

Inventing and Controlling the Vernacular

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African-American studies shares as an emerging discipline certain analogies with the founding of American Studies: both seem to be founded on ideas of the vernacular roots of American culture. In one of what I take to be its key 'documents,' Leo Marx identified the vernacular ideologically with the peripheral and provincial culture of the South-West. Here the voice of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn resounded in a "pre-historic landscape."¹

The romantic American hero's life on the margins in a running skirmish with domestic realism readily linked up with race (and gender). About the same time Marx's essay was published Leslie Fiedler was shortly to point out that the vernacular moment in American fiction is the moment of the confrontation with the Negro. America's archetypal romance, he told his readers in the 1950s, was a narrative about a white man on the run encountering and adopting the ways of a black man. Here was transgression and subversion, although as an internalized moment in the white man's psyche rather than as the experience of the real historical conditions of Negro life.

Marx's "vernacular tradition" also took its principal illustrations from narratives representing the encounter between black and white characters. In the new critical manner it was perceived as an encounter between two verbal styles. Marx's vernacular didn't respect the genteel snobbery and idealism of the dominant American nineteenth century aesthetic and political discourses. His use of Whitman suggests that the

¹ Leo Marx, "The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature" (orig. publ., 1958); repr. in *The Pilot and the Passenger* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

vernacular is not simply the appropriation of an actual dialect, or "literally the spoken language of his time."² Comparing a section of Whitman's "Song of Myself" with a poem by Longfellow on the topic of the persecuted run-away slave, Marx praises the "egalitarian community" projected by Whitman's imagination into the encounter between black and white.³ This egalitarianism is linguistically represented by Whitman's syncretic poetic style constructed out of various inputs from Quakerism, journalese, Biblical declamation, operatic recitative, etc. Longfellow's poem, on the other hand, adopts the style of a poetic tradition that Marx finds inauthentic.⁴ Marx makes Huck Finn's and Whitman's lack of cultured discrimination grounds for rediscovering fundamental American faiths in a society relieved of "received notions of class and status—and of literature."⁵

The American vernacular reinvents an old ideal of America by accommodating the many different idioms of English. Whitman's eclectically constructed heteroglossia becomes the touchstone of the American vernacular—the "barbaric yawp" that conveys the true experience of America.

Nevertheless Marx was unable to resist the hegemonic pressure of modernist aesthetics and its politics, whose clearest expressions were found in, perhaps, Lionel Trilling and Richard Hofstadter respectively.⁶ "The vernacular has not yet given America a great literature," he admitted. And he worried about the "excesses of uncontrolled improvisation that mas the work of Whitman and Twain," their "primitivism" and "anti-intellectualism"—the "chief defects of the vernacular mode."⁷

Despite its wish to re-affirm the existence of continued belief in a just, egalitarian society in American literature, Marx's essay ended on an elegiac note: the "history of the vernacular has been a history of its fragmentation"⁸—the vernacular has diffused in a welter of vernaculars,

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴ A judgment that may have to be reconsidered in the light of John Hollander's recent edition of 19th century American poetry for the Library of America series.

⁵ Marx, p. 8.

⁶ Cf. eg. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Schribner's, 1976 (1950)); Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963).

⁷ Marx, p. 17.

which do not support the "belief [the vernacular] originally was designed to affirm."⁸

Although these qualifications were made with explicit reference to Whitman, Twain, Sandburg and Hemingway,⁹ they are remarkably analogous to similarly phrased objections to emergent literatures, *e.g.* literature written by black Americans. Emergent writers who are perceived in sociological terms as belonging to a "minority," or, now, "ethnic" group, have conventionally been judged in terms of standards derived from idealized versions of the hegemonic culture. As the example of Marx suggests, the definition of vernacular adopted links the vernacular with the impure, the not-quite-good-enough—the socially marginal—and thus implies a center it deviates from either positively or negatively. Marx, in fact, essentially abandons the term and replaces it with "pastoral." A move inspired by William Empson's *Versions of Pastoral*, republished in the US in the early 1950s, which considered various "minor" literary forms in which socially marginal or subordinate groups are idealized by the dominant, literate classes in society.

This translation of the vernacular into the pastoral however is paid for by the abandonment of the transgressive energies of new modes of writing in favor of more familiar aesthetic values. Regretting the situation of a culturally heterogeneous America represented by several 'vernaculars'—a state of affairs Marx perceived as a separation of the vernacular from its founding egalitarian beliefs, he made of the vernacular a lyrical, natural moment. The finest moments of the vernacular were claimed to be those moments that approach literary value in a more traditional sense. Thus it was not the disrespectful montage of different languages of the street in a Whitman poem that were singled out for quotation; nor was it in *Huck Finn* elements of popular culture such as boasting, or debasement of high cultural pretensions, *etc.* that got high priority. It was by way of contrast those famously lyrical moments on the raft when the babble of different cultural idioms is silenced by nature—"It's lovely to live on a raft"¹⁰—a transcendent domain beyond labor, politics and language.

As *Huck Finn* entered the pastoral world of romance he entered the world of (great) literature, and left behind the social world of the novel.

⁸ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

The pastoral impulse that leads the vernacular hero to renounce the existing society is much stronger, needless to say, than the impulse to create a new one.⁹

But by identifying Twain's vernacular with a transcendent, natural world the road was paved for extending the idea that literature is essentially pastoral--creating a "world elsewhere"^w—"a world in which consciousness might be free to explore its powers and affinities."¹⁰

What we find in Marx's 1958 text on the vernacular tradition in American literature is, firstly, an ethnic subtext. The vernacular moment is represented by the encounter between a black man and a white "boy." It is this encounter which associates the vernacular with the "outlaw" and the fugitive. Secondly, it creates that lyrical, transcendent moment on the drifting raft that promises to escape social divisions and pressures altogether. Thirdly, in its dialogic relationship with melodrama, popular journalism and other modes of popular expression, the vernacular is also a "symptom of primitivism" and "unremitting anti-intellectualism."

Marx's evident ambivalence about the American vernacular's status in the middle of the 20th century as (great) literature addresses a familiar anxiety about popular modes of expression in general. But it reflects the inherently ambivalent idea of the vernacular, particularly, when it is applied to the perception and reception of black popular forms of expression.

Black literary criticism has embraced the idea of black culture as vernacular since the introduction of Black Studies programs in college. Thus, Houston A. Baker recently summarized Gates' definition of a vernacular 'tradition' that links together the various works and performances of black Americans. This tradition is said to be made up of "relations of revision, echo, call and response, antiphony, and so on."¹¹ Such terms suggest that a jazz aesthetic permeates and defines black culture.

Earlier definitions of a distinctive black aesthetic were founded on a number of pregnant archetypes derived from the experience of slavery,

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁰ Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967), ix.

¹¹ *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, ed. Baker/Redmond (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 5.

such as the quest for freedom or the struggle for literacy; or from prescriptive notions about black experience based on circular appeals to the intuitive insight of blacks of what it means to be black.¹² Stephen Henderson, in his anthology, *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973), referred to an experience of blackness, which "saturates" a black person's being, and which is, by definition, only available to those who are, racially, black.¹³

Baker and Gates on the other hand, although they do not entirely abandon such mimetic ideas, qualify them, and primarily construct a black vernacular in terms of formal innovation whose model is Ralph Ellison's fiction and essays. Their vernacular, although based on parodies of folk forms, especially the blues mode, belongs to a modernist aesthetics. The central chapter in Baker's *Blues* is an analysis of Ellison's "Trueblood" episode—the latter already a clever parody of (white patronage of) black folk culture. Gates' ideas about the vernacular nature of black literature are based on "signifying" as primarily aesthetic performance, and uses modern examples in which parody is the favored mode, e.g. jazz as parody of white pop music, and Ishamael Reed's send-up of the Harlem Renaissance and the attempts to control it, in *Mumbo Jumbo*.

The shift in interest away from black art as parasitic on prior socio-historical perceptions and definitions of Afro-American reality on to a modernist emphasis on black expression as aesthetic play and rhetoric creates a problem for the idea of a tradition. A black tradition in literature, the vernacular, is in Gates' version a tradition of particular tropical turns, like those summarized by Baker above. Thus we reach the familiar modernist position that (black) historical experience is dependent on language, on the deployment of specific tropes.¹⁴

12 Cf. Baker's critique of Robert Stepto and Stephen Henderson, in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

13 Beliefs in distinctive black experience only available to blacks of course often lead to mistaken identities. For example, it still assumed by some writers that Charles Keil, author of *Urban Blues*, is black. H. Nigel Thomas, in *From Folklore to Fiction*, does.

14 In fact in his recent work, Gates if not abandons at least uses only "tradition" and "vernacular" carefully insulated by inverted commas and in general regards them as disabling concepts for the development of an African-American cultural criticism. They are now seen as ideologies. "No longer are the concepts of black and white thought to be preconstituted: rather, they are mutually constitutive and socially produced." Henry Louis Gates, "African American Criticism," in *Redrawing the Boundaries*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: The Modern Language Association, 1992), pp. 309ff.

Gates' and Baker's concept of the vernacular is, broadly, the attempt to determine and maintain that modern aesthetic culture in the US should be appreciated in terms of its African-American popular cultural form, such as jazz. The discussion turns on the processes involved. Is modernism about selective assimilation, dilution, degradation of 'pre-modern,' colonized cultures? Or is it rather that modernist aesthetic expression has been decisively shaped by Americans (as well as by Caribbean) blacks?¹⁵

To Leo Marx modernization, although he didn't use the word in the context of the paper referred to above, meant the dispersal of the vernacular, and with it the loss of faith in the popular foundation of egalitarianism. To Marx the earlier, alleged unity of the popular, democratic roots of American literature comes apart in the familiar dichotomy in the 1950s between degraded mass diversion and the retrenchment of a high culture, whose roots in *e.g.* Jewish vernacular culture were pushed into the background.

Werner Sollors, in *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986), has summarized what became a matter of consensual agreement during the period of Marx's essay, that modernization, that is becoming an American, meant abandoning one's ethnic culture. In other terms, Henry Sayre has talked about the "inevitable colonization of the marginal by the dominant discourses of culture."¹⁶

The tendency is now, however, to emphasize the implications of how much modernist aesthetics in fact were due to writers and intellectuals who did not belong to the Anglo-American arbiters of culture. There is now increasing emphasis on the connections between the peripheral, provincial or ethnic and modernist expression. Thus the conflictual nature of modernist aesthetics has become apparent and become re-linked with opposition and resistance. This has certainly re-vitalized modernism which otherwise has tended to become part of the hegemonic mainstream culture defensively reacting to the barbarism of mass media culture. The vernacular offers a perception of modern art in the

¹⁵ For an excellent discussion of the current dimensions of this question, see the interesting work by Susan Willis collected in *Specifying* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1987), and *A Primer for Daily Life* (London: Routledge: 1991).

¹⁶ Henry M. Sayre, "Pursuing Authenticity: the Vernacular Moment in Contemporary American Art," *Georgia review*, 1992, 150.

name of the populace, and as such seems inherently hostile to attempts to co-opt modernist art to enforce cultural hierarchies.

Gates and Baker would presumably applaud Robert Crawford's recent argument on behalf of another dependent and "provincial" culture, Scotland:

Modernism's delight in the construction of synthetic languages full of exotic **and** learned terminology can be seen as an attack on 'standard English' by writers wishing to escape the latent limitations in their provincial origins by forging a diction so polylingual and sophisticated that it tops and outflanks the English cultural centre.¹⁷

The immediate references here are not only to Joyce and Pound, but to Scotland's nationalist modernist, Hugh MacDiarmid's "synthetic work, which joined the demotic to the arcane."¹⁸ But in an earlier chapter Crawford makes a strong case for Walter Scott's influence on the aesthetics of the American nineteenth century Renaissance writers, especially Whitman.¹⁹ Crawford, like Marx, reminds us of how Emerson and Whitman made "eclecticism," that is Whitman's synthetic vernacular, a method to "free America from the status of an English cultural province."²⁰ Yet Crawford is also aware of how the "richly impure, eclectic, heteroglot" character of the eclectic vernacular can also be ambivalently seen as expressive of the dilution and impurity of co-opted, marginal cultural forms—either in 'totalitarian' forms like those of The Cantos or Paterson, or by the mass popularity of what were once considered authentic ethnic cultural forms, such as various forms of black music.

An apparent way out of this impasse between co-optation and refusal to adopt a unified essentialist concept of black culture, and yet keep alive the ideas of resistance and autonomy of the latter is Houston Baker's "blues matrix." Baker's version of the vernacular is based on the blues. But not on blues with a specific content ("blueness") but blues as a rhetorical mode in which blues is said to be a trope for that moment when the "marginal," ethnic performance enters and shapes and is

17 Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 261-62.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 265.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 206ff.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

shaped by the inevitable context of commercial, cultural and technological structures.²¹

Baker's strategy in *Blues* is heavily indebted to Ellison's essays and his *Invisible Man*. The sermon on blackness and the Trueblood episode are used not only to deconstruct the character of a member of the 'master race' in terms of anthropological theories of race, culture and mind, in order to provide the reader with interpretive concepts. But Baker uses Ellison's elegant "topping" and "outflanking" of white racism and patronage to construct a black narrator whose very self-awareness about these processes makes him always ironically aware of the ideological construction of any version of "folk" culture. Baker's analysis of Ellison's "Trueblood" episode captures the rich ironies of this "ethnic" minstrel performance, and makes Trueblood into an image of Ellison himself. The episode captures a type of the Black artist who outfoxes white power and patronage by his self-awareness of his narrative as entertainment in a particular situation, but where the bracketing effect provided by the nature of the event as performance releases him from the constraints operating in the story that is told.

Ellison makes ironic self-awareness itself a new basis of authenticity in the form of the blues. And although "authentic" is now a word that apparently can only be handled within inverted commas, the legitimacy it names is repeatedly sought in allegedly surviving "folk" cultures.

In practical criticism, despite warnings against "essentialist" thinking, the vernacular nevertheless oscillates between rhetorical form and realism. This ambiguity is observable in studies contemporary with Baker and Gates. Keith Byerman, for example, has observed that what appeals to contemporary black writers in black folk culture "is the idea of performance." Performance is associated with drama and role-playing and therefore seems to obviate, or at least postpone, belief in determinate identities. Role playing suggests choice, and accentuates the ideas of play, imagination, freedom; aesthetics above the constraints of history and sociology.²²

Despite Byerman's general allegiance to a post-modernist rhetoric—his emphasis on writing as performance, role-playing, indetermination—he finds that the "folk material" in writers like Ellison, Morrison, Reed,

21 Cf. reference in note 11.

22 Keith Byerman, *Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), pp. 4, 5.

and Forrest constitute "a basic element of the inner form"²³ of their narratives, a "fundamentally conservative, organic vision on the part of these writers." By "organic" Byerman understands, a "whole made up of interrelated parts and a slow, 'natural' process of change over time."²³ Here a modern rhetoric against racial essences and determinate identities folds back into a regular humanist one of the organic vision peculiar to black aesthetic expression.

There is no doubt that the consensus today is away from vernacular expression as mimetically expressing the culture of the black community in the U.S. But it is misleading to use the rhetoric of organic vision, and its derivative, authenticity about the use of folklore in the novelists mentioned above. As Berndt Ostendorf in his important work has pointed out, Ellison and Reed have consciously appropriated in a satiric or ironic fashion elements of black oral culture in order to send up "some of the most cherished background assumptions or myths of American history." But Ostendorf adds, significantly, theirs is essentially an outsider's view of that culture: They do not live the "folk culture" of the South anymore.²⁴

Neither do Baker nor Gates. They are Afro-American intellectuals who participate in a highly educated metropolitan university and media setting which is largely external to any lived experience of the vernacular. Neither Baker nor Gates when they first suggested the study of Afro-American literature as vernacular forms analyzed really existing black "folk" culture. Baker's Blues refers exclusively to high modernist literary theories. Gates' analysis of "signifying" relies on a few contemporary anthropological and linguistic studies of black street and prison verbal "culture," but apart from a casual reference to jazz, analyzes literary texts. Baker and Gates use key terms, such as "antiphony" or "signifying," not in terms of an organic vision shared by black writers, but as boundary-marking terms—forms of symbolic action that are intended to circumvent "colonization" and dilution by the mainstream media culture—the hegemonic form of the vernacular.²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

²⁴ Berndt Ostendorf, *Black Literature in White America* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 126, 129).

²⁵ "Boundary-marking": a concept Sollors, in *Beyond Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) introduced into literary studies; borrowed from Fredrick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969).

Although the Trueblood episode is a locus classicus of how complex eclectic American vernacular culture is, the professionalization of African-American studies makes it almost inevitable that attempts will be made to translate rhetoric into new organic visions. In practice, whatever black American critics say is a continuous black tradition is so. And Baker's, and to some extent Gates', books serve that purpose. With that the idea of the synthetic nature of the American vernacular is threatened and displaced in favor of a monologic construction of a particular black-only vernacular.

In a recent essay on Afro-American women's writing, Baker vacillates between rhetoric and organic vision. The garden and other objects associated with women's "sphere" are consistently enough interpreted as tropes, images, *etc.*—but of a "guiding spirituality" said to be characteristic of black women's writing!²⁶

The fact is, however, as Richard Broadhead has recently pointed out, that for ethnic writers vernacular writing, the construction of ethnic identities, has typically been "a vehicle for cultural mixing and boundary crossing."²⁷

Consider the history of jazz in the United States which epitomizes the "richly impure, eclectic, heteroglot" boundary-crossing nature of American vernacular music. Again we find endeavors to control cultural adulteration. Amiri Baraka's current position on jazz, at least when talking to a white audience, is that "black music is meant anthropologically, historically, to bring [black] worshippers into unity with the super-being (all-being), with the Holy Spirit."²⁸ This view has been professionalized with the emergence a discipline named "theomusicology" and a scholarly journal published by Duke University Press devoted to the field. In it black writers re-appropriate black popular music as a "mode of countercultural practice with deep roots in modes of religious transcendence and political opposition."²⁹ Such statements of course carry authority given the fact that sacred and secular music permeate and adulterate each other in black culture.

²⁶ In *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 154, 155.

²⁷ Richard Broadhead, "After the Opening: Problems and Prospects for a Reformed American Literature," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol 5, no. 2, 1992, p. 69.

²⁸ In *New Perspectives on Jazz*, ed. David N. Baker (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1990), p. 60.

²⁹ Cornell West, "From Be-Bop to Rap", in "Sacred Music of the Secular City: From Blues to Rap", special issue of *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology*, Vol. 6, no. 1, Spring 1992, p. 282.

There is a certain strategic duplicity about much of the current debate about the nature of the vernacular as a way of conceptualizing black aesthetic culture. On the one hand both Baker and Gates illustrate boundary-crossing in their eclectic use of literary theory—much of it written by whites. On the other hand, they explicitly seem to argue for the creation of an autonomous black literary tradition that will serve the interests of the new black studies field. In this context to think about black literature in terms of the vernacular entails a commitment to a popular black constituency. It is in this process, however, that we rediscover the ambivalence about the admissibility of mass cultural forms that was mentioned above in connection with Leo Marx. Thus we are not surprised when certain forms of black expression that reveal too much eclecticism are criticized as "not being black enough," in Ellison's memorable scene, while others are canonized. An example from music will illustrate the point. There seems to be a general consensus that John Coltrane's music was "sacred" and the man himself was a relative to Jesus. For those who do not fit into this spiritual vision as fundamental to black culture, like, perhaps an Anthony Braxton or an Anthony Davis, it is usually said that they imitate 'European' culture. Or if it is too popular, like the music of Quincy Jones or Michael Jackson, their version of the vernacular is labeled "cross-over"—examples of the attenuation and homogenization of distinct black musical traditions.

An example from literature may illustrate the how the black version of the American vernacular is constructed and turned into dogma. The recent *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1990) proposes a history of American literature along racial and gender lines. It contains Alice Walker's story "Nineteen Fifty-five," which is a fable about a white Elvis Presley-type rock'n'roll singer, Traynor, and his relationship with the narrator, a black, Southern blues singer, Gracie Mae Still. Traynor and his manager buy out Still's rights to her songs and become a big success with them. But Traynor remains a confused southern boy who has to ask his substitute black mama about the meaning of her songs that he sings.

Basically, Walker's story gives the LeRoi Jones-view of black music in the USA: American popular music is a rip-off of an autonomous black musical tradition. In the accompanying teacher's manual, the instructor is instructed to discuss the "the *theft* of black music by white musicians

who do not understand what they are performing.”³⁰ In this perspective the story tells whites to feel guilty about their cultural expropriation of blacks, but then adds the victim's curse on the successful pirate: you won't understand the meaning and value of what you "steal."

The story illustrates the point that ethnic "traditions" are very much constructed in terms of difference, that is in terms of "an other." In this case the reader's image of Grace Mae Still's blues is generated by its implied contrast to Traynor's confusion, desire for, and submission to commercial success, and his contempt for his audience.

On each of these counts—meaning of song, life versus commerce, the folks that you know versus Traynor's anonymous mass audience—Still's words and music are constructed in ways that could be called "authentic." In Traynor's mouth the black blues woman's song has become a piece of property rather than a lived experience, in the way Charles Keil describes black blues performances in *Urban Blues*.³¹ Her audience is the people-that-you-know. Traynor's audience don't know him and he doesn't know them. The image constructed is one of an authentic black folk culture invaded by parasitic white mass culture. Still's songs vibrate with authentic life, even though the songs are not necessarily literally true. But Traynor, we are told, merely reproduces the text of her lyrics.

[Folk music] is the product of a race, and reflects feelings and tastes that are communal rather than personal.... The racial character of a ballad or song is due, therefore [...] to communal choice ... they reflect the popular taste, express the popular ideal, and are stamped with the popular approval.³²

Did Alice Walker write this? Did an Afro-centric ideologue? No, Cecil Sharp did, in 1907. "Folk," like "Dixieland" jazz, is usually reserved now for attempts to reconstruct the esthetic expression of a pre-industrial culture, and although such expression may also be antagonistically directed against capitalism and its culture industry, the popular culture most literary critics have in mind is that piped through mass media or that which can be associated with the "ghetto" street life of young

³⁰ *Instructor's Guide for the Heath Anthology of American Literature*, ed. J. A. Stanford (Lexington: Heath, 1990), p. 615. Emphasis added.

³¹ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

³² Cecil Sharp, *English Folk Song* (1907); quoted in Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), p. 140.

blacks. Even so the vernacular may easily reconstruct that life in meanings borrowed from the usually discredited values of "folk."

This is what happens in Walker's story. If we look, however, at real-life parallels to Gracie Mae Still, then the integrity of the latter looks like authorial idealism. Gracie Mae Still "knew" Bessie Smith, the reader is told. But Walker tells us nothing about the TOBA circuit she must have traveled. Like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and other 1920s female blues singers, Still must have been a professional entertainer exploited by black agents and organizers. Like them not only one of the people, but a highly individualized star whose repertory covered not only blues but also variety-type songs (think of Bessie Smith's "Kitchen Man" song, for example). A large part of Still's audience would presumably know her from the "race records" she performed for, but Walker has no interest in exploring the "propertying" implied by that relationship. Exploitation is white business only.

Is Traynor's relationship with the blues one of stealing? Presumably Walker has in mind the recording history of "Hound Dog"—a song first recorded by black Willie Mae ("Big Mama") Thornton in 1953. This song is credited to two Jewish-American admirers of black music: Leiber and Stoller. These two copyrighted the song and, arguably, may have stolen it from Johnny Otis. And as Otis is white we must persist and assume that he (probably) stole the song from some black blues performer. One may note in passing that "stealing" often means that white performers were paid more than black ones. But it doesn't necessarily mean that blacks did not in some cases get royalties for songs "covered" by white performers!

The problematic word is "stealing." Culture is a complex transaction between residual, emergent and dominant groups in society, to use Raymond Williams' terms. And it seems to me that stealing is not a useful way of looking at such transaction. It isn't because it relies on a concept of the (bourgeois) notion of culture as ownership that the American vernacular must challenge effectively, if it is to have any meaning at all. And if stealing, then certainly black vernacular culture is all about stealing!

The Heath instructor is in effect asked to transfer the literary model of production in terms of a single, originating author to popular culture. But the model of esthetic culture as the property of single authors is useless in describing the highly eclectic affair of mass-audience art.

Black popular music has been part of a minor, and now a major, entertainment industry in which composers and musicians have limited power. Feelings of powerlessness may then be translated into resentment. But white and black musicians and composers are fundamentally in the same position. Differences are of degrees of employment and financial reward. Indignation often concerns economic differences rather than cultural heritage. Do black musicians stop being "exploited" if they make more money than whites?

There is in Walker's story no room for the complex interaction, the give and take, between Anglo-American song types and black music that one finds in, for instance, Peter Van Der Merwe's *Origins of the Popular Style* (1989).³³ Writing about the blues Van Der Merwe points to complaint songs that facilitated a lively, fertile ground for cultural cross-over in both directions, as complaints were familiar song genres in both European and African contexts.³⁴

When the value of the vernacular is associated with claims about originality and authenticity then it usually approaches the "folk" syndrome. And the regular re-appearance of the folk syndrome in black culture and elsewhere is clearly an indication that it answers to a real need. "Folk" answers to a need to legitimate contemporary cultural forms by creating continuity between them and the past. And by the same token delegitimize other forms. Raymond Williams notes that the establishment of "traditions" is a process of ratifying certain usages; a matter of "deliberate continuity;" a

selection and reselection of those significant received and recovered elements of the past which represent not a necessary but a *desired* continuity. In this it resembles education....³⁵

Walker's "1955" proposes how to resist, cast out, curse the homogenization of black ethnic culture in order to preserve intact an untouchable, unknowable—to outsiders— notion of black art. When we turn to more recent examples of black street culture we see the same tendency to project on to white co-optation the elements that are considered undesirable in black culture. Indeed there is arguably the same ambiva-

33 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

34 *Op. cit.*, p. 84.

35 *Keywords*, entry "tradition"; *Culture*, p. 187.

lence about the vernacular that Marx recorded. In such cases race and vernacular are not synonymous terms.

The emergence of "rap" would seem in many ways to answer well to Baker and Gates' vernacular grounding of black esthetic expression. It was performed by young black men in black neighborhoods. It was flippantly, but often sincerely aware of black history and cultural traditions, and was verbally and musically antagonistic to dominant cultural patterns. It had the features of, on the one hand, "outlaw" music, on the other a re-ethnicization of black music after the cross-over successes of, say, Michael Jackson, Prince, and the neo-traditionalist jazz of a Wynton Marsalis. Thirdly, it was thoroughly modern in its original (*i.e.* contrary to its conventional usage) handling of modern musical reproduction and recording technology (scratching, sampling etc.). Illegitimate, apparently popular with the black masses, aware of black history, modern, it had all the ear-marks of an emergent autonomous black vernacular expression.

Yet black intellectuals have responded to this manifestation of black popular culture by and large as white intellectuals have historically done to popular culture. The tendency to preserve the autonomy of culture from the encroachment and vulgarities of capitalism and commerce becomes among black intellectuals the desire to sacralize black expression. Thus Jon Michael Spencer, the editor of the *Journal of Theomusicology*, emphasizes theological passages in rap lyrics and recovers a message of conversion. Another finds Nation of Islam ideology in the lyrics of certain rap groups (*e.g.* Public Enemy).³⁶

Rap is in the tradition of toasts, signifying and so on. What is de-emphasized, and what rouses anxiety, are those passages that convey sentiments or attitudes that are perceived to threaten communal values in Afro-American life. Therefore these passages are said to be not organic parts of Afro-American life but to reflect the damage wrought by living in a society that does not support Afro-American communal values. The notoriety that arose about the explicit lyrics of 2 Live Crew stands out here. In so far as their lyrics may seem to endorse "vicious sexual domination" they are disturbing.³⁷ Likewise Cornell West, a philosopher and theologian, worries whether some of rap by its "lyrical

36 *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology*, Vol. 6, no. 1, Spring 1992.

37 Michael Eric Dyson, "2 Live Crew and Rap's Moral Vision", *ibid.*, pp. 276-77.

hopelessness" parodies or undermines the traditional message, the organic vision, of black art: transcendent triumph in tough circumstances.³⁸ One thinks here of the many blues full of anti-communal values. Just as sexual boasting, if perhaps in less graphic terms, is traditional to earlier versions of the black vernacular.

Naming is important. The vernacular may suggest consensus about blackness that on closer examination breaks down in different views. Black intellectuals resist the inevitable "commercialization" of black expression which entails that they lose some degree of control over its reception (interpretation). On the whole they seem to have been quite successful in re-racializing large areas of American culture but at a price: by de-emphasizing the "richly impure, eclectic" heteroglossia of the vernacular.

In making the vernacular the founding moment of the study of African American literature, black writers have come face to face with the same ambiguities and uncontrollable uncertainties that Leo Marx and other American Studies intellectuals perceived as they watched the emergence of mass-media produced vernacular expression.

38 West, "From Be-Bop to Rap," *Black Sacred Music*, Vol. 6, no. 1, Spring 1992, p. 294.