slavery nexus, into the unscripted but attractive-by-default postmodern and beyond.[41] Given these dislocating logics, whether blacks are capable of functioning as modern subjects is, again, a question whose assumptions need to be interrogated, especially given the ways blackness is a constitutively modern albeit unstable formation (i.e., its commitments to possibilities in excess of and beyond modernity).

By raising the possibility that the norms, assumptions, and constructions of the modern need to be superseded, I am not overlooking the fact that blacks can rightly claim co-ownership as stockholders in the projects of modernity (and copyright holders with regard to the definition of many of these endeavors) or contending that modern developments are uniformly problematic and that there is some easy alternative. The pursuit of genuine emancipatory schemes is not a simple matter of escaping or even resisting existing arrangements (in the manner, perhaps, that new world blacks could conceivably in some past time establish maroon communities). The processes of exclusion that have defined the black experience of modernity have not allowed those of African descent to avoid the transfiguring and scarring aspects of the extended moment or complicity in its present conditions. These dynamics have also demanded sensibilities that recognize that solidarities are always contingent and essentialisms at best pragmatic, positional, and strategic.[42] Opting out, then, is not a viable—or available—response.

The logic of this argument makes the possible challenge offered by the articulation of a black aesthetic, or an explicitly ethnicized aesthetic, a less attractive course of action. The aesthetic in blackface, otherwise unreconfigured, would still leave in place the sanctity of the aesthetic and the aesthetic/political boundary. The objective, in the spirit of the arguments raised by artist-theorist Sylvia Wynter, cultural historian Clyde Taylor, and filmmaker Julio García Espinosa, is not to pluralize the aesthetic but rather to supplant it, while still leaving room for the possibility of more broadly embedded aesthetic registers.[43] For my purposes here, this stance would correspond with the reluctance

to engage in the shadow discourses of Afro- or alternative modernities (indeed, the two positions are intimately linked).[44] If the aesthetic is understood as a science of beauty that forecloses substantive political engagement or challenge, it must be recognized as a key brick in the wall of modernity and one of the cornerstones of the racialized edifice that has so effectively contained and restricted black life chances. Given the synchronic political marginalization of black peoples and cultural hyperdeployment of representations of blackness, a transformative approach would have to move far beyond the conjoined and overlapping imperatives of the aesthetic and the modern.

My suggestive reference to a black fantastic, then, is meant to refer to the minor-key sensibilities generated from the experiences of the underground, the vagabond, and those constituencies marked as deviant—notions of being that are inevitably aligned within, in conversation with, against, and articulated beyond the boundaries of the modern.[45] The surrealist movements of the early and mid-twentieth century and the broader neosurrealist tradition, in their attempts to fuse dream worlds and everyday practices and bridge the politics/culture divide, are obvious reference points and sources of sustenance. (Indeed, one might suggest that representations of blackness are always surreal, given the inevitably irregular and provocative qualities of these efforts and the "source material" itself in a broader context in which the nonblack is thoroughly normalized.) We might also think here of the struggles to establish and maintain space for substantive, open-ended deliberative activity and the related commitment to the nurturing of potentially subversive forms of interiority through and by which private geographies are made available to the public. The *black* in black fantastic, in this context, signifies both a generic category of underdeveloped possibilities and the particular "always there" interpretations of these agonistic, postracial, and post-colonial visions and practices generated by subaltern populations.[46]

The effort here is to identify meaningful and social as well as consciously imperfect and in-process notions of autonomy and emancipation that can survive the challenge of those who legitimately critique the hidden imperialisms that underwrite too many of our notions of progress, cosmopolitanism, the human and the universal.[47] The hope is that these contingent, evolving, and uncommon thick particularisms in the aggregate represent an appealing and viable alternative to the inevitable frustrations and racially bound, unproductive labor associated with the efforts to work within the standard narratives of modernity. By bringing into view and into the field of play practices and ritual spaces that are often cast as beyond the reasonable and relevant—to the point,

indeed, of being unrecognizable as politics—these visions might help us gain normative traction in an era characterized by the dismissal of any possibilities beyond the already existing.

My concern is to identify the ways these sensibilities and activities in and around the joints of the politics/popular culture matrix, derived from a particular understanding of the relationship between blackness and modernity, might transcend the prevailing notions of the aesthetic and the predominance of the state as the sole frame for subject formation and progressive and transformative discourse and mobilization. The fantastic in this context would entail unsettling these governmentalities and the conventional notions of the political, the public sphere, and civil society that depend on the exclusion of blacks and other nonwhites from meaningful participation and their ongoing reconstitution as raw material for the naturalization of modern arrangements. These perspectives and practices would require, then, both decentering the state and overriding the aesthetic and, in the process, pushing to the surface exactly those tensions and possibilities that are necessarily suppressed and denied in the standard respectability discourses associated with the preservation of the modern.

Returning to the anxieties regarding black difference, then, the fusion of the realms of politics and popular culture in mainstream American life *does* at one level present a unique array of dilemmas, problems, and opportunities for blacks. Nevertheless, the claim that the integration of cultural actors into the framework of black politics legitimizes exceptionalist understandings of African American inclinations overlooks the possibility that being exceptional in relation to the standard practices and norms prevailing in American life need not necessarily be a bad thing; naturalizes a national frame that deserves troubling; and arguably misses the point. Hyperactivity on the cultural front usually occurs as a response to some sort of marginalization from the processes of decision-making or exercising control over one's own circumstances; what might appear to be an overinvestment in the cultural realm is rarely a freely chosen strategy. American blacks are not "different" in this respect because they have chosen to be but because of the exclusionary and often violent practices that have historically defined black citizenship and public sphere participation as problematic and because of the recognition that the cultural realm is always in play and already politically significant terrain. In other words, not engaging the cultural realm, whether defensively or assertively, would be, to some degree, to concede defeat in an important—and relatively accessible—arena. "Precisely because African Americans historically have had more control over their own culture than many other aspects of their world," historian Waldo

Martin Jr. adds, "culture has always been a critical battleground in their freedom struggle."[48] The factors, then, that might provoke such (perceived) overinvestments and the implications of such developments need to be acknowledged and investigated, as the logical error of reading these choices outside of their causal fields must be avoided.

Anxieties about institutionalizing and celebrating difference aside, another significant concern that underlies many of the objections to the reading of popular culture as a form of politics is normative. On one level, the desirability of incorporating specifically *popular* culture into formal politics is complicated by the extent to which the images of black life that have had an impact in mainstream circles have tended often to promote distorted notions of black humanity (e.g., minstrelsy, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the signifying black smile, *The Birth of a Nation*, Elvis, Madonna, and the work of Quentin Tarantino), despite their occasionally transgressive qualities. Given the constant containment aspect that has been historically characteristic of these forms of entertainment, and their frequent deployment of black bodies as punctuation, it would not appear sensible to encourage the further merging of the realms of formal politics and popular culture. Indeed, one could instead urge their further disentanglement; for what kinds of politics are likely to be encouraged by processes in which cultural actors play a significant role, especially given the often dialectic tension between the qualifier "black" and the term "popular culture" and the symbolically (and problematically) loaded nature of what are perceived to be black performances, in the broadest sense, for nonblack audiences?[49]

Clearly, the messages emanating from the arenas of popular culture can generate action and inaction, and encourage reactionary as well as progressive mindsets. Reed writes that popular culture does not qualify as politics, that "the beauty of cultural politics . . . [is that] it can coexist comfortably with any kind of policy orientation," but he does not grapple with the reality that there is a need to at least acknowledge the status quo–oriented and reactionary perspectives that can gain sustenance within the realms of popular culture.[50] The ways popular culture can mobilize or demobilize—for instance, the way much of turn-of-the-century black pop (ranging from rapper Jay-Z's "Hard Knock Life [Ghetto Anthem]" to gospel vocalist Donnie McClurkin's "We Fall Down") naturalized economic hardship and specifically black poverty—need to be integrated into any effective framework for understanding the development of black politics. If we are to understand black politics fully, from an empirical or academic perspective, we cannot overlook those spaces that generate difficult data. Similarly, those committed to progressive change must also

engage with those arenas and voices that promote regressive and discomforting narratives.

Regardless of the content and impact of these communications, their significance, and the pattern of their effects, if any, need to be considered. To the extent that simple recognition is an important political goal for political actors, the different media of popular culture provide a means by which this need can be satisfied. While simply *being seen*, in and of itself, is rarely translated into an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of one's interests or action on behalf of those concerns, pop culture's ability to render the invisible visible (in an Ellisonian sense perhaps) or the unheard audible—and possibly, to borrow from Ellison and Fred Moten, the invisible audible and the unheard visible—gives it a certain political legitimacy.[51] In those instances where recognition itself is the intended end point of political activity, cultural politics often might suffice.[52] Finally, popular culture's ability—and tendency—to redefine the political, and cross the gendered and racialized borders distinguishing the public and private realms, should not be overlooked, nor should its status with regard to questions of political economy.

It is extremely rare—though not impossible—for actions undertaken by creative artists alone to bring about specific substantive public policy reorientations on the part of state authorities. Rather, the discursive disruptions artists instigate and the meanings read into their actions and creations are most likely to have a more diffuse, symbolic impact, at least in the external domain. Although music, films, and books are capable to some degree of generating attention around a specific issue, generally popular culture is about the mobilization of broader and less coherent sentiments.[53] At the same time, political movements' and campaigns' effectiveness in achieving particular policy objectives is affected by the broader atmospheric and symbolic discourses taking place. Indeed, it could be argued that the development of broader solidaristic sensibilities, which are crucial to sustaining a progressive politics in an era of neoliberal individuation, is *best* accomplished by means of the actions of creative artists.

SOME SING, SOME DANCE: FUNCTION, FORM, AND DOMAIN

One of the important functions popular culture has played has involved providing a location for the discussion of issues of concern and the making of black politics.[54] This role became even more significant over the course of the

decades following the civil rights era because of the marked transformation of the accessible, structured spaces for intramural black discourse. Indeed, some analysts have suggested that a viable black counterpublic has not existed for the last three decades. "[S]uch a public sphere did exist within the Black community as recently as the early 1970s," observed Michael Dawson in the mid-1990s, "if by that we mean a set of institutions, communication networks and practices which facilitate debate of causes and remedies to the current combination of political setbacks and economic devastation facing major segments of the Black community, and which facilitate the creation of oppositional formations and sites." As a result of the processes unleashed by the civil rights movement, though, he asserted, "A Black public sphere does not exist in contemporary America," although he would later modify this claim somewhat and refer to the black counterpublic as "severely undermined" and being in a state of "disintegration."[55]

Although black dialogical spaces and media were significantly reordered over the course of the 1970s, it was only toward the end of this period that previously marginalized constituencies within the black community were able to mobilize and develop their own communicative networks (e.g., the formation of the National Black Feminist Organization and the Combahee River Collective, in 1973 and 1975, respectively, and later the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays in 1978). The concerns of African American women, gays and lesbians, and lower-income cohorts rose to the surface—if only briefly in some instances—in a way that was largely impossible during the supposed glory days of the black public sphere that Dawson and others have highlighted.[56] A more accurate account might suggest that the conventional wisdom equates the viability and efficacy of black deliberative autonomy with the promotion of the interests of primarily straight, middle-class (or aspiring to be middle-class) men and overlooks other constituencies (as well as more local processes and micropublics that, in contrast to national arenas, are more likely to feature women in decision-making roles). This revised narrative is also suggestive in the same way that the coincidence of the implosion of the Left in the United States and the peak of the civil rights movement provokes questions about American progressives: what does it mean that the black public sphere—to use Dawson's terminology—is seen as collapsing at the same time that lower-income constituencies, women, lesbians, and gays start to mobilize?[57] That said, one might argue that black spaces continue to operate under constant pressure of erasure while resisting the assertion that an across-the-board collapse of some sort occurred at some point in the 1970s.

With regard to the activities taking place in these reconfigured public spaces, it is important not to exaggerate the distinction between the external and internal dimensions of the politics/popular culture nexus in the shaping and expression of African American politics. The blurring of the clear lines that demarcated black spaces is one of the legacies of the civil rights movement. There is currently a limited ability for blacks to discuss issues in arenas not accessible to others. Black life has, in many respects, become intensely public, partly as a result of the dramas that unfolded in the early 1990s, featuring in quick and painful succession Clarence Thomas, Anita Hill, Rodney King, and O. J. Simpson, among others. Accordingly, the actor-director Charles Dutton recalls that the singer Dionne Warwick told him she left before the completion of a performance of August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson* in which he was appearing because "[S]he couldn't take it anymore. . . . [W]e were letting white folks in on all of our sacred little things."[58] To some extent, similar concerns underpinned the controversies surrounding the popular 2002 film *Barbershop* and the mocking references made by one of its lead characters to Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and Jesse Jackson. "I was surprised it [i.e., the debate about the film] went straight to the media," noted O'Shea "Ice Cube" Jackson, one of the film's stars.[59]

This translucence is, of course, not entirely new: consider Booker T. Washington's double performance in Atlanta in 1895. Washington's simultaneous engagement of southern black and white audiences (and, to some extent, northern whites as well) with his famous Exposition speech downplaying the importance of civil rights while in a lower register encouraging black economic autonomy exemplifies a problematic Clyde Taylor has identified: "The speaker in this position attempts to master a language and thematic understandable by the majority while also speaking to affirm the values and interests of the in-house group." Continuing, Taylor asks the question that underpins most of the anxieties regarding black life and discourse played out in public and that animated most of the analyses of Washington's speech: "[W]hich of two masters does the text most effectively serve?"[60] In this respect, the Atlanta address and the responses it generated, and Washington's subsequent intentionally public role through the Tuskegee Machine in promoting a script that sought to restrict the substantive contours of black discourse foreshadowed later developments in the post–civil rights era. While Washington operated in a period in which black politics and popular culture remained largely behind the veil, to use Du Bois's terminology, developments in the last two decades of the twentieth century fundamentally challenged any assumptions about the sanctity of the black counterpublic/white public sphere divide and provoked

even deeper concerns with respect to the implications of black deliberative engagements and performances being accessible to nonblack audiences.

The remaking of the racial architecture that occurred post-1965 also suggests that the traditional frameworks for discussing and distinguishing black politics and discourses might need to be abandoned or, at the very least, troubled. On a superficial level, it has long been a common practice for black actors and movements to draw in varying degrees from both the integrationist and nationalist traditions, depending on the audience in question and the prevailing circumstances. While this is not a new phenomenon, it becomes much less remarkable and awkward after the civil rights movement. This is particularly true following the gradual domestication of the nationalist agenda, as evidenced in the transition in emphasis from emigration in the nineteenth century to the support of segregated development within the United States, and to the community control projects that emerged in the post–civil rights era. The diminished coherence of the integrationist stance in the face of successive white backlashes and withdrawals should also be considered a contributing factor to the decreased resonance of the integrationist/nationalist divide. It is useful to recall that integrationism itself only becomes an explicit goal of organizations such as the NAACP in the 1940s in the context of the struggle to desegregate the military—previously the goal had been identified as a matter of achieving civil rights.

It is perhaps in the contemporary production and consumption of black cultural politics that the displacement of relatively procedural questions of location and orientation becomes most obvious. Operating in deterritorialized arenas—for example, radio, television, and the internet—that confound the older understandings of the distinction between integrated and segregated spaces, artists in the post–civil rights era have been major contributors to the recalibration of the black discursive agenda. In their choices regarding whether to conform or transform, resist or embrace, confront or disengage, the distinct substantive dimensions of political and cultural existence become more salient and germane. Questions of geography and genealogy have less purchase on black thought as the inside and outside; the local, transnational, and global; and the past, present and future become conjoined and in some respects conflated. Moreover, beyond the cataloguing of geographical presences and genealogical connections, there is the possibility of approaching black identifications conceptually: as a matter of indexing a related set of sensibilities that resist quantification, physical or temporal classifications, and corporeal boundaries.

As a result of this paradigm shift, and the related reordering of the black counterpublic, the primacy and stridency of the integrationist/nationalist

debate subsides, as other concerns related to class, gender, sexuality, generation, and blackness in the aggregate emerge and become predominant. Clearly, the absorption with questions of segregation and assimilation has not dissipated completely; it lies just below the surface of almost every issue that attracts the interest of colored America (and the rest of the country as well). Furthermore, these questions are driven by very real substantive concerns: who are we if we make our politics and our selves over there as opposed to right here? It is hardly inconceivable that the integrationist/nationalist cleavage might reemerge as the most salient axis of African American discourse. That said, it is still remarkable how rarely contemporary black concerns are articulated in the terms of the earlier categorical language and how antiquated in some respects the inside/outside framework appears in the current moment, particularly if we consider the issue from the vantage point of the popular culture/politics nexus.[61]

Following this realignment, in choosing to *say something,* black artists can seek both to influence outcomes and to redefine the terms of debate, within and outside their immediate communities, and to bring attention to—and perhaps confer legitimacy on—the spaces in which they operate (whether these are black-community-specific or not). This merging of the substantive and the procedural—the support of certain agendas and the maintenance of viable dialogical spheres—can occur simultaneously inside and outside black spaces (to the extent, again, that such spaces can be identified). Alternately, these efforts can be strategically ordered, for example, by focusing first on intracommunity campaigns before deciding to intervene in broader discursive processes. Regardless of strategic preferences, cultural media and the actors involved in these arenas have played an increasingly crucial role in defining the aggregate black agenda and determining which issues will move from the internal arenas to the broader national stage (and possibly the international stage) with the perceived support of most African Americans.[62]

Regarding the issue of intentionality, cultural productions, moments, and gestures can have political and social meanings attributed to them regardless of their creators' objectives—for example, the "Burn, Baby! Burn!" exclamation identified with radio deejay the Magnificent Montague, and Aretha Franklin's "Respect." "I'm not a politician or political theorist," contends Franklin. "I don't make it a practice to put my politics into my music or social commentary. But the fact that 'Respect' naturally became a battle cry and an anthem for a nation shows me something."[63] In this context, consider the interpretations of Martha and the Vandellas' 1964 recording "Dancing in the Street." "Few blacks," suggests Gerald Early, "accepted the song on its face, insisting that it was a

metaphorical theme song for black unity and . . . revolution."[64] In 1965, Rolland Snellings, at the time a member of the Revolutionary Action Movement and subsequently (as Askia Muhammad Touré) one of the more prominent poets associated with the Black Arts movement, invoked the recording as a "Riot-song": "We sing in our young hearts, we sing in our angry Black Souls: WE ARE COMING UP! WE ARE COMING UP! And it's reflected in the Riot-song that symbolized Harlem, Philly, Brooklyn, Rochester, Patterson, Elizabeth; this song of course, 'Dancing in the Streets'—making Martha and the Vandellas legendary. . . . OUR songs are turning from 'love,' turning from being 'songs,' turning into WAYS, into WAYS, into 'THINGS.'"[65]

In contrast, Martha Reeves, the group's lead singer, contends that the song, released on July 31, 1964, "actually came out just after the riots occurred but, even so, the rumor got stirred up. It offended me because I would never be a part of anything like that. I've always promoted love, my songs are about heartbreak not [the] beating up of heads or breaking down of buildings and destroying anyone's property." Reeves, who would subsequently be elected to Detroit's city council, is correct to note that the riots that took place in Harlem and Rochester that summer happened before the release of the single (although other conflicts, including those in Jersey City, Elizabeth, and Paterson, New Jersey, and Philadelphia—one of the cities mentioned in the lyrics—occurred the same summer, after the song's release).[66] Despite her understanding of the recording and the group's intentions, though, it is not surprising that others uncovered different possibilities: distinct readings she would have to consider in her subsequent performances of the composition (at least in the mid- and late 1960s). The song does feature a certain post-King sensibility, and in its reclaiming of the streets, its references to (mostly) northern cities, and its propulsive, assertive rhythm, one can detect some sense of the changes that were taking place at the time (e.g., the campaign to open up the Democratic Party at its convention in Atlantic City the same summer). Marvin Gaye, one of the song's coauthors, offers that "of all the acts back then, I thought Martha and the Vandellas came closest to really saying something. It wasn't a conscious thing, but when they sang numbers like 'Quicksand' or 'Wild One' or 'Nowhere to Run' or 'Dancing in the Street,' they captured a spirit that felt political to me."[67] Indeed, a unique pent-up energy radiates throughout many of the group's classic singles that could be easily translated and adapted to the broader circumstances pertaining in that particular era. Cultural work, then, must be understood as a result of the interactions of the creative process and its embedded intentions; the potentially quite distinct and even contrasting—but equally creative—use made of them

by others; and the feedback mechanisms and interpolative possibilities linking these various stages (in both senses of the word).[68]

If, as political theorists often insist, the opportunity to debate and the quality of deliberation are important, the arenas of popular culture offer more accessible spaces for engagement than the officially recognized mechanisms of decision-making.[69] This is especially true in light of the developments during the 2000 and 2004 national elections (i.e., the fact that there is no guarantee that one's vote will even be counted), and given the limited number of other effective means for substantive political debate among African Americans in the electoral realm. The concerns of certain black constituencies have not been responded to, and indeed been avoided, by black elected officials. The silences and evasions, which have been at times encouraged by other blacks, have not been as audible or apparent in the formal political realms—nor for that matter in the original added content provided by what remains of the black press, black-oriented radio, or the newer black media—as they have been in the aggregated arenas of popular culture.[70] In other words, the agenda-setters controlling these black-oriented media outlets have been on the whole reluctant to reproduce unfiltered the intracommunity negotiations and conflicts taking place within African American popular culture.

A number of factors can explain these circumstances: the absence of structured and recognized mechanisms within black communities for expression of internal disagreements, local political structures sufficiently sensitive to intracommunity conflicts, and a significant political movement to the left of the Democratic Party; disenfranchisement and continued black mis- and underrepresentation; and the ways the workings of race in American life have discouraged the slightest manifestations of "black disunity."[71] With regard to the logic underlying this last point, Charles Hamilton argued in 1970:

> If we would understand the nature of The Modern Political Struggle, we would understand that its essence lies not in traditional debates among ourselves that our very gallant forefathers of necessity had to engage in. We would quickly resolve those differences and move to a new level—a level occasioned by new times and new needs and new possibilities. For example: The mass media is a new variable. How are we going to organize to use it? To continue to debate and blast each other—to the entertainment of white people? Or to carefully politicize masses of Black people?[72]

Hamilton's analysis speaks to a sensibility that assumes that public discourse among blacks is problematic and, with its confident deployment of collective

pronouns, assumes that race itself is a legitimate marker of community lines. For black public officials persuaded, understandably, by these sorts of sentiments, there is little inclination to engage in open debate with regard to the options available to African Americans. Actors in the cultural arenas, then, like early twentieth-century soapbox orators, have often been the primary public generators of black conventional wisdoms, and the main protagonists in the evolving battles concerning the negotiation of the boundaries of black community, and the definition of the aggregate black agenda. African American elected officials have been less often called on to play these roles; unwilling to get involved beyond engaging in the overlapping theatrics associated with performing blackness and performing accountability; discouraged, overcommitted, or powerless; or simply unable to respond in any useful manner or contemplate possibilities beyond the already existing.

This characterization of the limitations of contemporary black electoral politics needs to be further contextualized. Black elected officials are not deficient or retrograde in comparison to their colleagues in the legislative branch. Indeed, they—especially the members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC)—have consistently been the most likely to promote liberal and democratic alternatives, and the most reliable defenders of black interests in congressional debates. Although some subconstituencies are neglected and underserved, black elected officials are also, in the aggregate, more economically and socially liberal and progressive than the communities they represent. At the same time, the ability and capacity of black representatives to risk public deliberations among themselves is restricted by the relative size of the black contingent in the formal realm, strategic considerations, and the racially polarized foundation on which American politics rests. This last point is important. Because race is still a major, arguably *the* major, structuring contributor to the shape and substance of American politics, black politics still operate under some serious constraints, and crossracial coalitions are still extremely difficult to sustain.[73]

The choices made by black elected officials have also illustrated the salience of the processes of linked fate and secondary marginalization, developed by political scientists Michael Dawson and Cathy Cohen, respectively.[74] Although belatedly in some instances, inclusive movements of the sort Dawson describes have developed in response to cases of police brutality, reparations, racial profiling, voting rights infractions, and other race-related civil rights violations, and been accompanied by movements within black popular culture (e g., the numerous recordings generated by the murder of Amadou Diallo).[75] Despite the fault lines that have become magnified within black communities since the end of the civil rights era (including class, which is the focus of most of Dawson's attention),

issues perceived to be linked directly to race have continued to mobilize significant support among African Americans and black elected officials.[76]

In contrast, issues regarding class, gender, sexuality, and the "boundaries" of American blackness, to use Cohen's term, have not, for the most part, generated the same level of interest from, or cohesion among, black elected officials or black publics. On those occasions when these actors have been engaged by these issues, the responses have lacked intensity and enthusiasm (as evidenced in the debates about welfare reform and AIDS policy). Indeed, as Cohen notes, these concerns and their advocates have often been (actively) marginalized within black communities. The literal and emotional redistricting that has taken place in the post–civil rights era has not been nearly as apparent in the realms of formal political activity—nor, for that matter, the realms of protest and extrastate activity—as it has been in black music, film, comedy and comic strips (i.e., *The Boondocks*), literature, video, athletics, and to a lesser degree, television (particularly Black Entertainment Television [BET]), theatre, and the fine arts. Indeed, beyond deliberation, I will argue that official politics have been pulled into vernacular spaces and that de facto decisions have been made in the cultural realm regarding issues of clear political significance.

TELLING STORIES

The broad question with which I started, of how the marginalized should respond to the shifting terms of their exclusion, is closely related to the narrower concern underlying this book. What happens to the assumption that popular culture and politics are intimately and optimally linked after the paradigm shift that marks the end of the civil rights era with its post-nationalist, post-soul, post-black, and anti-nigger echoes? Both questions speak not only to the dilemmas facing black communities and their representatives throughout the diaspora but to the character, salience and viability of diasporic identifications themselves. African Americans, defined broadly, European blacks, and continental Africans are all currently grappling with distinct but overlapping forms of demoralization, Afro-pessimism, and postcolonial melancholia, to borrow—out of context—a phrasing from Paul Gilroy, and with a hegemonic incentive structure that posits that black imaginations should neither trouble the aesthetic/politics boundary nor exceed nation-state borders. The current moment is characterized much more by its acceptance of these dominant scripts of modernity than by a willingness to challenge the slippery and

changing bases on which blacks have been excommunicated by the reification and deification of the modern. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we seem to have agreed that there is no escaping this modernity—so wide we can't get around it—and, accordingly, its problematics and implicit margins. Even our references to alternative modernities suggest a primary template that might at best allow certain variations on a relatively fixed score. My goal here is to understand what role popular culture has played in getting us to this point, and perhaps pushing against the grain, the potentially transformative, thickly emancipatory and substantively post-colonial visions these black performances might offer in their lower registers: their capacity to displace modernity as a master signifier within black and global discourse, along with its norms and modal infrastructures.

Throughout the book, I aim to bring together a number of distinct disciplines and fields of study—political science and cultural studies, African American studies and diaspora studies, American studies and postcolonial studies, among others—in order to insert the African American and American examples more explicitly into discourses that tend to overlook the particular significance of American data for our understanding of our modern circumstances. And vice versa: I am interested in placing the study of the United States in a comparative framework as well as one that attends to the artificiality of national boundaries. Toward these ends, Chapter 2 examines the political developments within black popular culture in the period after the Red Scare and the efforts to create forms of blackness from outside and from within that might align more easily with the borders and ambitions of the modern American project. In particular, I argue that the Cold War marks an important turn with regard to the pressures to separate the roles of creative artist and political activist by focusing on the experiences of, among others, Paul Robeson, Lorraine Hansberry, and Harry Belafonte and the related changes that took place in the relationship between black politics and popular culture between 1945 and 1965. Chapter 3 considers the emergence of the Black Arts Movement and its impact on African American politics leading up to the 1972 National Black Political Assembly. The focus is on the various attempts to renegotiate the relationship between actors in the cultural arena and those in the realm of formal politics and the resulting contest over the location and substance of politics. Despite efforts to restrict black political energies within the boundaries of formal politics, I argue that actors in the cultural realm continue to resist arrangements that confine black deliberative activity spatially and temporally to the places and rhythms preferred by the increasing ranks of

black elected officials. In Chapter 4, I suggest that the technological changes occurring in the 1980s—especially with regard to the visual arts—challenge intracommunity assumptions about the inheritability of black political traditions and indeed the sustainability of a coherent black politics. Chapter 5 follows chronologically and thematically from the previous chapter and examines the ways shifts in black discourse, situated in popular culture, might have affected, and not just reflected, the way blacks responded to the welfare reform debates of the mid-1990s (i.e., regarding the reform/abolition of Aid to Families with Dependent Children [AFDC]). I seek to establish in this section that black deliberative activity cannot be captured or understood by focusing only on that which happens in the arenas of formal politics and policy making. In this chapter, and the next, I also contend that the standard discourses of citizenship might be questioned in light of their dependence on the trope of the nigger. Chapter 6 examines the intersection of the two primary concerns of this book: the relationship between the aesthetic and the political and that between the national and the diasporic. In a discussion that considers the boundary work and play that link Garveyism, modernism, reggae, and the emergence of hip-hop, I also consider the question of the relationship between deliberative space and black politics from a perspective that does not posit the nation-state as the only or final frontier. Where the previous chapter hints at the instability of modern infrastructures, in this chapter I discuss more explicitly the transgressibility of the modernity/coloniality matrix and, specifically, diaspora's capacity through cultural exchange to challenge modern narratives that obscure their colonial underpinnings. Chapter 7 is presented as a sort of remix of the previous chapter in its examination of the gendered dynamics and colonial narratives that have underpinned diasporic relations and attempts to map and temporalize the ways African American (cultural) politics have been energized and limited by certain identifications in the realms of gender and sexuality. Here, I propose that exchange in the cultural arena has the potential not only to upset the nation—in at least two senses—but also to counter the masculinist norms that often structure both state-centered and diasporic politics. The last chapter is a brief overview of the book's central claims. Here, as in the rest of the book, my intention is to be suggestive rather than comprehensive, given the range of topics and artistic media under consideration. The goal is to highlight the possible ways a deep engagement with popular culture might enhance our understanding of developments in the formal political arena and to suggest that greater attention to a fuller range of deliberative practices and spaces might compel a revision of our notions of the political.

Whereof we cannot speak thereof we must be silent.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

What now emerges into prominence is the family

considered as an element internal to population, and as a

fundamental instrument in its government.

—Michel Foucault, "Governmentality"

2

REMEMBERING THE FAMILY

If modern sensibilities suggest that those of African descent are outliers, it is not surprising that some of those so designated would seek to establish their credentials as able citizens deserving of equal treatment without challenging the terms on which their marginalization occurred. In the context of the struggle over the proper definition of black politics, the black agenda, and blackness itself that has occurred since World War II, this reluctance manifested itself as a hegemonic bundle of inclinations and efforts to render the already said unsaid and unimaginable. This dominant set of impulses informed the steady rhetorical retreat that has characterized black politics since the Cold War: the splitting of the civil rights movement from the Left that occurred in the 1940s and 1950s; the associated disconnection of the domestic civil rights campaign from other international and diasporic anticolonial movements; the resistance to second wave feminism as it was enunciated by women of color in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; the related increasingly ambivalent response to the call for progressive policy reform within the framework of the liberal welfare state; and recently, to a significantly lesser extent, the questioning of the value and appropriateness of antiracist mobilization. Consistent with these campaigns were the celebration of pragmatism, instrumentalism, and compromise; the

abandonment of the convention movement, black counterpublics, and shared spaces, once they are used to broaden rather than constrict black possibilities; and the rhetorical shunning and shaming of protest activities, political engagement on the part of the black churches, and the efforts to imagine and seek change via the cultural realm.[1]

These investments can be linked in some respects to the shared sentiments that informed Ralph Ellison's pre–civil rights era American Negroism; the former Popular Front singer Bayard Rustin's arguments and increasingly Habermasian commitments regarding the irrationality of protest strategies in the mid-1960s; and Adolph Reed's post–civil rights concerns about what he has cast as problematic evidence of African American exceptionalism. Common to these perspectives is also a certain liminal pessimism with regard to the implications of the (black) popular. Like the anxious and cross-pressured finance ministers of indebted states that have been ordered to undergo structural readjustment by the International Monetary Fund, these actors are for the most part committed to integrating black communities into the American body politic and the modern order, on the terms they imagine—or feel compelled to suggest—that these entities and constructions operate. Working in a broader rhetorical context in which alternatives to American liberalism and modernity increasingly seem to be lacking and fantastical, this valorization of black realpolitik, even by progressives, appears "rational" and justified.

By suggesting that Rustin's calls for downplaying protest are part of a broader cycle, I do not mean to imply that he was opposed to black internationalism or a welfare state oriented toward institutionalizing comprehensive and redistributive public goods or that he supported the maintenance of the prevailing status quos with regard to questions of gender and sexuality. In all of these instances, Rustin's commitments were generally progressive and, on occasion, transformative. Similarly, Ellison's and Reed's politics in the aggregate are hardly conservative. While their prescriptions were not nearly as effectively conservative as those proposed publicly by Booker T. Washington as part of a similar earlier campaign, what does resonate in the arguments these strategists have made is a certain emerging caution with regard to the trajectory of black politics and the scope of black claims, ambitions, and practices. Given their suggestion that mainstream practices should be the yardstick against which the wisdom of black strategies should be assessed, the emphasis on "normalizing" black politics and practices corresponded, and possibly contributed implicitly, to a rhetorical reticence and inevitable substantive retreat on the part of black publics. To the extent that the approximation of mainstream American

norms becomes a priority—and at points *the* priority—such commitments imply a logic that can have logarithmic effects and implications (and is, at the very least, in tension with some of their other positions). Progressive and transformative proposals, in this logical matrix, only become acceptable if they correspond to the patterns and practices prevalent in the American national context. Blacks, accordingly, should never unilaterally dissent or "act out."

In this context, it might be useful to think of the anxiety regarding the blurring of the lines that distinguish politics and popular culture as not just exemplary of the modern/black dilemma but crucial and perhaps central to an understanding and investigation of that broader problematic. Figures engaged in both popular culture and politics put into question the frames that have been constituted and reified to keep these realms alienated and apart. Also disrupted is the enforcement of other norms that have been rendered as conventional wisdoms with regard to appropriate performances of class status, gender, and sexuality, as the boundary transgressor or space traitor takes things to places they do not belong, carrying materials and sentiments that are quotidian in one arena into contexts where they become unavoidably surplus and intrinsically provocative. Such displays would mitigate, for example, against the nation-state's attempts to naturalize the splitting of the self into that which is—always incompletely—integrated into the state as citizen and that which haunts that project by imagining ways of being and communal identifications that transcend, ignore, displace, upend, or undermine the singular predominance of these administrative investments and arrangements. This double consciousness, to invoke a familiar reference, is especially evident in the interpellation of nonwhite subjects. To understand, then, the unstable text that is the black/modern and the nature of the shifting connections between politics and popular culture, a good starting point is the status of the artist-activist, that presence that must be read as an implicit rejection of these compelled and internalized binary estrangements and, in general, as a challenge to the promotion of both the aesthetic and the national as signifiers of respectability.

My aim in this chapter is to trace the developments in the Cold War, civil rights, and immediate post–civil rights eras regarding the viability of the artist-activist as other civil rights leaders rooted in the protest tradition—narrowly defined—and elected officials sought to establish their legitimacy as the most appropriate representatives of black interests. Black political leadership in this period largely lay outside the halls of Congress and, for that matter, the state legislatures and municipal administrations that determined the policies that affected black communities. During this time, there were only four black

members of Congress (all Democrats): William L. Dawson, from Chicago, who was first elected in 1943 and served until 1970; Adam Clayton Powell Jr., who represented Harlem from 1945 until 1967 (and then again from 1969 to 1971); and later Detroit's Charles C. Diggs Jr. (1955–80) and Philadelphia's Robert N. C. Nix (1958–79).[2] In the absence of significant representation within electoral politics, civil rights leaders and cultural actors provided much of the public leadership of black communities.

Much of this leadership came from the left side of the political spectrum. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Communist Party had established closer links with the civil rights movement than any other progressive movement in American history. As a result of the connections among the Congress of Industrial Unions, the major civil rights groups, and the left wing of the Democratic Party, the Left was at its peak in terms of its influence on American politics, especially if we include left-of-center movements operating outside of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), for instance, the anti-Communist, originally socialist-oriented work of A. Philip Randolph within the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the mainstream labor movement, disaffected but still left-leaning former communists, Marxists, Trotskyists, and socialists, of various hues.

The CPUSA was hardly the ideal partner in the civil rights venture, given its ties to the foreign policy concerns of the Soviet Union, and subsequently Joseph Stalin's pogroms, through the Comintern; its chronic inability to reckon with black autonomy (whether expressed institutionally as nationalism or in artistic, cultural, and religious forms); and its willingness at a moment's notice to "go slow" with regard to, or abandon, the civil rights cause.[3] The Party did provide, though, a space for the development of alternatives to the American status quo on both the class and race fronts. "The reality of the day was that anyone who took an active interest in the plight of black people was naturally drawn toward the Communist Party—not as a member, necessarily, but at least as a friend and ally, owing to the fact that the Communists historically had been out front in the struggle for civil rights," recollects Coleman Young, an activist in the labor movement:

> The prevailing paranoia about communism was consequently translated into a paranoia about civil rights—although in retrospect, it is difficult to say which was the predominant phobia. It seemed that the government was unable to make any distinction between civil rights and communism, and by extension, between civil rights

> and subversion. . . . It was all but impossible for a black person to avoid the Communist label as long as he or she advocated civil rights with any degree of vigor.[4]

By explicitly challenging American mores and espousing an internationalist rhetoric, the communist Left opened up American domestic arrangements and foreign policies—and the connections between the two—for scrutiny in a way that no purely domestic movement could have managed. In this way, by destabilizing the mechanisms that constrained American political practice and the thinking about the nation's various colonial investments, the Left represented a natural ally for civil rights activists, especially as both movements were stigmatized and attacked by the same forces. This cooperation was further enabled by the fact that economic marginalization and skepticism about the natural and exclusive sovereignty claims of the state had always been embedded subtexts in the civil rights movement defined broadly—that is, including the abolitionist and emigration movements and the Reconstruction effort of the nineteenth century—throughout its history. Moreover, it is important to recognize that anticommunism was never just about the Soviet Union or the CPUSA; it also operated as a metaphor and proxy for the demonization of any forms of dissent or deviance.

Operating, then, in a moment in which civil rights and communism were conflated in the American mind, it was predictable that the actor Canada Lee's efforts to distinguish himself from the Left while maintaining and indeed publicly deepening his commitment to the civil rights cause in the United States and South Africa (where he had filmed *Cry, the Beloved Country* with Sidney Poitier) would fail to save him from being effectively blacklisted.[5] Although elements in the broader civil rights movement made attempts to challenge only the racial status quo, the degree to which such projects were logically—and, by others, deliberately—connected to questions of class and economic status made such efforts rather difficult to sustain. The hardly coincidental linkage of these two forms of "un-American" activity—dissent on the economic and racial fronts—was hardly new in the broader sweep of the history of the United States and created a polarized environment that allowed for little middle-ground or moderate maneuvering.[6]

Perhaps the most significant personality in this period was the actor, singer, and activist Paul Robeson. Along with W. E. B. Du Bois, and Canada Lee, Robeson was one of the major targets of the Red Scare investigations that would develop after World War II and the emergence of antagonisms between

the two former allies, the United States and the Soviet Union. Although he was never actually a member, Robeson was strongly identified with the CPUSA, the Soviet Union, and the Left in general and embodied the fusion of the civil rights movement, the anticolonial effort (through his work with Du Bois and others on the Council on African Affairs), the Left and the union movement, and in particular the left-leaning and—in this period—actively antiracist Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Moreover, the combination of his artistic accomplishments and his political engagements made him exactly the kind of transgressive figure that would trouble, at some fundamental level, the arrangements on which the American modern depended. It was precisely this admixture that marked him as not only an enemy of the Right but a major symbol and hero of many progressives as well.

Accordingly, it is not surprising that Robeson emerged as a focal point in the Cold War drama and that so many African Americans saw him as one of their most cherished leaders. "I was in awe of him," offers West Coast jazz artist Buddy Colette:

> He was one of the first to speak out in that way, and that really did a lot for me to see that. And he wasn't afraid. Being around him, it was a turning point for me. I loved it, I really did. . . . A lot of people don't realize the inspiration he was for a lot of the black people who were leaders, who were able to stand up. Because it can be costly if you stand up and say, "I believe in this."[7]

Trinidadian expatriate C. L. R. James would argue in retrospect that Robeson possessed the unique ability to attract and mobilize black support:

> [I]f Paul had wanted to he would have built a movement in the United States that would have been the natural successor to the Garvey movement. . . . [T]he movement would have been of a far higher intellectual quality than was the Garvey movement. . . . There were numbers of people, dozens and scores of people, who would have been ready to work with him if he had begun, and the mass of the black population would have followed him as they were ready to follow him everywhere he went.[8]

Reflecting his own brand of anti-Soviet Marxism, James would lament, though, Robeson's steadfast attachment to the Soviet Union, observing that Robeson "felt himself committed to the doctrines and the policies of the Communist Party. The Black movement which could have burst and swept the United States