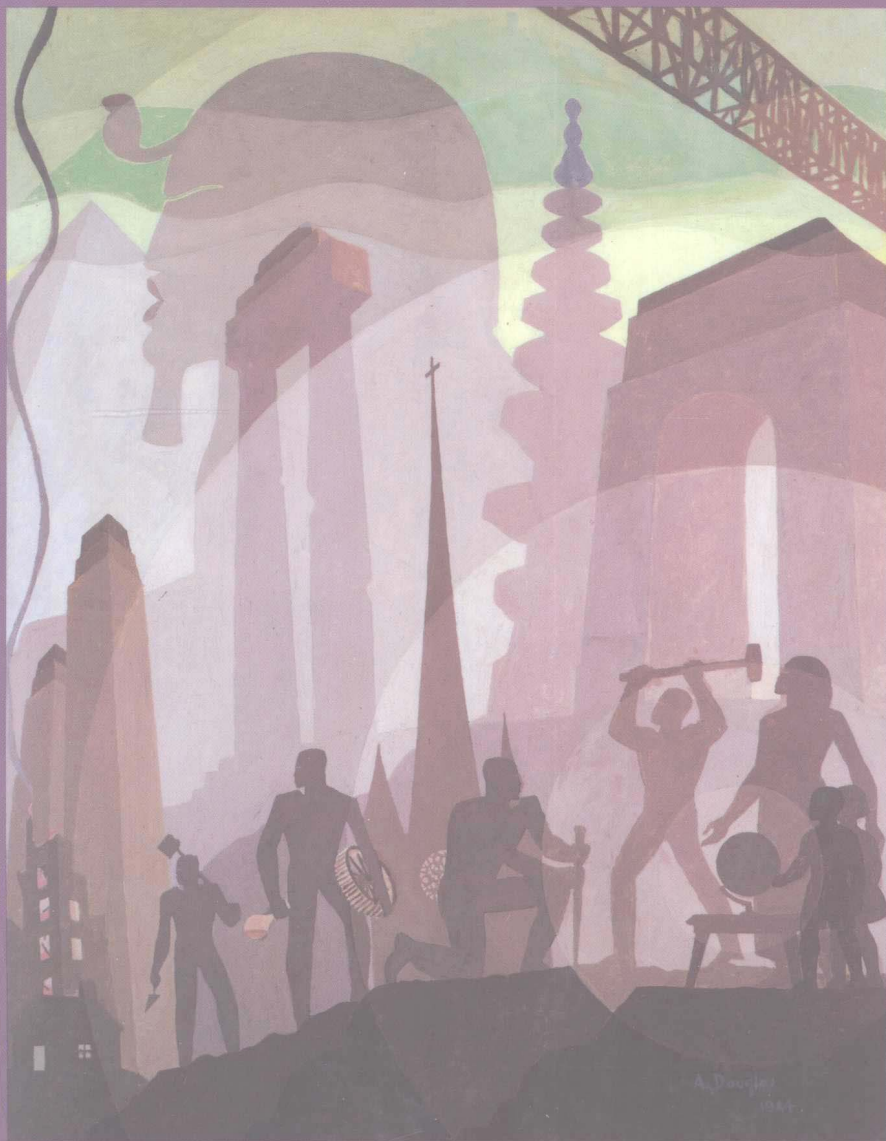# THE BLACK ATLANTIC

Modernity and Double Consciousness

PAUL GILROY

The Black Atlantic

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Paul Gilroy

For Cora Hatshepsut
and my mother

Preface

THIS BOOK WAS FIRST CONCEIVED while I was working at South Bank Polytechnic in London's Elephant and Castle. It grew from a difficult period when I was lecturing on the history of sociology to a large group of second-year students who had opted not to study that subject as a major part of their degree. The flight from sociology was, for many of them, a deliberate sign of their disengagement from the life of the mind. To make things worse, these lectures were very early in the morning. With the help of writers like Michel Foucault, Marshall Berman, Richard Sennett, Fredric Jameson, Jurgen Habermas, Stuart Hall, Cornel West, Jane Flax, bell hooks, Donna Haraway, Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding, Janet Wolff, Seyla Benhabib, and Zygmunt Bauman, as well as a good dose of the classics, I would try to persuade them that the history and the legacy of the Enlightenment were worth understanding and arguing about. I worked hard to punctuate the flow of the Europe-centred material with observations drawn from the dissonant contributions of black writers to Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment concerns.

The Black Atlantic developed from my uneven attempts to show these students that the experiences of black people were part of the abstract modernity they found so puzzling and to produce as evidence some of the things that black intellectuals had said—sometimes as defenders of the West, sometimes as its sharpest critics—about their sense of embeddedness in the modern world.

Chapter 1 sets out the dimensions of the polemical arguments that are developed in more detail later. It shows how different nationalist paradigms for thinking about cultural history fail when confronted by the intercultural and transnational formation that I call the black Atlantic. It makes some political and philosophical claims for black vernacular culture and casts a fresh eye on the history of black nationalist thought that has had to repress its own ambivalence about exile from Africa.

Chapter 2 was prompted by the absence of a concern with "race" or ethnicity from most contemporary writings about modernity. It argues that

racial slavery was integral to western civilisation and looks in detail at the master/mistress/slave relationship which is foundational to both black critiques and affirmations of modernity. It argues that the literary and philosophical modernisms of the black Atlantic have their origins in a well-developed sense of the complicity of racialised reason and white supremacist terror.

Chapter 3 pursues these themes in conjunction with a historical commentary on aspects of black music. It offers an inventory of queries about the ideas of ethnic authenticity that are routinely constructed through discussions of that music, the gender identities it celebrates, and the images of "race" as family that have become an important part of both producing and interpreting it. The chapter tries to demonstrate why the polarisation between essentialist and anti-essentialist theories of black identity has become unhelpful. It proposes that analyzing the history of black Atlantic music might play a useful role in constructing a more satisfactory set of anti-anti-essentialist arguments.

Chapter 4 examines a small part of the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, whose stimulating theory of "double consciousness" provides one of the central organising themes of my own work. It questions the location of his work in the emergent canon of African-American cultural history and explores the impact of his Pan-Africanism and anti-imperialism on the elements of his thinking that were configured by a belief in African-American exceptionalism. This chapter is intended to show how black Atlantic political culture changed as it moved out of the early phases that had been dominated by the need to escape slavery and various attempts to acquire meaningful citizenship in post-emancipation societies. I suggest that Du Bois's travels and studentship in Europe transformed his understanding of "race" and its place in the modern world.

Chapter 5 continues this line of argument with a parallel discussion of Richard Wright's work and critical responses to it. In his case, black Atlantic politics is re-examined against the backgrounds of European fascism and the construction of post-colonial, independent nation states in Africa and elsewhere. Wright is defended against those tendencies in African-American literary criticism which argue that the work he produced while living in Europe was worthless when compared to his supposedly authentic earlier writings. He is applauded for his attempts to link the plight of black Americans with the experiences of other colonised peoples and to build a theory of racial subordination that included a psychology.

The book concludes with a critical discussion of Africentrism and the way it has understood the idea of tradition as invariant repetition rather than a stimulus toward innovation and change. This chapter includes a

meditation on the diaspora concept which was imported into Pan-African politics and black history from unacknowledged Jewish sources. I suggest that this concept should be cherished for its ability to pose the relationship between ethnic sameness and differentiation: a *changing* same. I also argue that exchanges between blacks and Jews are important for the future of black Atlantic cultural politics as well as for its history.

It is essential to emphasise that there is nothing definitive here. Black Atlantic culture is so massive and its history so little known that I have done scarcely more than put down some preliminary markers for more detailed future investigations. My concerns are heuristic and my conclusions are strictly provisional. There are also many obvious omissions. I have said virtually nothing about the lives, theories, and political activities of Frantz Fanon and C. L. R. James, the two best-known black Atlantic thinkers. Their lives fit readily into the pattern of movement, transformation, and relocation that I have described. But they are already well known if not as widely read as they should be, and other people have begun the labour of introducing their writings into contemporary critical theory.

There are two aspirations that I would like to share with readers before they embark on the sea voyage that I would like reading this book to represent. Neither aspiration is restricted by the racialised examples I have used to give them substance. The first is my hope that the contents of this book are unified by a concern to repudiate the dangerous obsessions with "racial" purity which are circulating inside and outside black politics. It is, after all, essentially an essay about the inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas. The second is my desire that the book's heartfelt plea against the closure of the categories with which we conduct our political lives will not go unheard. The history of the black Atlantic yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade.

What matters for the dialectician is having the wind of world history in his sails. Thinking for him means: to set the sails. It is the way they are set that matters. Words are his sails. The way they are set turns them into concepts.

Walter Benjamin

We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us— indeed, we have gone farther and destroyed the land behind us. Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean: to be sure, it does not always roar, and at times it lies spread out like silk and gold and reveries of graciousness. But hours will come when you realize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that felt free now strikes the walls of this cage! Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more *freedom*—and there is no longer any "land."

Nietzsche

In my clothing I was rigged out in sailor style. I had on a red shirt and a tarpaulin hat and black cravat, tied in sailor fashion, carelessly and loosely about my neck. My knowledge of ships and sailors' talk came much to my assistance, for I knew a ship from stem to stern, and from keelson to crosstrees, and could talk sailor like an "old salt."

Frederick Douglass

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The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity

We who are homeless,—Among Europeans today there is no lack of those who are entitled to call themselves homeless in a distinctive and honourable sense . . . We children of the future, how could we be at home in this today? We feel disfavour for all ideals that might lead one to feel at home even in this fragile, broken time of transition; as for "realities," we do not believe that they will last. The ice that still supports people today has become very thin; the wind that brings the thaw is blowing; we ourselves who are homeless constitute a force that breaks open ice and other all too thin "realities."

>   *Nietzsche*

On the notion of modernity. It is a vexed question. Is not every era "modern" in relation to the preceding one? It seems that at least one of the components of "our" modernity is the spread of the awareness we have of it. The awareness of our awareness (the double, the second degree) is our source of strength and our torment.

>   **Edouard Glissant**

STRIVING TO BE both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness. By saying this I do not mean to suggest that taking on either or both of these unfinished identities necessarily exhausts the subjective resources of any particular individual. However, where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination.

The contemporary black English, like the Anglo-Africans of earlier generations and perhaps, like all blacks in the West, stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations. At present, they remain locked symbiotically in an antagonistic relationship marked out by the symbolism of colours which adds to the conspicuous cultural power of their central Manichean dynamic—black and

white. These colours support a special rhetoric that has grown to be associated with a language of nationality and national belonging as well as the languages of "race" and ethnic identity.

Though largely ignored by recent debates over modernity and its discontents, these ideas about nationality, ethnicity, authenticity, and cultural integrity are characteristically modern phenomena that have profound implications for cultural criticism and cultural history. They crystallised with the revolutionary transformations of the West at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries and involved novel typologies and modes of identification. Any shift towards a postmodern condition should not, however, mean that the conspicuous power of these modern subjectivities and the movements they articulated has been left behind. Their power has, if anything, grown, and their ubiquity as a means to make political sense of the world is currently unparalleled by the languages of class and socialism by which they once appeared to have been surpassed. My concern here is less with explaining their longevity and enduring appeal than with exploring some of the special political problems that arise from the fatal junction of the concept of nationality with the concept of culture and the affinities and affiliations which link the blacks of the West to one of their adoptive, parental cultures: the intellectual heritage of the West since the Enlightenment. I have become fascinated with how successive generations of black intellectuals have understood this connection and how they have projected it in their writing and speaking in pursuit of freedom, citizenship, and social and political autonomy.

If this appears to be little more than a roundabout way of saying that the reflexive cultures and consciousness of the European settlers and those of the Africans they enslaved, the "Indians" they slaughtered, and the Asians they indentured were not, even in situations of the most extreme brutality, sealed off hermetically from each other, then so be it. This seems as though it ought to be an obvious and self-evident observation, but its stark character has been systematically obscured by commentators from all sides of political opinion. Regardless of their affiliation to the right, left, or centre, groups have fallen back on the idea of cultural nationalism, on the overintegrated conceptions of culture which present immutable, ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of "black" and "white" people. Against this choice stands another, more difficult option: the theorisation of creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity. From the viewpoint of ethnic absolutism, this would be a litany of pollution and impurity. These terms are rather unsatisfactory ways of naming the processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents.

This book addresses one small area in the grand consequence of this historical conjunction—the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering that I have heuristically called the black Atlantic world. This chapter is therefore rooted in and routed through the special stress that grows with the effort involved in trying to face (at least) two ways at once.

My concerns at this stage are primarily conceptual: I have tried to address the continuing lure of ethnic absolutisms in cultural criticism produced both by blacks and by whites. In particular, this chapter seeks to explore the special relationships between "race," culture, nationality, and ethnicity which have a bearing on the histories and political cultures of Britain's black citizens. I have argued elsewhere that the cultures of this group have been produced in a syncretic pattern in which the styles and forms of the Caribbean, the United States, and Africa have been reworked and reinscribed in the novel context of modern Britain's own untidy ensemble of regional and class-oriented conflicts. Rather than make the invigorating flux of those mongrel cultural forms my focal concern here, I want instead to look at broader questions of ethnic identity that have contributed to the scholarship and the political strategies that Britain's black settlers have generated and to the underlying sense of England as a cohesive cultural community against which their self-conception has so often been defined. Here the ideas of nation, nationality, national belonging, and nationalism are paramount. They are extensively supported by a clutch of rhetorical strategies that can be named "cultural insiderism."[1] The essential trademark of cultural insiderism which also supplies the key to its popularity is an absolute sense of ethnic difference. This is maximised so that it distinguishes people from one another and at the same time acquires an incontestable priority over all other dimensions of their social and historical experience, cultures, and identities. Characteristically, these claims are associated with the idea of national belonging or the aspiration to nationality and other more local but equivalent forms of cultural kinship. The range and complexity of these ideas in English cultural life defies simple summary or exposition. However, the forms of cultural insiderism they sanction typically construct the nation as an ethnically homogeneous object and invoke ethnicity a second time in the hermeneutic procedures deployed to make sense of its distinctive cultural content.

The intellectual seam in which English cultural studies has positioned itself—through innovative work in the fields of social history and literary criticism—can be indicted here. The statist modalities of Marxist analysis that view modes of material production and political domination as exclu-

sively *national* entities are only one source of this problem. Another factor, more evasive but nonetheless potent for its intangible ubiquity, is a quiet cultural nationalism which pervades the work of some radical thinkers. This crypto-nationalism means that they are often disinclined to consider the cross catalytic or transverse dynamics of racial politics as a significant element in the formation and reproduction of English national identities. These formations are treated as if they spring, fully formed, from their own special viscera.

My search for resources with which to comprehend the doubleness and cultural intermixture that distinguish the experience of black Britons in contemporary Europe required me to seek inspiration from other sources and, in effect, to make an intellectual journey across the Atlantic. In black America's histories of cultural and political debate and organisation I found another, second perspective with which to orient my own position. Here too the lure of ethnic particularism and nationalism has provided an ever-present danger. But that narrowness of vision which is content with the merely national has also been challenged from within that black community by thinkers who were prepared to renounce the easy claims of African-American exceptionalism in favour of a global, coalitional politics in which anti-imperialism and anti-racism might be seen to interact if not to fuse. The work of some of those thinkers will be examined in subsequent chapters.

This chapter also proposes some new chronotopes[2] that might fit with a theory that was less intimidated by and respectful of the boundaries and integrity of modern nation states than either English or African-American cultural studies have so far been. I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons that I hope will become clearer below. Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs.

The rest of this chapter falls into three sections. The first part addresses some conceptual problems common to English and African-American versions of cultural studies which, I argue, share a nationalistic focus that is antithetical to the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation I call the black Atlantic. The second section uses the life and writings of Martin Robison Delany, an early architect of black

nationalism whose influence still registers in contemporary political move-
ments, to bring the black Atlantic to life and to extend the general argu-
ments by introducing a number of key themes that will be used to map the
responses to modernity's promises and failures produced by later thinkers.
The final section explores the specific counterculture of modernity pro-
duced by black intellectuals and makes some preliminary points about the
internality of blacks to the West. It initiates a polemic which runs through
the rest of the book against the ethnic absolutism that currently dominates
black political culture.

Cultural Studies in Black and White

Any satisfaction to be experienced from the recent spectacular growth of
cultural studies as an academic project should not obscure its conspicuous
problems with ethnocentrism and nationalism. Understanding these diffi-
culties might commence with a critical evaluation of the ways in which
notions of ethnicity have been mobilised, often by default rather than de-
sign, as part of the distinctive hermeneutics of cultural studies or with the
unthinking assumption that cultures always flow into patterns congruent
with the borders of essentially homogeneous nation states. The marketing
and inevitable reification of cultural studies as a discrete academic subject
also has what might be called a secondary ethnic aspect. The project of
cultural studies is a more or less attractive candidate for institutionalisation
according to the ethnic garb in which it appears. The question of whose
cultures are being studied is therefore an important one, as is the issue of
where the instruments which will make that study possible are going to
come from. In these circumstances it is hard not to wonder how much
of the recent international enthusiasm for cultural studies is generated
by its profound associations with England and ideas of Englishness. This
possibility can be used as a point of entry into consideration of the ethno-
historical specificity of the discourse of cultural studies itself.

   Looking at cultural studies from an ethnohistorical perspective requires
more than just noting its association with English literature, history, and
New Left politics. It necessitates constructing an account of the bor-
rowings made by these English initiatives from wider, modern, European
traditions of thinking about culture, and at every stage examining the place
which these cultural perspectives provide for the images of their racialised[3]
others as objects of knowledge, power, and cultural criticism. It is impera-
tive, though very hard, to combine thinking about these issues with con-
sideration of the pressing need to get black cultural expressions, analyses,
and histories taken seriously in academic circles rather than assigned via

the idea of "race relations" to sociology and thence abandoned to the ele-
phants' graveyard to which intractable policy issues go to await their expiry.
These two important conversations pull in different directions and some-
times threaten to cancel each other out, but it is the struggle to have blacks
perceived as agents, as people with cognitive capacities and even with an
intellectual history—attributes denied by modern racism—that is for me
the primary reason for writing this book. It provides a valuable warrant for
questioning some of the ways in which ethnicity is appealed to in the Eng-
lish idioms of cultural theory and history, and in the scholarly productions
of black America. Understanding the political culture of blacks in Britain
demands close attention to both these traditions. This book is situated on
their cusp.

Histories of cultural studies seldom acknowledge how the politically
radical and openly interventionist aspirations found in the best of its schol-
arship are already articulated to black cultural history and theory. These
links are rarely seen or accorded any significance. In England, the work of
figures like C. L. R. James and Stuart Hall offers a wealth of both symbols
and concrete evidence for the practical links between these critical political
projects. In the United States the work of interventionist scholars like bell
hooks and Cornel West as well as that of more orthodox academics like
Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston A. Baker, Jr., Anthony Appiah, and Hazel
Carby, points to similar convergences. The position of these thinkers in the
contested "contact zones"[4] between cultures and histories is not, however,
as exceptional as it might appear at first. We shall see below that successive
generations of black intellectuals (especially those whose lives, like James's,
crisscrossed the Atlantic Ocean) noted this intercultural positionality and
accorded it a special significance before launching their distinct modes of
cultural and political critique. They were often urged on in their labour by
the brutal absurdity of racial classification that derives from and also cele-
brates racially exclusive conceptions of national identity from which blacks
were excluded as either non-humans or non-citizens. I shall try to show
that their marginal endeavours point to some new analytic possibilities with
a general significance far beyond the well-policed borders of black particu-
larity. For example, this body of work offers intermediate concepts, lodged
between the local and the global, which have a wider applicability in cul-
tural history and politics precisely because they offer an alternative to the
nationalist focus which dominates cultural criticism. These intermediate
concepts, especially the undertheorised idea of diaspora examined in Chap-
ter 6, are exemplary precisely because they break the dogmatic focus on
discrete *national* dynamics which has characterised so much modern Euro-
American cultural thought.

Getting beyond these national and nationalistic perspectives has become essential for two additional reasons. The first arises from the urgent obligation to reevaluate the significance of the modern nation state as a political, economic, and cultural unit. Neither political nor economic structures of domination are still simply co-extensive with national borders. This has a special significance in contemporary Europe, where new political and economic relations are being created seemingly day by day, but it is a worldwide phenomenon with significant consequences for the relationship between the politics of information and the practices of capital accumulation. Its effects underpin more recognisably political changes like the growing centrality of transnational ecological movements which, through their insistence on the association of sustainability and justice, do so much to shift the moral and scientific precepts on which the modern separation of politics and ethics was built. The second reason relates to the tragic popularity of ideas about the integrity and purity of cultures. In particular, it concerns the relationship between nationality and ethnicity. This too currently has a special force in Europe, but it is also reflected directly in the post-colonial histories and complex, transcultural, political trajectories of Britain's black settlers.

What might be called the peculiarity of the black English requires attention to the intermixture of a variety of distinct cultural forms. Previously separated political and intellectual traditions converged and, in their coming together, overdetermined the process of black Britain's social and historical formation. This blending is misunderstood if it is conceived in simple ethnic terms, but right and left, racist and anti-racist, black and white tacitly share a view of it as little more than a collision between fully formed and mutually exclusive cultural communities. This has become the dominant view where black history and culture are perceived, like black settlers themselves, as an illegitimate intrusion into a vision of authentic British national life that, prior to their arrival, was as stable and as peaceful as it was ethnically undifferentiated. Considering this history points to issues of power and knowledge that are beyond the scope of this book. However, though it arises from present rather than past conditions, contemporary British racism bears the imprint of the past in many ways. The especially crude and reductive notions of culture that form the substance of racial politics today are clearly associated with an older discourse of racial and ethnic difference which is everywhere entangled in the history of the idea of culture in the modern West. This history has itself become hotly contested since debates about multiculturalism, cultural pluralism, and the responses to them that are sometimes dismissively called "political correctness" arrived to query the ease and speed with which European partic-

ularisms are still being translated into absolute, universal standards for hu-
man achievement, norms, and aspirations.

It is significant that prior to the consolidation of scientific racism in the
nineteenth century,[5] the term "race" was used very much in the way that
the word "culture" is used today. But in the attempts to differentiate the
true, the good, and the beautiful which characterise the junction point of
capitalism, industrialisation, and political democracy and give substance to
the discourse of western modernity, it is important to appreciate that scien-
tists did not monopolise either the image of the black or the emergent
concept of biologically based racial difference. As far as the future of cul-
tural studies is concerned, it should be equally important that both were
centrally employed in those European attempts to think through beauty,
taste, and aesthetic judgement that are the precursors of contemporary cul-
tural criticism.

Tracing the racial signs from which the discourse of cultural value was
constructed and their conditions of existence in relation to European aes-
thetics and philosophy as well as European science can contribute much
to an ethnohistorical reading of the aspirations of western modernity as a
whole and to the critique of Enlightenment assumptions in particular. It is
certainly the case that ideas about "race," ethnicity, and nationality form
an important seam of continuity linking English cultural studies with one
of its sources of inspiration—the doctrines of modern European aesthetics
that are consistently configured by the appeal to national and often racial
particularity.[6]

This is not the place to go deeply into the broader dimensions of this
intellectual inheritance. Valuable work has already been done by Sander
Gilman,[7] Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,[8] and others on the history and role of the
image of the black in the discussions which found modern cultural axiol-
ogy. Gilman points out usefully that the figure of the black appears in dif-
ferent forms in the aesthetics of Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche
(among others) as a marker for moments of cultural relativism and to sup-
port the production of aesthetic judgements of a supposedly universal
character to differentiate, for example, between authentic music and, as
Hegel puts it, "the most detestable noise." Gates emphasises a complex
genealogy in which ambiguities in Montesquieu's discussion of slavery
prompt responses in Hume that can be related, in turn, to philosophical
debates over the nature of beauty and sublimity found in the work of Burke
and Kant. Critical evaluation of these representations of blackness might
also be connected to the controversies over the place of racism and anti-
Semitism in the work of Enlightenment figures like Kant and Voltaire.[9]
These issues deserve an extended treatment that cannot be provided here.
What is essential for the purposes of this opening chapter is that debates