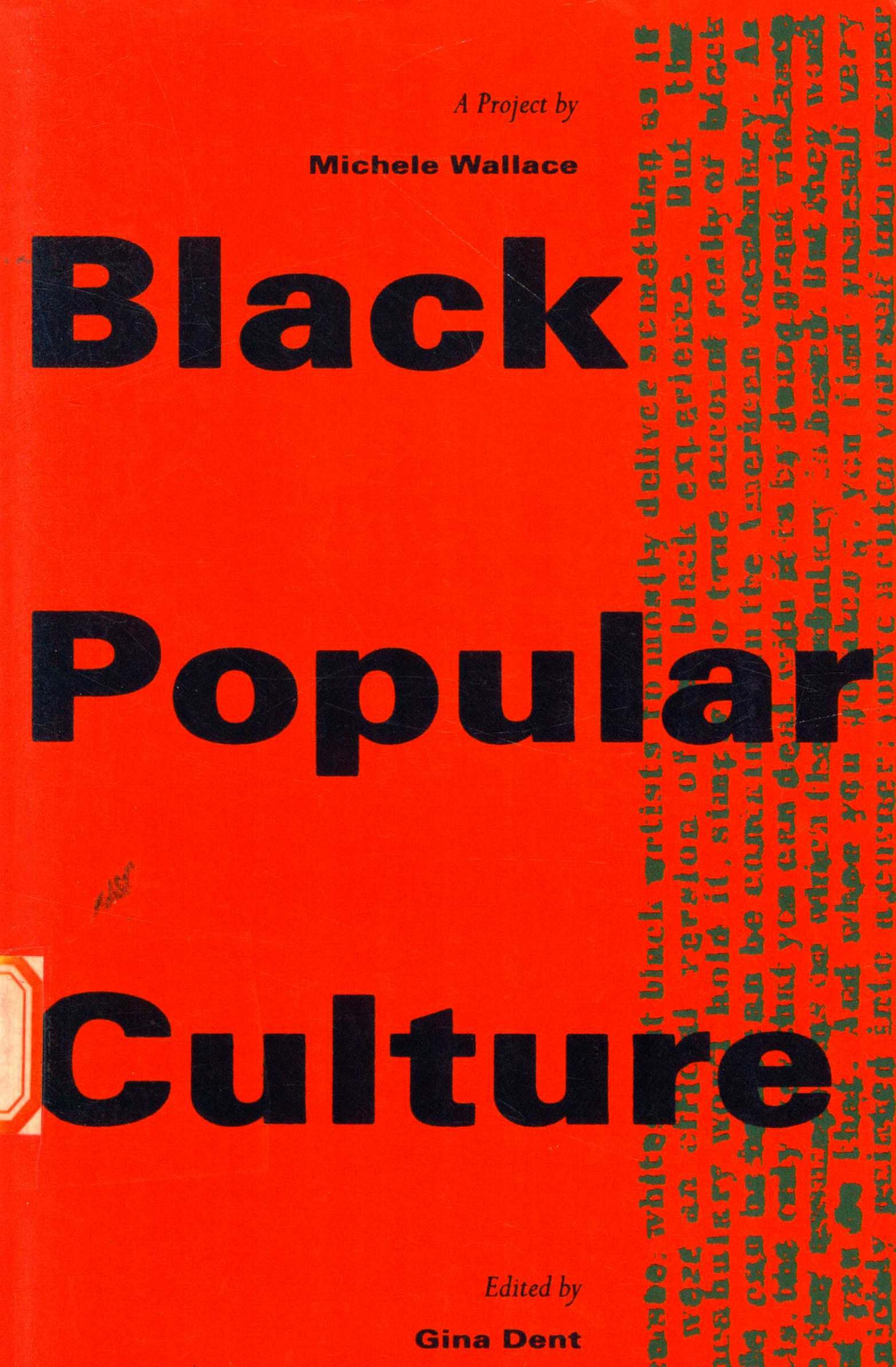
A Project by

Michele Wallace

Black Popular Culture

Edited by

Gina Dent



Dia Center for the Arts
Discussions in Contemporary Culture
Number 8

Black Popular Culture

A Project by Michele Wallace

Edited by Gina Dent

Bay Press • Seattle • 1992

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Number 89-650815
ISSN 1047-6806
ISBN 978-1-56584-459-9

Designed by Bethany Johns with Georgie Stout
Typesetting by Strong Silent Type
Printing by Malloy Lithographing

"Nihilism in Black America" by Cornel West was originally published in *Dissent* (Spring 1991). Reprinted by permission of the author and the Foundation for the Study of Independent Social Ideas, Inc.

"The Body in Question" by Lisa Kennedy was originally published in *The Village Voice* (October 16, 1990). Reprinted by permission of the author.

A Note on the Series

Our aim for the "Discussions in Contemporary Culture" series is to reflect on aspects of our culture which are emerging or in flux. Often we are in uncharted territory. The symposia are opportunities for many voices to take part in new conversations and are organized to encourage informal presentations and audience participation. The books that grow out of these symposia are similarly meant as explorations, open and informal.

This book, the eighth in the "Discussions in Contemporary Culture" series, includes texts prepared by the participants in a three-day conference held at The Studio Museum in Harlem and at Dia's space in SoHo on December 8–10, 1991. Michele Wallace first conceived of a conference event to acknowledge the growing presence of a politicized popular culture and to explore debates on participation by black communities in the creation and critique of popular culture. Her thoughts on the structure of the conference took shape with the assistance primarily of Phil Mariani. Michele has participated before in events in this series and Phil has had a long-standing role in conceiving and organizing symposia with Dia; it was a great pleasure to work with both of them again. Of course, we owe a great debt of thanks to the participants in the conference for their presentations and for the prepared texts.

The event as it was structured would not have been possible without the collaborative participation of The Studio Museum in Harlem, and I would especially like to thank Kinshasha Conwill, Director; Pat Cruz, Deputy Director of Programming; and George Calderaro, Public Relations Manager for their support and active participation in the organization of the conference. Sara Schnittjer at Dia was also instrumental in the coordination of the conference.

This publication is the result of considerable further effort to transcribe and edit presentations from the conference, and to craft the whole into one coherent volume. Gina Dent, as editor of this publication, energetically and ably

took on these responsibilities. She was assisted principally by Karen Kelly of Dia's staff, who has overseen the project from start to finish. I would like to thank Thatcher Bailey at Bay Press for his enthusiasm in publishing this book.

We are particularly grateful to The Nathan Cummings Foundation for generous funding for this project.

Charles B. Wright

Executive Director, Dia Center for the Arts

Editor's Note

In recognition of the contest within African diasporic intellectual production over the meaning of the term "blackness," we have allowed a small subset of that debate to live on in the use of both Black with a capital "B" and black with a lowercase "b" in the essays that follow. Bay Press's standard style, which calls for the latter practice, has been observed, however, in all the discussions and in every case where an author has not otherwise stated a preference. For those unfamiliar with the dynamics of such a debate, let it suffice to say that this apparently minor distinction can indicate subtle differences in the way scholars and artists think about the issues of black nationalism, essentialism, and Pan-Africanism, just to name a few, as is revealed in the various essays and exchanges presented here. There is no definitive way this choice should be evaluated. It speaks to our personal histories and the diversity of thought and practice influencing our work.

In addition to the contributors, I would like to thank the following individuals for their contributions to this volume: Michele Wallace, for having the audacity to propose such a project and for the lengthy discussions we had at various stages in this process; and Karen Kelly, at Dia Center for the Arts, for her assistance in everything, but especially in the pursuit of elusive footnotes and the selection of images.

Gina Dent

Contents

I. Popular Culture: Theory and Criticism

II. Gender, Sexuality, and Black Images in Popular Culture

III. The Urban Context

IV. The Production of Black Popular Culture

V. Do the Right Thing: Postnationalism and Essentialism

Gina Dent

Black Pleasure, Black Joy: An Introduction

Every gathering has its points of profound collective understanding, never to be fully grasped except in the elusive phrases with which we attempt to reconstruct them. These phrases serve to remind us of our collective goals for the future, and yet point continually to our distance from them—for they can never be matched in the habits of our daily lives, our constant negotiations through the contradictory spaces of identity and history, our imperfect access to the "real." One of the challenges for cultural criticism today is to learn to grasp the full range of questions and problems proposed in media where the modes of expression are not easily captured within language. It is, then, not surprising that at a conference on black popular culture, one figure came to stand in for this complexity, returning again and again in variants on a single refrain, a single elusive phrase: black pleasure, black joy.

No one could have expected that in responding to a question about pleasure in our own work, Cornel West could, in elucidating the differences between our conceptions of pleasure and joy, so compellingly provide a context for reading this volume. As he described them then,

> ...pleasure, under commodified conditions, tends to be inward. You take it with you, and it's a highly individuated unit...But joy tries to cut across that. Joy tries to get at those non-market values—love, care, kindness, service, solidarity, the struggle for justice—values that provide the possibility of bringing people together.

This formulation became, in fact, the theme of the conference. Or, more precisely, it became the text of call and response that was consistently rewritten over the next two days. That a conference on black popular culture comprised of the work of some thirty black artists, critics, and scholars, could hold to an

agenda so explicitly concerned with the issues of collective struggle, and the politics of gender and sexuality that factor into any discussion of the economies of pleasure, is a powerful comment on the possibilities for new bases of collective engagement in this historical moment.

Joy, as West says, is a collective experience, or at least provides the possibility of one. For me, this definition revises the discussion of woman's pleasure inherited from feminism and psychoanalysis and places it within a black progressive context. Like pleasure, joy still speaks, though not exclusively, to that locus of sensation and activity around which so much contemporary black anxiety is produced—the erotic. But I refer to the erotic here not in its most general, colloquial sense, but in the way that Audre Lorde has defined it: as our deepest knowledge, a power that, unlike other spheres of power, we all have access to, and that can lessen the threat of our individual difference.[1]

I.

Joy is about the potential for our coexistence within another sphere of knowledge. Alluding to this potential forces us to question what the practices might be within that alternative space and to examine what current conflicts prevent us from entering its realm. At this moment, joy is another mythic construction, one that has recently been engagingly deployed in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy,* a novel that at once appropriates and recontextualizes the restrictive neocolonial adage that gives Walker her title—"Black people are natural, they possess the secret of joy."[2] And in transposing this essentialist version of blackness, Walker plunges us into what may be considered the most uncompromising nexus of confusion in the black diasporic intellectual tradition: those issues gathered around gender, sexuality, and cultural or national difference.

In Walker's novel, these issues coalesce around the very particular concern of female circumcision, a subject that she rightly identifies as at the center of a structure of myth. The question becomes, of course, whose myth are we reading? Is this an essential African cultural symbolic exposed for the gaze of African descendants in the West or, rather, a mythic construction shedding light on the syncretic nature of our own ambivalent situation in the black diaspora? We must take it as the latter. As Stuart Hall writes,

> ...popular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all,

> as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an arena that is *profoundly* mythic...It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time.

Walker's novel forces us to confront not the history of female circumcision, but the mythical use of that particularity as a point of entry into the analysis of our ever elusive connections to Africa. And like other contemporary efforts, such as Afrocentrism, this novel struggles to rebuild the story of Africa only to satisfy the intense desires for an oppositional politics unleashed within the United States.

We could read the gesture of an African-American woman writing from the United States about an issue that primarily affects black women living in Africa as an extension of the imperial eye, as the thoroughly acritical absorption of a classic western feminist paradigm, or as a liberatory move to shed light not only on the painful practice of circumcision, but on the strange marriage of "traditional" African and colonial culture that is the post-colonial condition. But the choice among these three limited readings is already, perhaps, a false one. However we see it, Walker locks the proverbial feminist personal-is-political into battle with that notorious black manifesto—we will not have our business put in the streets—and cuts close to the communal nerve. The scene of this battle is that legacy of western hegemony in the world, the courtroom; its protagonist is a black woman, a woman both African and American in the truest sense, on trial for murder. But this is where the story begins to trouble our most intransigent notions of collective responsibility and personal agency exercised in the interest of justice: she has not murdered a European or a village elder, but an older African woman; she is never absolved of and never denies her responsibility in this; and in the end she herself is put to death. In fact, she tells us her story from "the other side," through Walker as author and medium.

Tashi, Walker's protagonist, has returned from Europe and the United States to Africa to murder the woman who performed her circumcision (an operation that was performed late in Tashi's life due to the earlier intervention of the African-American missionaries who challenged the common practices of her

native heritage). It was Tashi herself who insisted, once the missionaries were gone, on having this ritual performed. But its legacies were years of physical and emotional pain, altered and reduced possibilities for her sexual pleasure, and brain damage for the only child to whom she was able to give birth. Within the structure of the novel, Tashi's assertion of individual agency, her choice to be circumcised, is supported by the nationalist call to traditional culture, within which the sexual economy places restrictions on pleasure that disproportionately impact on the lives of women. Her later rebellion against this decision is a specific feminist act against those discriminatory structures of gender subordination.

But this "choice"—between modern, feminist, U.S.–based black culture and traditional African culture—is the paradigm we must learn to unread. The now more familiar error of western feminism, of extending the category of woman across time and space with little regard for cultural or historical specificity, is no longer at issue; it is the ground for defining that specificity that must be questioned. On the basis of the premise that the personal is political, the category of experience allows Walker to extend a narrative of personal pain into a larger story of gender oppression, colonial expansion, and post-colonial cultural conflict. To deconstruct the paradox of Tashi's choice between Africa and America, between culture and gender, between woman's acceptability and woman's pleasure is not merely to state that within the context of western rationalism she can exert no agency. It is to go even further than complicating the means by which we determine an action, and more significantly here, a cultural text, to be progressive or conservative, positive or negative. It is to begin dismantling our understanding of the very means by which we are said to come to know, to decide, and to act.

Tashi is unable to answer questions in the courtroom according to a direct, rational line of thought. Instead, her response to interrogation is to begin to tell a story. We come to understand that her habit of telling stories in these crucial moments is not simply a reflection of her essential African nature or Walker's acritical reproduction of one; it is the result of a very specific psychic trauma that prevents her, until she is "returned to actionality" (as Frantz Fanon might have said), from finding peace. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is the story of the recovery of that trauma through a series of therapies: psychoanalysis, dreamwork, and Tashi's own creative reconstruction of her unconscious life in endless

outpourings, including a mural that eventually takes over her living space. Out of her dreampainting is produced a narrative of gender subordination in its mythic form, interpreted as the cultural symbolic of her native Africa. This extension of the personal symbolic directly into the cultural symbolic (the Jungian approach) relies on belief in a system of therapy that derives meanings from dreams and interprets them as reflections not only of our inescapably singular *experience* of culture but applies them unself-consciously to the collective imagining, and therefore to the collective reality as well.

II.

Taken to the extreme, the elision from the personal into the cultural symbolic is consistent with the tendency toward one of two opposing vectors of logic in contemporary cultural criticism. In this direction, interpersonal relationships are translated directly into structural oppressions, and the remedies for any antagonisms can be found within the private spheres of personal examination and family confrontation. In the other direction, structural oppressions *determine* interpersonal dynamics, such that all interactions that attempt to transcend these barriers become suspect unless they are subsumed under the larger project of structural reform. These habits parallel the modes of the two critical camps Cornel West describes here in setting out his thesis on nihilism in black America—the conservative behaviorists and the liberal structuralists, respectively.

West's attention to these political critiques points out that in both tendencies an analysis of our cultural products is largely absent. We will have to be reminded again and again that any successful cultural critique must take account not only of the movements in both these directions, but of the myriad cross-connections and dislocations that occur and prevent us from making any such overdetermined causal links. In attending to the domain of culture and in articulating a variety of points of ambivalence, this volume points past the conclusions drawn in the game of positive and negative image-making and toward the context in which this game is played out. But it also refuses to strand us in that ambivalent zone; recognizing our mandate to "do the right thing," these essays return us to the ground of intervention equipped with that "other knowledge."

In the year of the televised trial of four Los Angeles police officers for the beating of Rodney King, and in the wake of such cataclysmic public events as

the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas confrontation, it has become increasingly clear that black criticism will have to begin to make use of the more sophisticated cultural analyses that depend on understanding the complexities of video imaging, the dynamics of representation, and reception theories. These analyses take for their example the full range of colors available on the screen and deploy the now habitual but nonetheless crucial triad, gender-race-class, to describe the politics for the constituencies of color encoded there. This volume reaches beyond the model of black criticism that posits blackness as the antidote to whiteness within the limited but predominant sphere of American popular culture. It speaks to the ways black cultures have begun to revise the dynamics inherited from other periods of intense cultural production and reassembled vision in terms that extend beyond the illusory poles of black and white. And it references the various movements, political and cultural, struggling to build "the new cultural politics of difference," as Cornel West has recently named them.[3]

These new cultural politics depend on our reconfiguring the field of representation, on creating another context for cultural and political activity as we reconstitute the ground of difference. That is to say, some differences we habitually construct, as Stuart Hall says here, might not make any difference at all. The newness in any cultural politics of difference also depends on our being able to distinguish between these *habits* of difference, read through the mythic realm of culture, and the emerging differences we must *learn* to read. Despite the anxieties that Walker's novel produces for those of us interested in the areas of black culture, feminism, and post-colonial international conflict and negotiation it is incumbent upon us to produce the context that will, I believe, not only allow a discussion of her novel, but provide a basis for making our way through the nexus of complexes, both psychological and social, that she describes. I repeat: she rightly identifies the center of a structure of myth—our myth. But how do we read that myth? And what do we *do* once we can read it?

Walker's novel encourages a political reading that, when attributed to one specific version of the joined discourses of feminism and psychoanalysis, allows us to see Tashi's dreampainting but not its frame, the projection without its context, the myth but not our coimplication in it. We do not, for example, necessarily recognize, until Walker makes it clear in her closing address to the

reader, that Tashi is one of many invented "African" names, that the Olinkans are not an existing African tribe, that the village and the nation in which this story takes place are the products of Walker's imagination. We do not recognize this either, because our knowledge of Africa is so severely limited or, because conceiving of this as the stuff of fiction so entirely transgresses our notion of just representation.

Do we, peoples of the African diaspora, any longer have the right to invent an Africa? Certainly, argue some of the cultural workers in this volume, we have the right to attend creatively to any of the domains we find within our view. And this may follow even if what we see exists only inside of our own heads. But how, in black popular culture and criticism, are we, as Coco Fusco writes, to "avoid retracing 'intercultural' patterns established by modernism, surrealism, and ethnography"? The answer lies perhaps not in policing the areas over which our gaze may trespass, but, rather, in making it clear that what we reveal there are the effects of that gaze. This is the significant political move this volume makes: rather than policing the borders of black culture, these critics attend to the high and the low, the progressive and conservative, the general and the particular. In doing so, airing our dirty laundry so to speak, they challenge the resurrection of communal privacy that relies on extending the paradigm of the bourgeois family to that of the "race." And they go against the version of Afrocentrism that, in inscribing privacy at the level of the community, attempts to hide the gender relations that benefit "our men," calling it the protection of "our women." Or, worse yet, that treat our cultural circumstances as so distinct and isolated from the larger community's that the gender economy no longer applies.

Afrocentrists and feminists, then, are struggling with each other over whether or not we can extend the paradigm of the family to the black nation. This group of cultural critics overwhelmingly sides with the feminist critique. It is interesting, however, considering the current tendency to set the methods and practices of Afrocentricity and feminism against each other, to discover that they can sometimes operate in the same mode. That is, the personal-is-political should involve breaking down the rigid distinctions between public and private space so that all dominations are submitted to critique, and therefore are available to structural, political, *and* personal redress. Instead, in practice, the