Vernacular Culture and the Problem of Belonging

My remarks today revolve around what is, to me, a central issue in reckoning with the African-American intellectual tradition: the relationship in the tradition between cultural production and the politics of belonging. At the heart of this relationship is the matter of integration, broadly conceived, into a wider, multiracial political and social space. This is no simple equation. I am mindful, always, of James Baldwin's question in *The Fire Next Time:* "Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?"[1] Baldwin's remark is less about a nascent nationalism on his part, of course, and more about an affirmation of the meaningfulness of Black life in the liminal space of the United States. What do we do with that meaningfulness? And how does it relate to the significance and power of vernacular culture as a kind of belonging that does not need – or perhaps even want – wider social and political inclusion?

Let me begin with a few comments on the trajectory of Paul Gilroy's work, work that crystalizes many of the key theoretical meta-issues in the African-American tradition. Gilroy's oeuvre moves in two distinct directions. These directions schematize the stakes of thinking through Black cultural production and politics. First, there is the argument in *The Black Atlantic* for establishing the African-American tradition as a form of counter-modernity. This argument establishes the roots and routes of that tradition, but the wider theoretical problem of modernity is transformed in Gilroy's hands. Rather than thinking the tradition as abject or produced as a reactive force, Gilroy demonstrates the incisive and unique character of African-American cultural production *inside* white European modernity – a *counter*-modernity insofar as it operates under the rubric, time, and geography of white European modernity, unique and incisive insofar as it moves outside the hegemony of the latter through hyper-syncretic and creolizing work. Second, there is the argument, more utopian than anything, in his post-2000 essays that move *against* racial nationalism and toward a vision of conviviality. *The Black Atlantic*, with its emphasis on the labor of producing the cultural forms of counter-modernity, is already a critique of racial nationalism – roots and routes are post-national and syncretic – but in *Between Camps, Postcolonial Melancholia,* and after, Gilroy explores the possibilities, conditions, and hopes for conviviality, that living-together that is conceivable *after* all the discourses that dominated modernity: race, nation, ethno-nationalism, and cultural specificity. Conviviality is a relation of exchange and pleasure – less the much-hyped and often maligned "post-racial" world, more the material factuality of multicultural space made to its own measure. A humanism after the infrahuman, we could say.

Gilroy's theorization of the past, then future, of Black life raises important questions. Let me here posit a guiding question for the present reflections: pending the social and political transformation that makes

conviviality *possible,* what are we to make of the cultural space cleared out by counter-modern production and the question of belonging? For me, this is a key question in thinking through the meaning of democracy in an anti-black, necropolitical world. That is, if the production of social death is the political transcendental – the condition for the possibility of making the American common place in which Black death is commonplace – then how ought we think belonging and democratic meaning?

In a certain sense, this is a very old question. I would say that it is at the heart of one of the founding disputes of the African-American tradition, the clash of Black political vision between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. That dispute is at first glance about the ethics and politics of concession. But that is to let Du Bois dictate the terms of dispute. For Du Bois, Washington's focus on Tuskegee and vocational education comes to its political fruition in the Atlanta Compromise. In that moment, Washington tells the white South that he will not demand civil rights and will instead focus on the cultivation of virtues – work ethic, political sensibilities, democratic commitment, and other American spiritual values – until the timing is right for integration. Du Bois contests this with virulent language in the third chapter of *Souls of Black Folk,* depicting Washington as the worst kind of Black person who was happy to accept the white South's vision of abject blackness. Washington's argument in *Up from Slavery*, however, gives a very different account of his own rationale. On Washington's account, the Tuskegee project is really about making Black life whole after two and a half centuries of brokenness. This is a project about work and virtue that is in many ways paralleled in Anna Julia Cooper's conception of womanhood in *A Voice from the South,* in which she argues that Black women need their femininity recognized *and,* from that recognition, come to re-form Black childhood and manhood with the virtues and values denied them for centuries. Writing from the recently emancipated South, a site in which Black people had to live alongside their torturers and enslavers after emancipation, Washington and Cooper both turn their gaze and labor back to rebuilding (or building for the first time) African-American subjectivity as cultivation of self. Du Bois, child of the abolitionist hotbed of the Berkshires and New England more broadly, does not see this struggle and demand. He sees only concession. But if we read Washington and Cooper in the frame of a living-alongside-torturers-and-enslavers, then I wonder if a different picture comes into view – a picture of moving from survival to self-making.

This requires a double reading of sorts. In particular, I have in mind just this: Washington (and perhaps Cooper) is advocating in the higher frequencies for concessions to white racism and its sense of racial supremacy, but what of the lower frequencies? What is the second moment, folded into compromise? Perhaps those lower frequencies tell a different story, a story about what it means to live in such violent, contested space and want to not just survive, but begin to

thrive. Who will be our lawyers, accountants, farmers, teachers, doctors, and business owners in the post-Reconstruction nation, Washington asks? Black people. This is Washington's emphatic claim. When he makes this claim, we ought to hear in it a kind of racial nationalism: Black people for Black people, African-American community for itself, not for another, not in the interest of another nor under the gaze of the other. To be sure, there is a lot in *Up from Slavery* and elsewhere about an integration-to-come; when African-Americans prove themselves worthy, Washington claims, white Southerners will recognize Black goodness, equality, and even greatness. But before that, there is a retreat of blackness and Black people into itself in the economic and full social sense. Tuskegee produces just this. A sort of post-emancipation *marronage.*

I am often struck by how this early dispute prefigures so much that follows, especially in terms of the persistence of pessimism as an affect across the tradition. For all of his critique of Washington and aspiration for a different kind of America, it remains critical that we remember how Du Bois' work and life took a decidedly pessimistic turn beginning in *Darkwater* (I am thinking in particular of the "Souls of White Folk" chapter) and culminating in his renunciation of U.S. citizenship and emigration to Ghana. And I also have in mind Richard Wright's work, from *Native Son* onward, for which the movement from (near always abject) Black life to integrated social and political space is figured as a movement from muted life to violent, premature death. The man who lived underground exits the underground only to be murdered by the state. And we all know Bigger Thomas' fate. It's the same. Wright's puts the pessimist's ontology of whiteness into literary nihilism, which is a kind of race realism. When Ralph Ellison critiques Wright's fiction as mere sociology in "The World and the Jug," it is important to note how that is an aesthetic intervention. The pessimism remains beyond dispute.

Against this pessimism, there is in the tradition what we could call, following Michael Snediker (albeit in a different context), a *queer* optimism.[2] Not the optimism of a belief in American ideals – the necropolitical order makes such things perversely utopian, in my view, as well as derived from a misappropriation of founding principles and promises. Rather, there is instead an anchoring of life in sites of casual resistance: culture, pleasure, love, sadness, suffering, ecstasy, celebration. Not those things in mixed-space or spaces, but as the defining features of Black life lived answering only to itself or what Baldwin in "Many Thousands Gone" called "the relationship that Negroes bear to one another."[3] This is Baldwin's most powerful repudiation of Wright's nihilism. In it, he asks: What would it mean to think from this relation, rather than from the labor of the white gaze and the lifeworld? It would mean taking the tradition seriously as the event of world-making, the appropriation of thought and being by the work of intra-racial relations and their form of belonging. In a simple phrase, this is life as what, following so much of what Ellison's essays had

argued, Albert Murray calls the blues aesthetic. “The blues,” Ellison writes,” is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.”[4] This is world-making work. Murray makes this clear when he writes that “when the Negro musician or dancer swings the blues, he is fulfilling the same fundamental existential requirement that determines the mission of the poet, the priest, and the medicine man."[5] Creation of worlds, the naming of what is holy, and the terms of participation in worship. The blues aesthetic as subjectivity and community.

If we take the blues aesthetic seriously, then we begin to see how the spatial meaning of belonging is always and already fraught, or at least complicated. That is, belonging on the model of Gilroy’s conviviality is about the transformation of the psychological, cultural, social, and political space of a broad public into a space of multicultural participation and indulgence. Conviviality is about the pleasures of being-together, friendship as the possibility of another kind of *polis*. Conciliation (making friendship for the first time) and humanism reconfigured, in Césaire’s words, as a measure fitted to the world – these gather the full ethical and political meaning of conviviality to itself, animating it with a vision of the human after the infrahuman. The spatiality of this project or vision is the broadest sense of the *polis* and committed to common places –sites that bring multicultural communities together. We can also see this sort of vision manifest in discrete places, for example the jazz club in Baldwin’s *Another Country* and “Sonny’s Blues,” in which new forms of racial sociality are possible. Gilroy writes Baldwin’s jazz club large. That is the politics of a new humanism.

But another spatiality needs words and attunement, the spatiality enacted in the liminal spaces of Black sociality outside the white gaze. The white gaze is a mythic figure, and, at least in part, rightly so. The mythic character of the white gaze lies in its (alleged, sometimes real) capacity to form and deform social ontology, generating a colonial social and political space in which Black possibility is determined by the anti-black values of that gaze. Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* is an exemplary text here precisely because it outlines with such phenomenological and existential rigor how sociogeny determines ontology and all the pessimism and apocalyptic thinking that flows from such determination under colonial regimes. But what of the sociality that is not beholden to that gaze? If we recall Baldwin’s early critique of Wright, in particular when that critique works through the figures of Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima, we can see a key shift in psychological and cultural space. Baldwin attacks Wright by arguing that his protagonists are simply the creations of white racism; the protagonists are not in any sense fully developed African-American subjects. His protagonists are like Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima – understood in

their most reduced sense, as objects of white racism and not subjects of their own lives. Wright is not wrong, of course; Baldwin famously notes that every Black person has a Bigger Thomas living inside their skull. But Baldwin also asks what it means that we have not contemplated or stopped to imagine the whispers between Tom and Jemima, we have not considered their dreams and fantasies. We have not thought their lives without "aunt" and "uncle," those two derisive qualifiers. What about Jemima and Tom? Who are they? What do they have to say to us? What of their lives remains unsaid? "Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom," Baldwin writes, "our creations, at the last evaded us; they had a life – their own, perhaps a better life than ours – and they would never tell us what it was."[6] Or, perhaps better, we struggle to listen and hear that life. It is a life without articulation in Stowe, for sure, but also in Wright's fiction, which Baldwin describes as her great inheritor. (It's always worth noting that Wright's non-fiction tells different stories.)

If we begin with those whispers and dreams, Baldwin claims, then we open ourselves to what has already happened and, indeed, what makes Wright himself possible. Recall here Ellison's remark that "Wright could imagine Bigger, but Bigger could not possibly imagine Richard Wright."[7] But the key point is that this imagining and making has *already* happened, that bit that makes Wright possible, and it is not what the white gaze configures as the possibilities for blackness. Instead, it is the formation in and of vernacular culture, something as old as the arrival on and leaky space of the plantation, something as new as the conversations and creations outside or in the folds of the sociogeny of shared, multi-racial political space. This alternative, liminal space may be narrow and limited if viewed from the perspective of conviviality and its new humanist aspirations. But seen from itself, lived as the blues aesthetic and all the developments that have flowed from it, it is an entire world. And this, for me, is the crucial insight to be drawn from thinkers like Baldwin, Ellison, Murray, and others: the project of world-making is not just a matter of survival, fiat, or abject clinging to what remains. Rather, it is just that: making a world.

In the end, then, I would argue that conviviality, for all of its rich insight and profound moral aspirations, is in very real tension with the implications of the world-making work of counter-modernity. Counter-modernity is in many ways the refusal of the center-margin dyad and the sorts of political imperatives – conservative and radical both – that derive from it. The reinscription of that dyad in theorizing a wider sense of democracy and democratic belonging makes sense; the marginal always move in the world of the center, as it were, whereas the marginal are abandoned at best, subject to violence and terror at worst. My question in these moments, in these contrasting and at times crossing spaces, comes back to the meaning of belonging and vernacular culture. If vernacular culture is not only a belonging of black life to itself, but also a world sufficient to the task of sustaining and growing that life, – the blues aesthetic becomes the

jazz aesthetic becomes soul babies and hip-hop culture – then what is lost in the movement to conviviality? What is the fate of the counter-modern in another, convivial modernity and its aftermath? This has been the hesitation of Washington, Cooper, and others in the tradition, manifest then as the question of civil rights and Black independence. Their hesitation returns here and asks us, simply, to contemplate the risks to vernacular culture and belonging when we think race into democracy's promise of a common place of friendship, conviviality, and the widest sense of belonging.

What does it mean to lose a world in search of another future?

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[1] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage Publishers, 2002), 89.

[2] Michael Snediker, *Queer Optimism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006)

[3] James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 72-73.

[4] Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Publishers, 1996), 78.

[5] Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Black Experience and American Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 58.

[6] Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," 68.

[7] Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *Shadow and Act,* op. cit., 114.