

Review Essay

Black Cultural Production and the Promises and Pitfalls of American Pluralism

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Without historical contextualization, aesthetics are naturalized and certain cultural practices are made to appear essential to a given group of people. On the other hand, without aesthetic considerations, Black cultural practices are reduced to extensions of sociohistorical circumstances.

Tricia Rose, "Black Texts/Black Contexts," 1992

In her pioneering work on Black cultural production, cultural critic Tricia Rose reminds us that any examination must take on a dialectical engagement with both "historical contextualization" and "aesthetic considerations." The point is that throughout the uneven literature on Black cultural production, scholars have tended to either relegate Black cultural practices to an extension of a bio-cultural essence or reduce them to mere expressions of socio-economic conditioning.¹ While they appear diametrically oppositional, both positions converge where they dangerously position "Black" cultural production (and by extension Black people) as a limiting factor through which to understand the success or failure of a more universal political project, whether it be nation building or international class consciousness. In a sense Rose warns against situating Black cultural production (or Black people) as the terrain on which to

work through seemingly larger ideals, without recognizing and engaging the existence of dynamic and hybrid experiences that can still be called “Black.” At the same time, cultural analysis must come to terms with the historically situated specificity of diverse Black interpretative frameworks; with their own internal dynamics, systems of incorporation, and reflexive networks of identification that exist within but are not determined by conceptions of racial/spatial origin or the political economy.

The two following texts take up the above challenge by placing Black cultural production at the center of study, to measure the promises and pitfalls of what is identified as the American culturalist project. Yet, by examining the Black modern experience of the interwar period as a key nodal point in the longer “‘Red Line’ of history” (8) and a larger “Machine Age Modernism” (6), Barbara Foley’s *Spectres of 1919* and Joel Dinerstein’s *Swinging the Machine*, simultaneously resist and further the research tendencies that Tricia Rose warns against. For Foley, the shifting meaning of the “New Negro” reveals how any embrace of cultural pluralism by the left, even as an anti-racist counterdiscourse, has reinforced nationalisms that were class-collaborationist by supporting notions of “inexpugnable” racial differences (162). Joel Dinerstein’s analysis of modern bodies and machines celebrates what he describes as “an ongoing dialogue between white technology and black culture” in the cultural pluralist creation of a vigorous national “body” politic (21). A potentially productive discussion between Foley and Dinerstein is generated because, while not directly in conversation with each other, they share an interest in Black cultural production as the site for such drastically divergent assessments of American cultural pluralism.²

The year 1919 witnessed both a national backlash and resistance against leftist struggles and nationwide violent race riots, which serves as a fruitful starting point for Foley to discuss the interrelationship between race and class struggles. With a clearly Marxist orientation in mind, as noted by the titles’ *Communist Manifesto* reference, *Spectres* rhetorically asks how the “New Negro Movement” devolved from the radical class-consciousness associated with the *Messenger* magazine to the cultural nationalism most frequently tied to Alain Locke’s anthologized narration of the Harlem Renaissance. Five detailed chapters move the reader from the New Negro’s direct ties with the political left to the insufficiently comprehensive vision of class within the left that failed to adequately challenge the rise of racist anti-radicalism. For Foley, the Communist International’s concession to self-determination along racial and national lines finally constrained the left to a critique of American nationalism mounted on the limited terrain of anti-racist cultural pluralism. The important concluding analysis of Alain Locke’s *New Negro* anthology goes on to discuss how his leftist past and other more leftist essays in the project were expunged in the editorial shift towards race pride. In Foley’s eyes this turn was symptomatic of the emerging cultural pluralist hegemony in the nation at large.

Foley's work in *Spectres* is important for a number of reasons. First, she draws an almost encyclopedic attention to the close ties between African American cultural production, anti-racist politics, and what she calls the "left-wing premises" of capitalist exploitation after 1919 (68). Second, and as a further contribution to the vexed question, "Why is there no Socialism in America?" Foley provocatively answers that both Black and White Socialists too readily conceded to the separation of labor and "race-ism" instead of more vigorously including these two social realities under a wider comprehensive notion of the proletarian experience. By confining class struggles to the realm of economic competition, U.S. radicals did not fully theorize race as an ideology commensurate with ruling class exploitation under capitalism.

According to Foley, the leftist concession to self-determination for oppressed people in the colonized parts of the world was an attempt to deploy resistant nation-consciousness in the goal of dismantling nationalism. But whether "good" or "bad" and even in a provisional fashion, such nationalist practices opened the door to a consciousness rooted in essentialist notions of a "race, folk, or people" and not the desired radical cosmopolitan internationalism (117). Third, Foley points out that the above concession to notions of race, not tied to economic relations, limited the insights of even the most critical leftist anti-racist attacks against biological racism. For example, the cultural relativist theories of Franz Boas maintained notions of essential racial difference and opened the door for what she calls "metonymic nationalism." Within the metonymic framework even the counterdiscourses of cultural relativism, a Harlem Renaissance race pride, and/or identity-based politics, do not stand in opposition to racist nationalisms. They in effect simply stand in (in blackface) for dominant American nationalist visions of essential racial difference that Foley situates at the heart of even the most benign cultural pluralist discourse.

At first glance *Spectres of 1919* appears to be a discussion of race and class rooted in (or routed through) the African American experience. Chapters two and three suggest, however, that the text is most prominently an appeal for a more "comprehensive and materialist conception of class" that can free us from the link between culturalism and nationalism found in even the most post-structuralist aims of "late-twentieth century identity politics" (78 and 162). Through a strict adherence to what Foley considers the "real" Marxist understanding of the proletariat, she decides that racial identity can only be anti-essentialist when it is theorized as an ideological function "serving class ends" (154). This contention raises some concern on two fronts. On the theoretical front, there is no pure abstracted space of proletarian consciousness. Even the notion of a disembodied, cosmopolitan internationalism, as a critique of "rooted," racialized, nationalisms is a position of privilege. Such an abstracted understanding of the proletariat has to confront the very materialist, embodied working class and "cosmopolitan" experiences of, for example, Caribbean domestics or U.S. soldiers who live, work, and theorize liberation as *Black*

subjects in the interwar period. Such experiences require a transfiguration of the so-called theoretical pure space of radical internationalism through exploring how racialized laboring subjects simultaneously breeched and were bound by the racial logic of nation formation.³

The very colonial act of theoretically subjugating racial experience under some “color blind” notion of “ideology” or internationalism is an expression of authoritarian Marxism that recalls what W.E.B. Du Bois termed in 1933, a White “working-class aristocracy.”⁴ Moreover, the very same evolutionary tendencies that Foley identifies in the essentialist impulses of American cultural pluralists, the idea that societies move through fixed stages from low to high, are also found at the inception of Marxist historical materialist theories. As Marxist scholar Cedric Robinson pointed out long ago, one of the first times that racism and evolutionism come together is in Marx’s own inability to see, for example, a place like Haiti in the 1790s as a site of revolutionary struggle because of its “primitive” stage of social development. To paraphrase C.L.R. James and Du Bois, thank goodness slaves in revolutionary Haiti or in Civil War America did not wait for a proletarian consciousness to emerge but freed themselves within the dictates of their own Black cultural/political traditions.⁵

Foley expertly reclaims the comprehensive roots of the New Negro Movement, but tends to offer an uncomplicated narrative of radical decline and fall by locating Black radicalism exclusively within a proletarian consciousness. Just as an example, the cover of the book reproduces a visual representation of the Great Migration from the leftist journal the *Liberator* as a symbol of radical resistance. However, the text *Spectres of 1919* doesn’t (and this is the second and historical front) centrally engage the Great Migration as a site of resistance within a long legacy of Black radicalism that extends far beyond the parameters of twentieth century Socialist and Communist Party USA thought. Throughout the work, any Black critique of economic social relations is identified as “Marxist,” blatantly ignoring that even the most strident Black Communists came from communities rich with cultures of opposition that go at least as far back as slave revolts and include religious “ideology.”⁶ Moreover, what would Foley do with the Black radicals associated with the *Chicago Whip*? At the same moment of the 1919 race riots, these “other” Black leftists explicitly described the announcement of the New Negro as one who paid equal attention to issues of race *and* class within the realms of both cultural and wage labor. How does their existence and support of a vision that pulled from both conceptions of “race first” and capitalist critique complicate such stringent impositions on a relatively freestanding and comprehensive Black radical tradition?⁷

Unfortunately in *Spectres*, any Black radical interpretation of slavery, debt-peonage, imperialism, Jim-Crow terror, industrial labor, and even the Communist Party’s decision to recognize colonial self-determination (never acknowledged in the text as a demand that came from Black comrades), had as much to do with

race as class-consciousness. While diverse, contradictory and socio-historically situated in their range of practices, attitudes, and relationships, Black identities are not strictly ideological functions of class exploitation. As even the prized New Negroes of the *Messenger* attest, Black people as Black people, analyzed race and class to reconstruct Marxism altogether and offer an emancipatory road for the world that was not followed.

Where Foley limits the revolutionary possibilities of “Negro” or “Black” identities, Dinerstein’s *Swinging the Machine* argues that it was precisely what he calls the “techno-dialogic” (25), found in the African American stylization of machine rhythms and aesthetics, that saved America’s soul in the face of Depression Era over-mechanization. In between European theoretical and cultural reverence and American mainstream disdain, the African American cultural practices of swing music and dance styles expertly “mediated the need for both accommodation and resistance to the technological society” (18). For Dinerstein, Black swing music and dance are an extension of general West African philosophical impulses to incorporate and combine all the rhythms and sounds from social experiences into cultural forms. Between the wars, dystopic angst with a sped-up, homogenizing, seemingly regressive technological society forced “Americans” to recognize their “primal” need for the Du Boisian like “gifts” of African American aesthetics and kinesthetics as a “survival technology” through which to reconstruct the national consciousness (28). *Swinging the Machine* is organized into two major halves. The first part locates African American jazz within a dynamic process of transformation in the interface with intellectual fears of mechanization, musical interpretations of train rhythms, pre-existing negotiations with technology in African American expressive culture, and the symbolic techno-dialogic between streamliner trains and big bands. In the second half of the book, Dinerstein examines the Ziegfeld Follies and Busby Berkeley, Fred Astaire and Bill Robinson, the amateur dance contest at Madison Square Garden, and the New York World’s Fair of 1939-40. For Dinerstein, these cultural sites and icons reveal the begrudging, fractured, yet necessary process in which African American survival technologies were appropriated by Machine Age America.

By placing the Jazz Age alongside the Machine Age *Swinging the Machine* expertly historicizes the truly “cyborg” nature of African American cultural practices and their centrality to any American study. From anxieties over “the tempo of life” to proclamations of the obsolete human body, White intellectuals seemed unable to offer solutions for American cultural rejuvenation (29-32). Yet, according to Dinerstein, White jazz musicians like Paul Whiteman and Mezz Mezzrow recognized the on-going dialogue between African American music and machine age modernity. These White figures are commonly dismissed for the primitivist impulses found in their fascination with jazz, but Dinerstein counters that part of their gaze was informed by a recognition of jazz music’s modern expression of speed, efficiency, and mechanical qualities. At the same

time, *Swinging the Machine* necessarily takes to task scholars and musicians who saw in the locomotive power of jazz music and dance a jungle obsession with rhythm. Dinerstein counters that Jazz music and dance were an expression of “Afrodiasporic rhythms and performative approaches” as part of a modern philosophical alternative to Euro-American cultural aesthetic practices (55). In the end, Dinerstein celebrates what he considers the “black-white composite” in all of its racially contradictory splendor (28). It becomes the site where, for example, the White performative theft of the lindy hop signified both the dream deferred to African Americans seeking labor and leisure, and legitimacy within the mainstream culture industries. It also signified the White “need and desire” to remake their bodies through Black cultural aesthetics for survival in an urban industrializing America (291).

In *Swinging the Machine*, Dinerstein adds his important voice to an ongoing conversation about the legacies of primitivist discourses in American arts and letters and their relationship to how we understand Black people and meanings of their cultural production. This conversation becomes especially significant in a text that struggles to better understand while refuting received knowledge about the place of African American cultural practices within the vexed frame of cultural pluralism. However, his general references to Afrodiasporic aesthetics and kinesthetics as the source of the Negro’s “gift” to the nation help reinforce, instead of untangle, some of the residual traces of primitivist discourse.⁸ Dinerstein’s almost Cartesian distinctions between Euro-American “technology” and African American “survival technology,” “European hardware” and “African American software,” and White “control” and Black “energy,” first confirm Barbara Foley’s apprehensions about the pitfalls of racial reasoning. Second they do not reveal the full brilliance of the Ralph Ellison quote that begins *Swinging the Machine*, “we the machines inside the machines,” that could have actually offered a substantial response to Foley’s argument (22, 55, 16).

Where Foley over-determines the economic meaning of racial consciousness, Dinerstein over-aestheticizes the social context of Black cultural production in important ways. The composite or cultural pluralist approach to analysis, where the narrative is driven by a White American recognition of distinctly “African-derived” cultural forms, doesn’t pay enough attention to internal variations and intentions of “Black” styles. But equally important, this approach does not fully engage the effects of the modern realities of slavery, Jim Crow terror, Black strategies of resistance to these experiences and the role of their migrating memory that haunted the production of interwar cultural practices in Northern and Western urban cities. For example, slaves and their descendants did not just interpret “Euro-American” technology; they *were* the technology in the production of both the built environment and in grounding the technologies of racial meaning. Surely “West African” aesthetic philosophies can be found in “American” cultural forms. However, they take on very specific and situated meanings where the ring shout or the drum in service of a Yoruba royal court

ceremony, are transformed not just by their convergence with, for example, the “Euro-American” train. These literal instruments of sometimes-elite West African cultures were revolutionized into tools of resistance in slave and sharecropping contexts. While the forms of West African aesthetics and kinesthetic might have been easily portable across the Black Atlantic, we must come to terms with how their meanings changed over space and time.

Dinerstein does make the above point, but it does not seem to fully inform his general conclusions about the democratic possibilities of cultural pluralism and the degree to which African Americans have made America “Black.” I believe that even the White subjects of his study reveal the extent to which Black people were represented as more machine than man, along a clear racial hierarchy, especially at points of cultural appropriation. Dinerstein goes to great lengths to highlight the ways in which Black musicians got jobs and were recognized for their artistic brilliance if only through theft. But the relationships between Fred Astaire, the Ziegfeld Follies and their Black cultural practices were not narratives of democratic incorporation but American tales of White mastery over the technologies of Black bodies and their cultural practices on both material and epistemological levels.

Dinerstein re-reads the popular renaissance of the John Henry story in the 1930s, as its own tale of reconciliation between man and machine. Because Henry dies, Dinerstein asserts, the story becomes a moral tale about the need to work through, not against technology, and he traces this to the aesthetic philosophies of African diasporic cultures. While I think the lesson of incorporation is an extremely plausible interpretation, the question is: what happens if you place the literal body of Black knowledge and experience at the center of discussion? In looking at the slave, Jim Crow, and industrial wage labor struggles between Black and White workers, Henry’s death could easily signify a White mourning. The end of Henry marked the loss of a controllable machine (John Henry) and the ascendancy of an overpowering technology (the steam engine) that would undo the circuits of White labor privilege built on the technologies of racial difference. These ideas seem to maintain their coherency in the contemporary popular record. From Al Jolson, to Elvis Presley to Eminem to Quentin Tarrantino’s White protagonists in blaxploitation (and Kung Fu) films; what Dinerstein suggests is the potentially democratic mainstreaming of Afrodiasporic cultural forms is a tale whose success is partially premised on the superior “White” mastery of “Black” technologies. This process has become the litmus test for deeming Black cultural products or people as civilized.⁹

In my mind, this is precisely where Foley and Dinerstein converge. For Foley Du Bois’ “vision splendid” is only a possibility when African Americans are included in a pre-existing “revolutionary fold” (248). In parallel fashion, *Swinging the Machine* charts national belonging and reconciliation at the point when the “existential affirmation of African American survival technology . . . could be “appropriated by any society in crisis” (113). Plainly, recognition only

goes one way, while the Whiteness of national or internationalist belonging is left free of interrogation and Black people are just ignored. Without a solid understanding of the complexities of the “Black” in Black cultural production, both necessary critiques and creative (sometimes compelling) celebrations of American cultural pluralism leave Black people and their experiences within a revolutionary stranglehold. This takes place without ever understanding that it is precisely within the *crisis*; it is within our collective connection to the *Spectre* of Black bodies *Swinging* (on dance floors *and* from tree limbs) that a more “splendid vision” of belonging exists that would surpass any examination of American cultural pluralism.¹⁰

Notes

1. Tricia Rose, “Black Texts/Black Contexts,” in *Black Popular Culture*, Gina Dent ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992).
2. Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) and Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).
3. See Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).
4. See W.E.B. Du Bois, “Marxism and the Negro Problem,” in *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, David Levering Lewis ed. (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 541. See also, David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991).
5. See Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Books, 1983). See also, C.L.R. James, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Overture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1963) and W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935).
6. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994) and *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). See also, Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) and Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 124.
7. See, “The Cause of the New Negro,” *Chicago Whip* (Jan. 17, 1920), 8; “The Passing of Uncle Tom,” *Whip* (Aug. 9, 1919), 10 and “Radicals and Raids,” *Whip* (Jan 10, 1920). See also, Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 193, 197-200.
8. For more on the relationship between Black cultural production and American primitivist discourses, see David Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitive Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Martin J. Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).
9. For just a sample of the growing “whiteness studies” scholarship,” see, Greg Tate (ed.), *Everything but the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2003); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
10. On the “vision splendid,” see W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Negro Mind Reaches Out,” in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, Alain Locke ed. (New York: Charles and Albert Boni., 1925), 413-414.