

# WHAT IS THIS 'BLACK' IN BLACK STUDIES? FROM BLACK BRITISH CULTURAL STUDIES TO BLACK CRITICAL THOUGHT IN UK ARTS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is two-fold. Firstly, it identifies and maps out a new presence in race discourse in the UK arts and higher education, under the heading of 'US Black Critical Thought'. Secondly, it seeks to situate 'US Black Critical Thought' and its growing impact upon intellectual and aesthetic discourses on race in the UK through the lens of the longer-term project of 'Black British Cultural Studies'. The article traces the formation and eventual dissolving of 'Black British Cultural Studies' from the early 1980s to the late 1990s, and suggests that 'US Black Critical Thought' has energised a cohort of younger thinkers and artists in Britain, following a period where the intellectual left side-lined race as a serious category of theoretical or critical analysis.

**Keywords:** cultural studies, black thought, race, art, intellectual history

## INTRODUCTION

Consider the following list of events which were hosted by arts organisations and universities in the UK between 2013 and 2018: Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, 'Black Studies: Grammars of the Fugitive', Goldsmiths, University of London; Denise Ferreria De Silva, 'Reading the Dead', The Showroom, London; Saidiya Hartman, 'Intimate Trespass: Hapticality, Waywardness and the Practice of Entanglement', Serpentine Gallery, London; Frank B. Wilderson III, 'On Afro-Pessimism and Structural Antagonisms', Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), London; Christina Sharpe, 'On Lies and Lying', Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London (UCL); Hortense Spillers, 'In Conversation with Gail Lewis', ICA, London.<sup>1</sup>

Since the turn of the millennium the speakers listed above have developed a reputation as thinkers who have reoriented and re-energised the field of Black Studies in North America; all but one of them holds positions at higher education institutions which possess significant economic and cultural power (New York University, University of California, Columbia University, The University of British Columbia); and all had been invited to speak in the UK because there was an audience in place who had already begun to engage

1. <https://www.gold.ac.uk/calendar/?id=7091>. Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://www.theshowroom.org/library/object-positions-public-lecture-3-reading-the-dead-denise-ferreira-da-silva-in-conversation-with-shela-sheikh>. Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/exhibitions-events/intimate-trespass-hapticality-waywardness-and-practice-entanglement>. Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://archive.ica.art/whats-on/frank-b-wilderson-iii-afropessimism-and-structural-antagonisms>. Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies/events/2018/mar/ias-lies-public-lecture-series-christina-sharpe-lies-and-lying>. Accessed 1 March 2019. <https://www.ica.art/learning/hortense-spillers-conversation-gail-lewis>. Accessed 1 March 2019.

extensively with their published output.<sup>2</sup>

Such a pattern requires close attention. The concentration of events, organisations, and speakers indicates something like the emergence of a new phenomenon within Black Arts and the intellectual politics of race in the UK. It appears that a set of discourses and concepts concerning the question of 'blackness' from the field of Black Studies over the past decade have found a 'home' in UK arts institutions and the marginal spaces of race and cultural politics in the British academy. This is in contrast to the relative lack of attention given to new developments in Black Studies from more established disciplinary formations in the British academy (such as Philosophy, Critical Theory, History, English Literature, Sociology, Media and Politics). Certainly, up until the early 2000s, institutions such as The Serpentine or UCL would almost never have thought to have invite an African American scholar. Similarly, the first port of call to discuss questions of blackness and/or race at either the ICA or Goldsmiths would most likely have been one or all of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Kobena Mercer.

Something has clearly shifted within the aesthetico-political terrains of race and/or blackness as a site of discourse in the UK, whereby a grouping we want to call 'US Black Critical Thought' has becoming a formative presence in a set of live debates. At the same time it appears as if an earlier project of what we are retrospectively referring to as 'Black British Cultural Studies' no longer carries the same critical edge. This at least is the guiding proposition we want to enter into and take apart over the course of this article: the stakes of US Black Critical Thought's arrival in the UK, for both a retrospective mode of Black British Cultural Studies (which was neither fully constituted as a field and is perhaps now over) and for the present direction of travel for Black Arts and race thinking in the UK. The explicit focus on the arts and culture draws attention to what for us is a crucial dimension of the interdisciplinary approach that runs through early Black British Cultural Studies to US Black Critical Thought and now into the UK present. Our contention is that the take up of US Black Critical Thought in the arts and the edges of the academy in the UK is the sign of an emergence of a more experimental, speculative praxis, in a time where race analysis in UK academia, while continuing to offer trenchant critique of racism, is unable to conceptualise the politics of contemporary blackness within the reductive orthodoxies of institutional methodologies and sociological empiricism.

This will require us to not only delineate the generally derived characteristics of Black British Cultural Studies to the extent that it was formed, developed and dissolved from the 1980s to the late 1990s, but also to map out the nature of US Black Critical Thought as it has intensified and generalised its concerns since the early 2000s. It is also important at this stage to acknowledge that the terms 'Black British Cultural Studies' and 'US Black Critical Thought' are not absolute descriptors with strict demarcations. We fully recognise that such placeholders are in fact inadequate names for

2. The list above is not exhaustive. Many of the figures named have spoken in the UK on more than one occasion.

a set of diasporic formations which are already entangled, fractured and unclear in their genesis, and in fact this is a feature we shall seek to illuminate in the proceeding passages. In addition, we shall not be treating thought and intellectualism as reified objects, but instead we shall track them as an ensemble of activities which are buffeted by and forged within numerous intellectual ecologies and institutional contexts.

The questions driving this article are: What does it mean now that US Black Critical Thought has become the engine for new thinking in the Black Arts and race-conscious sections of academia in the UK? How do we consider this new trajectory in the light of a Black British Cultural Studies project which didn't quite fully arrive and has since been dismantled? Where does this leave us in terms of thinking on questions of race and/or blackness in the UK, especially at the points where thought production and aesthetic production mutate?

### BLACK BRITISH CULTURAL STUDIES

It is important from the outset to signal the level of instability operating between the terms 'Black British Cultural Studies' and 'US Black Critical Thought', and even more so, to acknowledge the complex genealogies of the name 'Black British Cultural Studies' itself. As we shall go on to show shortly, whilst race was a driving feature in the emergence of Cultural Studies in the UK from the 1970s, it was not until 1996, and the US publication of *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* that we find a clear delineation of a project.<sup>3</sup> That it was identified by the editors as uniquely Black and British, in order to draw distinctions from a historically coherent Black Studies trajectory in the US, and to measure the influence the new work from the UK was having upon their field, indicates the nuanced discursive terrain into which we are entering. Furthermore, the model for the type of analysis we intend to undertake is derived from Houston A. Baker, Ruth H. Lindenberg and Stephen Best's introduction to the 1996 collection. The reason being is that the authors assess the politics of knowledge production across the US-UK black diaspora not so much in terms of the merits of individual pieces of scholarship, but as the constitutions of fields, the development of conceptual tendencies, and a set of institutional alignments, which are shaped by a range of external as well as internal forces, and are reflective of shifting socio-economic dynamics, whilst also indicating how such fields are able to generate new modes of knowledge production. All of this takes place through a discussion of the term 'black/blackness' as it mediates between the projects of US Black Studies and Black British Cultural Studies, which draw on divergent – yet at points resonant – political, economic, cultural valences of these concepts. Even more so than this, what Baker et al. achieve, for our purposes, is the positing of an account for the conditions of emergence of Black Critical Thought in the US in its earliest guises during the 1980s. In effect, what Baker et al. argue is that what

3. Houston A. Baker Jr, Manthia Diawara & Ruth H. Lindenberg (eds), *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

we are calling US Black Critical Thought was the result of the entry of what they chose to call Black British Cultural Studies into the American academy via the likes of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Kobena Mercer and too many other Black British thinkers to mention here.<sup>4</sup> What the project of Black British Cultural Studies achieved in the US was the introduction of blackness as a discursive politics of representation. This was then spliced with an already operative US Black Studies articulation of blackness which was developed as a unifying force for a liberatory politics of material redistribution. It is in this splicing, during the 1980s, that the basis for the particular project of Black Critical Thought from the US – as we currently understand it – was arranged.

Much of the impetus for this development came via Black British Cultural Studies interlocution with new experimental tendencies in Black British Arts which established the aesthetics and politics of image production as the arena for new thinking on the question of blackness in the US (as exemplified by Coco Fusco's 1988 booklet *Young, British and Black: The Work of Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collective*).<sup>5</sup> What this means for our task in this article is that we are asking what happened to the nature and the politics of this multi-dimensional, cross-hatched channel of communication in the early 2000s? What happened when this US version of critical and cultural theory centred on the question of blackness matured, developed a syntax and grammar reflective of its particular histories, and was then transported to the UK through the economic reach of US higher education? Whilst at the same time the comparatively institutionally (although certainly not intellectually) nebulous project of Black British Cultural Studies to some extent stalled, but more importantly was dissolved of any serious support, and was thus largely unable to either sustain or redesign itself for a new political moment?

To answer such questions requires us to begin with a structural and historical mapping of race, higher education and left intellectualism in Britain that moves across theoretical, institutional, political, social and aesthetic terrains. We first need to determine what we mean by retrospectively installing the notion of a Black British Cultural Studies project. It is related to the trajectories and take-up of the two major figures, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, although it extends far beyond the specific remit of their work. At this stage, it is important for us to signal that it is almost impossible to grasp the emergence of Black British Cultural Studies without conceiving of it as a delayed outcome of several decades of black political mobilisation in Britain since the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> In fact, an analysis of the relationship between radical organising, academic and artistic labour is the work of another article, which would hopefully fold into and complement this piece. For our purposes though, we are going to set the parameters within academia and the arts – whilst recognising their mediation through the political – as we are concerned with the characteristics the British intellectual politics of race have taken on within these confines.

Following a period as research fellow, in 1968 Stuart Hall took on the directorship of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University

4. Significantly Hall was also a key figure in the making of US Cultural Studies. See Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A Treicher (eds), *Cultural Studies*, New York, Routledge, 1992.

5. <https://www.hallwalls.org/pubs/30.html>. Accessed 1 March 2019.

6. A. Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance*, London, Pluto Press, 1982.

of Birmingham from Richard Hoggart. At an institutional level Hall saw his role as extending and intensifying the atmosphere of student-driven debate internal to the centre, as well as protecting its work from the threat of political interference from the university. Intellectually, this period also saw him concertedly turn towards the question of race and immigration in British society. The impulse behind this analysis was the changing nature of black migration to the UK (settlement had now been recognised as the norm and a new 'second wave' of Black Britons were being born into the society), together with the emergent crisis in British capitalism and the state. Thus, over numerous articles and lectures, his line of argument tended to focus on two targets: one was the nature of race-relations and the mistaken notion that racism was simply a problem of psychology; the other was the orthodox distinction made by British Marxists between class (as a concrete category of analysis) and race (as a mode of problematic false consciousness). In this respect, much of his thinking in this period was shaped by his adaptation of both Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, allowing him to move towards an account of the hegemonic character of racism and race as a structural category.<sup>7</sup>

This thinking coalesced around the collectively authored *Policing the Crisis* (1978). Building on the CCCS' direct involvement in defence campaigns for two young black men charged with 'mugging' in Handsworth and sentenced for up to twenty years, the analytic scope of the book allowed Hall and his co-authors to put a number of new lines of argument on the table. As a result, *Policing the Crisis* saw them undertake a reformulation of the then prevalent Euro-Marxist theorisation of the state by positing race as a structural category. As part of such a line, the book configures race not as a new phenomenon visited upon British society through post-war migration, but as the latest stage in a long imperial project whereby colonial labour (and therefore race) became constitutive of class formation in Britain. Hall et al. were also insistent on foregrounding culture as the means by which Black populations in Britain forged and expressed their class status, as well as pointing to the intensity and depth of debates amongst Black organisations on the ground (such as *Race Today* and *The Black Liberator*) on the relations between race, class, and the crisis.<sup>8</sup>

By Hall's own acknowledgement he was unable to extend the question of race further within the setting of CCCS until a group of students arrived with the experience and energy to take on such a task. With the formation of the Race and Politics Group, the likes of Errol Lawrence, Hazel Carby, John Solomos, Pratibha Parmar, Gilroy and others, did more than fulfil this imperative. The work they produced contested a number of orthodoxies on the British Left with regards to race and empire, and even destabilised a self-styled set of radical tendencies in Marxist theory. The Race and Politics Group laid down the first recognisable marker in Black British Cultural Studies with the publication of *The Empire Strikes Back* in 1982. Looking

7. Kieran Connell, 'Stuart Hall: Cultural Studies 50 years on' [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t\\_Hkz0IODE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t_Hkz0IODE). Accessed 1 March 2019. Stuart Hall, 'Black Britons' in Eric Butterworth and David Weir (eds) *Social Problems of Modern Britain*, London, Fontana, 1972; 'Stuart Hall – Interview', *Cultural Studies*, 27, 5, 2013.

8. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan Press, 1978; 'An interview with Stuart Hall', *Afias Review: Special Issue on Racism and Class Structure*, London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1979.

back over the preceding decade, the collection tracks the emergence of a new popular racism in Britain arising out of crises within society and those occurring in international capital. The focal points of this new racism were Britain's immigrant Black populations, whose construction as an alien wedge, argued the authors, was not an aberration on the way to the dream of socialism in one country, but evidence of the tenacity of racism as a function of Britain's imperial constitution. Through contributions from Lawrence, Carby and Parmar, the collection proceeded to unpack such a hypothesis by highlighting: the pathological strain in 'race-relations' sociology; the state's predetermination of Black children as educationally subnormal; as well as the political limits of both white feminism and the labour movement when it came to the organisational capacities of Black and Asian women.<sup>9</sup>

The two pieces Gilroy contributed to *Empire* went on to form the basis of his solo publication, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987). In this study, Gilroy takes the basis of the claims laid out in *Empire* and intensifies the lines of argumentation. His critique of the national framing of Cultural Studies opened up the critical terrain to transnational and diasporic conceptualisation of Black culture. It allowed him to arrive at what would go onto to become two consistent features of his thinking: one, that forms of ethnic absolutism and nationalism require virulent critique, no matter on which side of the colour line they appear; two, that the sociality of black sonic culture operates as an underground yet open zone, where the apparently hard lines of race and class are decomposed and reengineered on a nightly basis.<sup>10</sup>

The 1980s saw the emergence of a new confident and assertive Black Arts movement in Britain. Flourishing for over a decade and a half, it initially began in painting but went on to encompass photography and film to operate as an entire visual project. Across this period there were various transitions and interventions which saw the induction of shifts from overt militancy to the exploration of feminist and queer politics, and modes of neo-conceptualism.<sup>11</sup> It came as no surprise then that, after taking up a new post at the Open University in 1979, Hall became increasingly involved in critical debates about Black British Arts, even if he insisted he was always doing so as an outsider. Initially entering into the field via the photography of Vanley Burke and Rotimi Fami-Kayode, before becoming actively engaged in the emergence of new black cinema, Hall began to recompose his earlier structuralist account of race by paying attention to the cultural practice being produced by the very 'second wave' of Black Britons whom he had insisted a decade earlier, would disturb and push through new articulations of the social and the political. This recognised and went beyond the notion of 'political blackness' as a unifying signifier for anti-racist struggles of African, Caribbean and South Asians migrants in the UK.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Hall's writing in this period of interlocution with Black Arts sees him introduce some new terms. One such example is the way 'black' becomes not so much a category of politically strategic significance but also a discursive one, constantly in flux and thus

9. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, London, Hutchinson / CCCS, University of Birmingham, 1982.

10. Paul Gilroy, *'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, Chicago, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987.

11. Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in Britain: A History since the 1950s*, London, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2014.

12. Stuart Hall and David A. Bailey (eds) *'Critical decade: Black British photography in the 80s'*, *Ten* 8, 1992.

13. Stuart Hall, 'What is this "Black" in black popular culture?', *Social Justice*, 20, 1/2, 1993.

14. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural identity and cinematic representation', *Framework*, 36, 1989.

15. Stuart Hall, 'Assembling the 1980s: The deluge - and after' in David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, Sonia Boyce, *Shades of Black: Assembling the 1980s*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2005.

16. Salman Rushdie, 'Songs doesn't know the score' in Kobena Mercer (ed), *Black Film, British Cinema*, London, BFI / ICA, 1988.

17. Paul Gilroy, 'Nothing but sweat inside my hand: Diaspora aesthetics and black arts in Britain' in Kobena Mercer (ed), *Black Film, British Cinema*, London, BFI / ICA, 1988; 'Cruciality and the frog's perspective: An agenda of difficulties for the black arts movement in Britain', *Third Text*, 2, 1988; Paul Gilroy and Jim Pines, 'Handsworth songs: audiences /aesthetics/ independence', *Framework*, 35, 1991.

forging a broader field of representation.<sup>13</sup> Or there is the entry of 'difference' into the frame. Hall was quick to stress that the turn to difference was not a simple adoption of a post-structuralist trope, but rather a recognition of the displacement of a certain mode of innocence by a new found critical confidence in black cultural politics.<sup>14</sup> He insisted throughout this moment in the re-making of Black British Cultural Studies that he was not looking to make aesthetic judgments on the transcendental value of artworks, because such a move would indicate a level of critical failure. Instead, he was interested in how the works within Black Arts operated as an ensemble of elements in the construction and challenging of a wider social fabric.<sup>15</sup> Nowhere was this stance more firmly pursued than in his 1987 debate with Salman Rushdie and Darcus Howe in the letters section of the *Guardian* over Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs*.<sup>16</sup>

Hall's defence of *Handsworth Songs* points to another crucial moment in the development of Black British Cultural Studies, especially in terms of the discursive construction of an arena where debates about black aesthetics and culture could be hashed out. In fact, the nature of the next moment in Black British Cultural Studies could be understood as a tension over the new found intimacy with Black Arts, a perceived growing distance from the politics of the Black working class and the limits of a sociology of race relations. Paul Gilroy and Kobena Mercer were central figures in this next stage. Following the flourishing of a new mode of black cinema (lead and exemplified by Black Audio Film Collective, Sankofa Film and Video Collective, and others), Gilroy sought in a series of articles and interviews to question what he felt was an unexamined avant-gardism of the work in this area. Using the figure of the black audience as the organising principle, Gilroy asked to what extent the form (art cinema), the institutional settings (the gallery and global art circuit) and the conceptual frameworks (an embrace of poststructuralism) meant that the new black cinema was operating at a distance from a set of historical and political responsibilities.<sup>17</sup> The pressure he exerted on the new black cinema allowed him to posit an alternative trajectory for Black Arts, one he called Black populist modernism. Turning to literary sources (Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison) as exemplary of this trajectory, he suggested that Black populist modernism does not allow for an emptying out of blackness as a historical signifier and its transformation into an exchangeable style (a charge Gilroy laid at the door of new black cinema), but rather retains a commitment to open experimentation through the plurality of the diaspora by staying in touch with the experiences of Black audiences. Thus, Black populist modernist works are able to tap into the freedom drives of historical black experience and make them available to all.

It was Kobena Mercer, in his 1994 collection *Welcome to the Jungle*, who engaged with Gilroy's charges against the new black cinema by focusing on the nature of Black populist modernism itself. Mercer recognised the necessary class component to Gilroy's critique, but noted that class operated

in Gilroy's conceptual apparatus as a moral rather than a materialist category. This exposed what for Mercer is a more fundamental blockage in Gilroy's approach to the new black cinema, in the form of a kind of identity policing of the Black artist and audience in the name of populism.<sup>18</sup> Although Gilroy's case for Black populist modernism was largely reliant on literature, perhaps the less acknowledged presence in the claims he constructed with regards to class, the vernacular, audience, and experimentation is that of black music. Beginning with his essays in *Empire*, extending through to penultimate chapter of *Ain't No Black*, and arriving at *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy consistently turned to the aesthetic complexity and affective immediacy of black social music as the element which extends and remakes a utopian project. In light of such a claim, it remains interesting that in their exchange both Mercer and Gilroy leave the 'audio' of Black Audio Film Collective unaccounted for.

By the late 1990s Hall had left professional academia, partly because he could see the pitfalls of the current direction of travel in British higher education, and also in 1994 to help establish Rivington Place, and became chair of the black photography organisation Autograph ABP and the Institute of International Visual Arts (INiVA) – which housed the Stuart Hall Library – as a holding space and materialisation for the next stage of black arts and intellectualism in the UK. Almost over the same period, Gilroy, Mercer and Hazel Carby took up major posts in the US academy in African American studies and Art History departments. Such was the depth and richness of the public debate that had developed over the previous twenty years, it comes as a surprise when so few new scholars emerged to reshape Black British Cultural Studies for a different conjuncture. Why is it that the rate of discourse seemed to slow down and flatten out? One issue is down to the relative 'success' of Black British Cultural Studies, and Cultural Studies in general. The impact of the work undertaken by scholars operating in the legacies of Birmingham could be measured in the way it became a core part of humanities teaching and research in the UK.<sup>19</sup> Yet despite this 'success', Cultural Studies, and certainly Black British Cultural Studies, was not given sufficient support and space to cohere, possibly due to the explicit politics of the project. The traditional humanities fields in the UK – English Literature, History, Fine Art – could cherry pick the relevant aspects of Hall, Gilroy, Mercer et al., without having to deal with their rigorous critiques of capitalism, the state and the British Left. Having said all of the above, it is essential to recognise and delve into some of the internal failings of Black British Cultural Studies as an intellectual project – institutionally marginal and as publicly prominent as it was – as contributing factors. What were the potential problems and limits of Black British Cultural Studies as it had been configured up till this point?

One project which signalled the limits of Black British Cultural Studies was the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) and its publication *Race & Class*, both of which were marshalled by Ambalavaner Sivanandan. Although in their formative years Black British Cultural Studies (in the guise of the Race

18. Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, New York, London, Routledge, 1994.

19. 'Stuart Hall in conversation with Les Back', *darkmatter*, 7, 2010. <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2010/11/28/stuart-hall-in-conversation-with-les-back-audio/>. Accessed 1 March 2019.



and Politics Group at Birmingham) and the IRR could have been considered complimentary endeavours – in that both sought a break from the ideology of race relations, were led by charismatic intellectuals and nurtured young black thinkers (Colin Prescod in the case of IRR) – there were also significant differences in place which became the basis for major schisms decades later. These differences lay in the IRR’s relative institutional autonomy, its explicit focus on black struggle, and the willingness of the group to take an overt interventionist stance in the politics of race as part of a credo of unity of theory and practice. The public break came in the late 1980s, when Black British Cultural Studies turned towards aesthetic and theoretical concerns, and with Hall and Martin Jacques’ *New Times* project.<sup>20</sup> Sivanandan crystallized the disjunctures between Black British Cultural Studies and the IRR – even more so between him and Hall – with a virulent attack upon *New Times* (‘Thatcherism in drag’), and a dismissal of the move into culturalism, ethnicism, discourse, deconstruction and representation, as a retreat from black working classes struggles against racism.<sup>21</sup> Thus what this dispute put in place was a major point of divergence on the Black British intellectual left – which soon became a hardening of lines – with a militant racial politics of the everyday on one side, and the take up of black aesthetics in major art spaces on the other.

Returning to a point raised above, the lines of demarcation between IRR and Black British Cultural Studies shows up something of the relation this academic project had with on-the-ground political mobilisation. We want to suggest though that this discord does not disqualify Black British Cultural Studies as a legitimate field to be studied. As we shall go on to discuss, within the intellectual arena of race and/or blackness in the UK, the distinctions drawn between the theoretical/aesthetic and the empirical/political have become historical fault-lines which prove almost impossible to bypass. Our concern is not to pass judgment on the political merits of Black British Cultural Studies, but to understand its formation and development as a theoretical concern embedded in questions of aesthetics and politics. We are interested in its character, its nature, over a period of time, and how the dissipation of Black British Cultural Studies effected a theoretical discourse on race through to the present moment.

In some ways, it’s possible to think of Gilroy as someone who was trying to address the limits of Black British Cultural Studies exposed by IRR, hence his reservations about the new avant-garde turn in black cinema and his debate with Kobena Mercer. The unique charge of Paul Gilroy’s intellectualism had always come about through his intense attunement to Black British working class culture and its vernacular sound-field of race-class, as well as its real-time arrangement of utopian possibilities in the face of violent racism. Yet beyond *The Black Atlantic*, his work was not systematically taken up by the then more institutionally integrated mode of Cultural Studies, or experimental developments in Critical Theory and Radical Philosophy in the UK.

20. Stuart Hall, ‘The meaning of New Times’ in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds), *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1989.

21. A.Sivanandan, ‘All that melts into air is solid: the hokum of New Times’, *Race & Class*, 31, 3, 1989.

As much as an intellectual there is also an institutional and political dimension to the complex story of Black British Cultural Studies. Whilst we don't have the room to fully rehearse it here, we do need to account for the institutional disappearance of both Cultural Studies and Black British Cultural Studies which was orchestrated through the restructuring of polytechnics into post-92 universities. The polytechnic college was arguably the incubating unit for Black British Cultural Studies and Cultural Studies (for example, Black Audio Film Collective formed at Portsmouth Polytechnic and one of Gilroy's first professional appointments was at South Bank Polytechnic).<sup>22</sup> Marginal to traditional red-brick institutions and their heavily sedimented approaches to disciplinary knowledge production, polytechnics (as well as art colleges) appeared to operate under some kind of autonomy and thus displayed a greater openness to new strands in radical philosophy and critical theory, as well as live political and social developments. Thus, the polytechnic became a holding space within which Black and Asian working class students could deviate from proscribed social roles. The shift to post-92 university status meant that former polytechnics were integrated into the newly formed market of higher education. The resulting demand to compete for research funding and student numbers (the human capital of higher education) meant a new conservatism came into play, over time disciplinary boundaries were reinstated, and the impact-employability paradigm became the structuring force of daily life in the university. In such an atmosphere it became increasingly impossible for either Cultural Studies or Black British Cultural Studies to survive other than through exceptional yet isolated figures.

22. Phil Cohen, 'Introduction: Through a glass darkly', *New Ethnicities, Old Racisms*, London, Zed Books, 1999, p6.

#### 'NEW ETHNICITIES' AND THE EMPIRICAL TURN

A major point of demarcation in the narrative we are assembling arrives with Hall's 1988 'New Ethnicities' essay. Originally delivered as a conference keynote at the ICA, in it he outlines the shifting imperatives for Black British Cultural Studies in the face of the recomposition of the black subject, which was having knock on effects in the field of representation and black politics. One of the salient features of 'New Ethnicities' was Hall's deployment of much of the New Black Cinema as a guide for his audience – with references to films by Isaac Julien, Martina Attille, and Hanif Kureishi – thus further cementing his investment in the work of these artists as reconfigurations of the racial terrain.<sup>23</sup>

Phil Cohen was one of the first to try and codify Hall's intervention, but he did so by explicitly attempting to move away from the concerns of black arts and aesthetics, which he felt had begun to exclusively focus on immaterial questions of identity and hybridity. Instead, Cohen argued that 'New Ethnicities' needed to speak to the shifting nature of capital, maintain a focus on structural racism and keep class in the picture, rather than get lost

23. Stuart Hall, 'New ethnicities' in Kobena Mercer (ed), *Black Film, British Cinema*, London, BFI/ICA, 1988.

24. Phil Cohen, 'Through a glass darkly: Intellectuals on race', in Phil Cohen (ed), *New Ethnicities, Old Racisms*, London, Zed Books, 1999; Phil Cohen, 'Both sides of the line – Stuart Hall and new ethnicities, then and now': <https://philcohenworks.com/sides-line-stuart-hall-new-ethnicities-now/> Accessed 1 July 2019.

25. Les Back, *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives London*, London, UCL Press, 1996; Les Back and Shamser Sinha, *Migrant City*, London, Routledge, 2015.

26. Malcolm James, *Urban multiculturalism: youth, politics and cultural transformation in a global city*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2015; Helen Kim, *Making Diaspora in a Global City South Asian Youth Cultures in London*, London, Routledge, 2014; Naaz Rashid, *Veiled threats: representing the Muslim woman in public policy discourses*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2016; Sivamohan Valluvan, *The Clamour of Nationalism*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2019.

27. Claire Alexander, *The art of being Black: The creation of black British youth identities*, Oxford, New York, Clarendon Press, 1996.

in what for him was the interchangeable cul-de-sac of postcolonialism and postmodernism. The basis for this lay in empirically driven research, and it became the core of Cohen's Centre for New Ethnicities Research, established at University of East London in 1992.<sup>24</sup>

Such an interpretation of 'New Ethnicities', and the establishment of the centre, formed part of a broader reorganisation of intellectual labour on race in the UK. Following the remodelling of the higher education sector in 1992, the demand to secure research funding was twinned with the call for an empirically driven New Ethnicities project, the result being that Black British Cultural Studies in effect became solely located within Sociology. The fact that Hall, Gilroy and others were being most closely read and extended within the frameworks of the sociological imagination inevitably meant the character and direction of Black British Cultural Studies changed.

Les Back is probably the leading UK sociologist who has developed a wide-ranging body of critical work located in and expanding the contours of an ethnographic focused New Ethnicities, principally through paying close attention to urban everyday life and culture. (He taught at the Department of Cultural Studies, Birmingham University in the early 1990s before joining the Sociology Department at Goldsmiths in 1993). From his highly influential *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives London* (1996), to his recent writings on the *Migrant City* (2018) (with Shamser Sinha) Back has attempted to navigate the ethico-political relationship between lived culture, racism and the university.<sup>25</sup> He has been an influence in various ways on a younger generation of contemporary scholars who are committed to an empirically driven anti-racist sociology.<sup>26</sup>

Claire Alexander, a student of Hall's, is like Back, an important figure in instigating and chronicling this shift. Her first book, *The Art of Being Black: The Creation of Black British Youth Identities* (1996), was premised upon a break from 'generalised external pronouncements' on blackness in order to move towards more everyday understandings. In this respect, Alexander marks a distinction between her 'street level' focus, and that of Gilroy, Cornel West and bell hooks, whom she believes mistake black artistic production for black lived experience.<sup>27</sup> In a pair of articles stretching from 2002 to 2018, she reassessed the impact of New Ethnicities. One effect of its take up was that race thinking tended towards polarisation between hard empiricism and theoretical abstraction, which in turn led to an estrangement between intellectual labour and anti-racist activism.<sup>28</sup> Despite recognising the dangers of 'utilitarianism', Alexander still makes the case for a tempered New Ethnicities project and its ethnographic orientation as the most effective means for conceptualising race.<sup>29</sup> Examples of the type of work she proposes can be found in the *Ethnic & Racial Studies* journal, as well as the British Sociological Association's 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration' stream. The alternative is a valorisation of thinking over doing which – fed by a reduction of Hall's ideas into soundbites – leads to what Alexander feels are the theoretical dead-ends signalled by postcolonial,

decolonial and Black Studies.<sup>30</sup>

With Gargi Bhattacharyya we get a similar insistence on the textures of the everyday coupled with an investment in expressive popular culture, but it is interesting to note that rather than nailing her colours to the mast of New Ethnicities, Bhattacharyya insists she is drawing upon Black British Cultural Studies (while holding a professorship in sociology). Thus, it is no surprise that she recognises the necessity of operating in ‘the disparate morass of social science and humanities practice, with no particular unifying trait’.<sup>31</sup> Although working in Media and Communications, Anamik Saha’s analysis of race and the cultural industries is very much a product of the New Ethnicities approach (and thus speaks to the sociological). Yet he does criticise Alexander’s stance on the theoretical and the aesthetic for not recognising the psycho-social and affective operations of race embedded in the structural.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, although it appears that something resembling Black British Cultural Studies was maintained in New Ethnicities, its repositioning within sociology altered the nature of the project beyond recognition. For our purposes, the feeding of Black British Cultural Studies through the sociological imagination stalled several critical dynamics of the project. There was a failure to recognise that rather than leading to a ‘tidier and more convincing narrative’, a serious theoretical engagement with black cultural aesthetics generates degrees of messiness and incommensurability which, despite its obvious merits, the empirical and the ethnographic cannot adequately access.<sup>33</sup> What this has led to in New Ethnicities influenced research is a tendency to emphasise anti-racism and cultural identity as the singular horizon for thinking race in Britain, and thus theory, left relatively untouched by new British intellectuals of colour, even in its radical guises.

Where did something even vaguely resembling Black British Cultural Studies continue post-2000s? One possible last hurrah was Barnor Hesse’s edited collection *Un/settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, Transruptions*.<sup>34</sup> The essays by Barnor Hesse and Stuart Hall which bookend the volume show that by the early 2000s ‘multiculturalism’ had come to the forefront of debates about race in the UK, and that such debates were heavily encoded with Derridian conceptual figures, with the help of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as interlocutors. Beyond this text we have to broaden our framing definition of Black British Cultural Studies to trace anything like the vestiges, extension and maintenance of this type of work.

The key development that extended and pushed the work of Black British Cultural Studies was that of Black British Feminism. The publication of *Black British Feminism: A Reader* in 1997 signalled the fruition and continued urgency of a presence which had always been operative within Black British Cultural Studies, yet had not been given an adequate platform.<sup>35</sup> In this collection we find a genealogical development of Black British Feminism from its basis in the struggles of Black women migrant workers from the former colonies

28. Claire Alexander & Brian Alleyne, ‘Introduction: framing difference: Racial and ethnic studies in twenty-first century Britain’, *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 25, 4, 2002.

29. Claire Alexander, ‘Beyond Black: rethinking the colour/culture divide’, *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 25, 4, 2002.

30. Claire Alexander, ‘Breaking Black: the death of ethnic and racial studies in Britain’, *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 41, 6, 2018.

31. Gargi Bhattacharyya, ‘Teaching race in Cultural Studies’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies Today*, 1999.

32. Anamik Saha, *Race and the Cultural Industries*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018.

33. Claire Alexander, ‘Beyond Black: rethinking the colour/culture divide’, *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 25, 4, 2002.

34. Barnor Hesse (ed), *Un/settled multiculturalisms: Diasporas, entanglements, transruptions*, London, New York, Zed Books, 2000.

35. Heidi Safia Mirza (ed), *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, London, Routledge, 1997.

in the post-war period, into the Grunwick Strike of 1974 and the formation of the Organisation for Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) in 1978, the critiques of white feminism undertaken by Parmar and Carby at Birmingham, before arriving at a set of contemporary concerns around questions of postmodernity and difference. Similarly Avtar Brah's 1996 *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contested Identities* also brought into critical dialogue questions of Black feminism, nation, race, and diasporic culture within a politically informed Black British Cultural Studies framework.<sup>36</sup> Significantly Brah's work was largely taken up in Sociology and not in Cultural Studies or related Humanities fields. Much of the groundwork laid out by Brah and *Black British Feminism* was taken on a stage further by Sara Ahmed (who also contributed to the *Black British Feminism* reader) in a series of texts (*Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality*, and *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*).<sup>37</sup> With Ahmed we see a more explicitly theoretical account of race, gender and difference using a mode of dissident phenomenology. As such her work is probably as close as anything to the legacies of the Black British Cultural Studies project whilst representing a genuine attempt to rethink it for a new moment and through new paradigms, all undertaken outside the sociological holding zone. It's also worth noting that by the mid-2000s Ahmed was a somewhat lone figure, in that she was the only Professor of Race and Cultural Studies in British academia.

The other influential field closely related to Black British Cultural Studies was that of Postcolonial Studies. Ideas of otherness, history, and colonial discourse within this arena situated metropolitan racism and nationalism in the longer histories of colonial discourses as sites for the reproduction of imperial global power. In particular, the figure of Frantz Fanon articulated questions of racialisation and subjectivity, and through the focus on his *Black Skin White Masks*, brought together the concerns of Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies. Homi Bhabha's forward to the 1996 republication of *Black Skin, White Masks*, as well as his highly influential collection of essays in *The Location of Culture* (1994), provided a theoretically informed deconstruction of race, culture and coloniality.<sup>38</sup> In fact, the figure of Fanon serves as one who brings together questions of blackness, the postcolonial and the philosophical across a certain period in early 1990s British left discourse on race, as exemplified by the release of Isaac Julien's *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* (1995). The abstractions of postcolonial theory and perceived textualism were critiqued in particular by orthodox Marxist informed Cultural Studies. This anti-theoretical, empirical tendency, as well as the nationally focused British Left, resulted in postcolonialism having a very marginal place in Cultural Studies post-2000, with only a 'theory-lite' version operating in literature departments. In contrast, Fanon functioned as a theoretical resource has been a key site of critical debate across the differing elements of US Black Critical Thought.

36. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contested Identities*, London, Routledge, 1996.

37. Sara Ahmed, *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009; *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality*, London Routledge, 2000; *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, London, Routledge, 2004.

38. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994.

The contemporary intellectual residues of Black British Cultural Studies are exemplified in the work of John Akomfrah and Kodwo Eshun. Both figures working across the spaces of Critical Theory and Visual Art have extended the conceptual apparatus of earlier decades with a sustained critique of the politics of representation, and through a focus on aesthetics and the temporality of blackness. The singular trajectory of Akomfrah's film work brings into focus the routes not taken by Cultural Studies and race Sociology in the UK academy. Emerging from the nexus of developments in the social and political crisis in the 1980s, visibly manifest in the 'riots', and the institutional marginalisation of matters of race, the funded black film workshops, where Akomfrah as part of the Black Audio Film Collective, called into question the prevailing race relations anti-racist paradigms.<sup>39</sup> Armed with the latest developments in cultural theory and post-structuralism and in dialogue with key figures in Black British Cultural Studies (Hall, Gilroy, Mercer, Bhabha), Akomfrah and others experimented with the grammar of race through a series of cinematic interventions destabilising the politics of culture and nation. Since the early 1990s, with the demise of the funded film workshops, Akomfrah has in the main worked on large scale installations within art spaces and events. In works such as *The Nine Muses* (2010), *Vertigo Sea* (2015), *Auto Da Fé* (2016) and *Purple* (2017) Akomfrah has, through a near obsessive engagement with imperial visual archives, deconstructed and created counter histories and memories of slavery, colonialism, nationalism, increasingly framed through the ecological crisis of the planetary. The critical and political significance of these extraordinary works has largely been ignored in the dominant strains of Cultural Studies and the British Left (in and outside the academy) partly because of the failures to develop a language and frameworks that go beyond the moribund categories of race, nation and representation. In an equally reductive approach, the fields of Art History and Fine Art, as well as art criticism, have tended to valorise in isolation the aesthetics of the screenworks, with little understanding of the longer histories of Black and Postcolonial cultural politics being addressed.

Similarly Kodwo Eshun, through an inventive reworking of different strands of cultural theory has offered an array of insightful commentaries on music and sonic culture, as well as contemporary art, over a twenty year period. In particular, in *More Brilliant than the Sun* (1998) Eshun reconceptualised black electronic music in terms of its speculative capacities as the near ontological condition of diasporic blackness in the aftermath of the middle passage and the ruins of urban spaces. Eshun, as part of the 'The Otolith Group' (with Anjalika Sagar), has produced a number of experimental films that have interrogated the materiality of space and time across different political ontologies across the world.<sup>40</sup> Eshun, while operating between academic and art spaces, has remained a unique thinker whose work

39. Kodwo Eshun & Anjalika Sagar (eds), *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2007.

40. <http://otolithgroup.org/index.php?m=catalogue>. Accessed 1 March 2019.

doesn't fit neatly into the orthodoxies of Black British Cultural Studies. Both Akomfrah and Eshun, significantly have had a much stronger impact on black cultural and artistic discourse in the US than in the UK, as they themselves have been in dialogue with new developments in Black Critical Thought.

It is worthwhile noting here that whilst Akomfrah and Eshun have extended the work of Black British Cultural Studies, and in some respects offer a bridge to the developments in US Black Critical Thought, they are doing so more or less outside of academia and without any contact with black political organisations. Their primary venues are public arts institutions and the art economy. Such environments tend to require the flourishing of singular exceptional figures – as opposed to collectives – and have a tendency towards dehistoricisation due to an insistence upon contemporaneity. So whilst we are making the case that Akomfrah and Eshun have sustained Black British Cultural Studies in some form, they do so within contexts where it is very difficult for their audience to situate them within such a trajectory.

The passing of Stuart Hall in 2014 has led to numerous publications and events reflecting on his key ideas and writings. The variety of publications draw attention to the wide-ranging contributions of Hall to the development of Cultural Studies, race and left politics. The types of valorisation here have tended to place him as a historical figure, whose ideas are unproblematically fixed from the time of their articulation. Hall himself was not interested in his personal archive, or the history of Cultural Studies, unless it informed an analysis of the contemporary moment. He was a contingent thinker of the conjuncture. It is interesting to note that Hall's later work in the arts is quite marginal from the publications assessing his career.<sup>41</sup> This relative absence further supports our contention that what remains in place of the institutional project of Cultural Studies has largely failed to engage with developments in UK Black Arts, as well as US Black Critical Thought. In contrast, Hall as a thinker of race and culture has been addressed by John Akomfrah in film projects focusing on his life and political significance: *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012) in collaboration with Autograph, and *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013). The films, while engaging with the formation of Hall's ideas in the historical archive, stress the 'unfinished' form of his thinking, always open to be recomposed in different histories and places. We are arguing that the Black British Cultural Studies mode of thinking and practice as exemplified by Hall has been most rigorously worked through and developed (via Akomfrah and Eshun) in US Black Critical Thought. In the absence of any marked conceptual developments in the interdisciplinary analysis of race and culture in Britain in a time of diversity management and the ascendancy again of an anti-intellectual English empiricism, we see the innovations in US Black Critical Thought as providing an experimental mode of speculative theorisation that finds a very receptive audience looking for a way of intervening in the contested praxis of race and black culture in the UK. In a manner similar to 'French' post-structuralism in the 1970s and

41. Stuart Hall and Sarat Maharaj, *Modernity and Difference* (Annotation 6), INIVA, 2001; Stuart Hall and Mark Sealey, *Different: A Historical Context. Contemporary Photographers and Black Identity*, London, Phaidon, 2001.

1980s, US Black Critical Thought offers an urgently needed – if not always satisfactory – grammar to address the racial faultlines of UK knowledge formation.

## US BLACK CRITICAL THOUGHT

To understand how US Black Critical Thought has begun to shape critical discourse on race and blackness in the UK, we first need to grasp its own formation and characteristics. In general, since the early 2000s there has been an ontological-aesthetic turn within US Black Studies, whereby the take up of blackness as a contested field of representation has been reanimated by in-depth readings of major post-structuralist thinkers in order to re-align the project of Black Studies and develop a new mode of theorisation. This is not to say that US Black Critical Thought is entirely consistent and uniform. There are many internal lines of dispute, as well as lingering resonances of a Black British Cultural Studies influence, but we want to suggest that there are common qualities to US Black Critical Thought as a type of knowledge production – we could even call this a style – that has in some way to do with a set of shared questions on the table.

Hortense Spillers set the agenda for US Black Critical Thought in this regard by pushing beyond the task of rediscovering lost great black writers or campaigning for greater canonical representation. Instead, Spillers' is an epistemological project that involves – to adapt her own words – bringing theory into her house and making it work for black literature and culture. Therefore, it is possible to identify numerous components moving through her writing – feminist psychoanalysis, the Frankfurt School, Foucault and Derrida – but these are not taken as a whole and applied to her selected materials. Rather, Spillers is disaggregating these frameworks in order to deploy tendencies within them which allow her to amplify already existent strains in Black diasporic literature and culture. Across numerous articles and essays in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Spillers assembled formulations which have become foundational to the new direction in Black Critical Thought. They include the distinction she draws between body and flesh as a way to conceptualise the dispossessive cohesions of Black diasporic psychic life in the US; and 'ungendering', as an intense complication of the lines of demarcation between violence and capacity when it came to the libidinal economy of slavery.<sup>42</sup>

Saidiya Hartman is another figure who, alongside Spillers, has opened up new terrains for Black Studies and has become a touchstone thinker for the contemporary mode of Black Critical Thought. Although Hartman's project is archival and memorial, as opposed to Spiller's focus on the literary and cultural, she shares with Spillers the intention to undertake an epistemic rearrangement of Black diasporic history and the intellectual apparatus of the Enlightenment. The crucible for Hartman is the notion that slavery is not

42. Hortense Spillers, *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003.



43. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century American*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997; *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

44. See Alex Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2014.

45. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

46. Fred Moten, *Black and Blue*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2017; *Stolen Life*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2018; *The Universal Machine*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2018.

47. Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2010; Jared Sexton, 'People-of-colour-blindness: Notes on the afterlife of slavery', *Social Text*, 28, 2, 2010; 'Ante-anti blackness: afterthoughts', *Lateral*, 1, Spring 2012; 'Afro-pessimism: The unclear word', *Rhizomes*, 29, 2016.

only an unending project – extending in almost every direction and into the present – but the slave experience becomes constitutive of modern notions of freedom, sovereignty and free will, to the extent that the descendants of Africans in the Americas have never been able to evade its deadly grasp. Hartman has set out to show this to be the case in two ways: by turning to the archives of antebellum slavery and re-reading mundane instances of black performance as contoured by the presence of subjection; or by travelling to modern Ghana to reflect on the limits of conviviality and solidarity between Africans on the continent and the Black diaspora due to the psychic, political, economic and social reverberations of the trade and the world it put in place.<sup>43</sup>

It is worth noting that the terms of Black Critical Thought, as a new trajectory in US Black Studies, were set by two Black feminist thinkers in Spillers and Hartman, which is perhaps why questions of sexual and gender difference have tended to be at the forefront of the scholarship which followed their work.<sup>44</sup> This is certainly the case with Fred Moten and his 2003 *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, with its opening engagement with both Hartman and Spillers. Alongside his reading of their work, Moten's originality lies in holding together what seem like a set of disparate elements: the social aesthetics of black performance as extolled by Amiri Baraka; an insurgent and dissident Marxist strand in Black Studies exemplified by Cedric Robinson; and an absorption of Derrida to the extent that he feels like a Black diasporic thinker.<sup>45</sup> All of these materials cohere in Moten's account of blackness initiated in *In the Break*, but have now developed further beyond the terms established in the book. What has become evident is that Moten re-injects into a theorisation of blackness a class character, in the form of a mass intellectuality that is indicative of a hyperbolic mode of its everyday aesthetic production. For him, this means blackness is both quotidian and (borrowing from Nahum Chandler) 'para-ontological', in that it announces its presence but only in so far as it decomposes the very systems of racialisation that brought it into play. Blackness achieves this decomposition of race through an insistent, aberrant, communist openness and generosity.<sup>46</sup>

Frank B. Wilderson III and Jared Sexton are two thinkers who also take their lead from Spillers and Hartman, but they tread a markedly different path to Moten. Gathering their ideas under the banner of Afro-Pessimism, Wilderson and Sexton have sought to dismantle a liberal consensus in Black Studies by taking apart the logics of multiculturalism and solidarity through common lines of racial oppression. Shaped by a particular reading of Frantz Fanon, as well as selective interpretations of Achille Mbembe, Orlando Patterson and Lewis Gordon, Wilderson and Sexton have assembled a virulent account of blackness.<sup>47</sup> For them, blackness is exclusively tied to the Middle Passage and the slave trade, and as such it does not travel. The black is the sole unit for the paradigm (as opposed to experience) of blackness, because what it concentrates are historical modes of dispossession and alienation that amount to social death. Such conceptual moves allow Wilderson and Sexton to

distinguish between generalised racism (directed by whites and experienced by all non-whites) and the more categorical violence of anti-blackness (which is generated both by whites and all non-black people of colour and directed towards all black people). The engine for the production of anti-blackness is civil society, a hegemonic structure which reproduces and sustains the white/non-black through a libidinal drive for the public spectacle of black social death.

Afro-pessimism has been taken up rapidly among younger scholars in Black Studies, largely because it signals a type of radical break from orthodoxies and exposes the historical problematics around race in US left discourse. Having said that, a significant amount of the spread of this work can be ascribed to Wilderson and Sexton's tendency to sloganeer rather than analyse, and their reliance upon the ruse of the anecdote. Perhaps the most potent alternative to Afro-Pessimism – although not consciously produced as such – comes through Moten's work with Stefano Harney.<sup>48</sup> Their carving out of such concept-images as 'undercommons', 'study', 'logisticality' and 'incompleteness', is the outcome of the chain-reaction set off by the meeting points between the Black Radical Tradition and Italian Autonomia. The result is a theorisation of racial capitalism from Harney and Moten which pays close attention to the quotidian production of revolutionary activity as a kind of atmospheric blackness, which capital continually looks to monetise but can never fully capture.

Working from the historical vantage point of Brazil's location in the Black diaspora, but trained within the US, Denise Ferreira da Silva has introduced a strong philosophical and speculative orientation to the current debates in Black Studies. She has done so by extending some of the core precepts of Hortense Spillers thinking (the distinction between body and flesh) into the realms of mathematics and genetics. Her method though appears to carry the traces of Sylvia Wynter, the Caribbean philosopher and theorist, who is undergoing a period of rediscovery as a foundational thinker for current discourses within Critical Race Theory, Caribbean Studies and Black Studies.<sup>49</sup>

The originality of Nahum Dimitri Chandler's work lies in his commitment to a reading of W.E.B Du Bois which positions him as a pre-figurative desedimenter of enlightenment rationality. Chandler's thesis is that whilst Du Bois has been understood as a historian, sociologist and political organiser, if his long body of work is re-encountered as that of a philosopher, then what is opened up is an immense meditation on race as the foundational problematic of modern historicity and ontology. For Chandler, it is a project Du Bois could only have arrived at through his careful attentiveness to the social life and historical experience of African Americans.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, David Marriott's writing emerges through an attachment to a single major figure in the Black Radical Tradition: Frantz Fanon. Marriott is significant within the context of this article, because he (along with the likes of Kobena Mercer and Barnor Hesse) was part of a cohort of Black British

48. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson, Minor Compositions, 2013.

49. Denise Ferreira Da Silva, 'Toward a black feminist poetics: The question of blackness toward the end of the world', *The Black Scholar*, 2, 44, 2014; '1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On matter beyond the equation of value', *e-flux*, 79, Feb 2017; 'Hacking the subject: Black feminism and refusal beyond the limits of critique', *philoSOPHIA*, 1, 8, 2018.

50. Nahum Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2013.

51. David Marriott,  
*Whither Fanon?*  
*Studies in the*  
*Blackness of Being*,  
Redwood City,  
Stanford University  
Press, 2018.

intellectuals who left for the US most likely due to the greater hospitality offered to the very notion of a black thinker.<sup>51</sup> There are two ways to read Marriott's intense, psychoanalytically informed interpretation of the Antillean scholar and revolutionary: one is as a much more considered and rigorous account of Fanon than that offered by Wilderson and Sexton; another is as a strategic divergence from one of the closing moments of Black British Cultural Studies, in the form of the 1995 ICA symposium *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*, featuring Hall, Homi Bhabha, bell hooks, Françoise Verges, and Isaac Julien.

Whilst the picture we have painted of US Black Critical Thought is far from exhaustive, and inevitably partial, it provides enough of a sense of the key trajectories and characteristics of this formation for us to begin the final stage of our analysis. By this we mean, in the context of a scenario in Cultural Studies and left intellectualism in Britain where little had developed theoretically on race and/or blackness since the end of the 1990s (due to the combination of New Ethnicities empiricism, the depoliticisation of Black British Cultural Studies within the humanities, and few coherent theorists of race beyond exceptional artists), US Black Critical Thought fulfilled a certain need for young British students and artists of colour seeking to name the dynamics of race facing them. With its institutional form lending it a greater sense of coherence, the black thinkers trained within the American academy introduced above provide those coming to maturity within higher education and the arts in the UK the means through which to begin thinking race and/or blackness. Obviously the task of translation is never and should never be smooth – discord is a necessity – but what this British cohort of students and artists are able to do is independently (as Black Critical Thought is rarely, if ever, formally taught in Britain), construct a grammar that feeds into their practice. What then did it mean for the type of epistemic reordering undertaken by Spillers, Hartman, Moten, Wilderson, Sexton, Chandler and others to be fed into a neighbouring ecology in the form of the Black British Arts? How was Black Critical Thought received and translated within arts spaces in the context of a still post-imperial ecology, when it was not being picked up within the academy? At what rate and by what means were these theorists read? Were there any significant blockages and re-interpretations? What has this lead to in terms of the current modes of discourse on blackness and/or race in the arts, higher education and left thought in Britain?

## CONCLUSION – UK BLACK/RACE THOUGHT RELOADED

As we have been delineating, the formation of thinking and knowledge is never a programmed or linear process, as evidenced in the entangled traffic of ideas and texts between the UK and US. This is particularly the case for critical work in race and Black culture, where – in comparison to the US where we are seeing the changes in the curriculum and cultural field – in the

UK race and blackness has been in a very marginalised space, where only a few now canonical thinkers or artists are institutionally recognised. The lack of senior Black faculty within the humanities, and the very few courses and research centres focusing on race, diaspora and blackness has meant that the development and scope of UK Black Thought is very limited. Given that work operating under the rubric of Cultural Studies over the past decade has largely reduced race again to the marginal sub-field of the sociology of race relations, it is striking how US Black Thought has offered a sustained body of writings that at once critique the problematic of race as a social construct, and offer – following Nahum Chandler – a ‘para-ontological’ rendering of blackness and identity formation as site for resistance and collectivity. It is also striking that Black, Asian and Queer students, younger thinkers and artists at the edge or outside of the UK universities have embraced this work. The student-led initiatives such as ‘Why isn’t my Professor Black’, and the various decolonising the university/curriculum/arts projects are symptoms of the failures of the UK institutions to address the contemporary concerns of hegemonic whiteness, racism and resistance.<sup>52</sup> These institutional failures are the context for the recent establishment of Black Studies in the UK. Kehinde Andrews, one of the leading figures in setting up the BA Black Studies course at Birmingham City University, as well as the Black Studies Association largely ignores the history of Black British Cultural Studies, and the decades of race sociology, for a form of cultural nationalism and essentialist community discourses. Andrews’ persistent denunciation of the ‘white university’ ironically exposes the political limits of his project with its desire for institutional recognition as its end point.<sup>53</sup>

In contrast the study of US Black Thought has been the central mode of collective thinking against the depoliticised, dismantling of race work in UK universities and art schools. Inspired in particular by Harney and Moten’s *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, various groups and artists have created modes of (self) organising and intervening that cuts through the protocols of university teaching and learning. These initiatives do not constitute a coherent framework for anything like a new moment in Black British Cultural Studies. In fact in their contingencies and fugitive modalities they question the limits of the university and arts institutions for radical critique and cultural politics. They are suggestive examples of how alternative modes of knowledge and practices are being developed similar to the beginnings of Cultural Studies and its critique of hegemonic knowledge production.

For example, *The Sorry You Feel Uncomfortable Collective* (SYFU), formed in 2014, under the auspices of artist and educator Barby Asante (and curator Teresa Cisneros), and participated in ‘Baldwin’s Nigger Reloaded Project’ at INiVA, have been one of the major groups in shaping the reception of US Black Critical thought in the UK arts, and more importantly, they have put this work to use. Made up of a cohort of PoC, Black and Queer recently

52. “Why isn’t my professor Black? UCL panel discussion” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBqgIK9dTk4>. Accessed 1 March 2019; ‘Decolonising the Academy’, *The Dissonance of Things* <https://soundcloud.com/dissonanceofthings/decolonising-the-academy>. Accessed 1 March 2019.

53. Dhanveer Singh Brar, ‘Questions for a prospective black professoriate’, *darkmatter*, 31 March 2014. <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2014/03/31/questions-for-a-prospective-black-professoriate/>. Accessed 13 February 2020.

graduated fine arts students, independent writers, and curators, SYFU have undertaken a range of activities, such as public workshops on key black critical theory texts, exhibitions ( *(BUT) WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT WHITE SUPREMACY?*, at The Gallows Gate ), as well as developing conceptually driven projects – ‘Black Drift’ and ‘Blackness as Lingua Franca’ – which display a collectively shaped originality in their extension of the ideas of Spillers and Hartman, as well as Afro-Pessimist tropes.

Barby Asante, in her own right as an artist, exemplifies a reworking of US Black Critical Thought with a focus on history, cultural memory and the archive. In her performative work such as the serial project ‘Declaration of Independence’, (initially performed at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, 2019) she animates the erased histories of women of colour through rituals of collective invoking and reimagining the suffering and pain of the past. In dialogue with influential work of the US Black Studies theorist Christina Sharpe (as well as Spillers and Hartman), and through a prism of black feminism, Asante articulates elements of Afro-Pessimism with current ideas of the ‘decolonial’ that have been circulating in and outside academia. Asante’s focus on women, historical violence and death, threads the decolonial through African mythology and black womanism, in registers of ‘care’, spirituality, and self/group love.

Similarly, Hannah Black’s writings, exhibitions and performance work have featured some of the most sustained engagement with the work of key Black Studies thinkers from a Black British artist and intellectual. In books (*Dark Pool Party*), essays (‘Fractal Freedoms’), and recent shows (*Some Context* at Chisenhale Gallery, 2017), we see Black ruminate on and further complicate concepts such as ‘non-performance’, ‘fugitivity’, ‘anti-blackness’, and ‘ownership’ as they have been developed by major U.S Black Critical Theorists.<sup>54</sup> Despite being British born and educated in the UK, it’s worth noting that in order to move along these lines Black did so via relocation to Berlin and New York, and without entering into the institutional machinery of American higher education.

These are some instances in a wider range of activity, but they are indicative of one of our central propositions: that this emergent form of ‘(black) study’ within the Black British Arts revisits the original ethos of Cultural Studies as a radical praxis, especially inventing new collective ways of speculating on and reimagining the relationship between race, culture, sociality and everyday politics. A central critical tendency across a range of these emergent UK black art practices is a mode of speculative thought that is attempting to posit an absolute break from the violence of racial and Eurocentric knowledge production. This characteristic decolonial gesture, here mediated through an ontological-aesthetic, risks, like Afro-Pessimism, ignoring the importance of historical conjuncture and the entanglements of diasporas and modernities, as theorised through the intersections of the postcolonial and Black British Cultural Studies. The claim to forms of ‘non-western’ and

54. Hannah Black, *Dark Pool Party*, Los Angeles, Dominica and Arcadia Missa, 2016; ‘Fractal Freedoms’, *Afterall: Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Volume 41, Spring/Summer 2016.

‘indigenous’ practices inside western institutions if not articulated with the politics of everyday and social organisation, can be – with little resistance – incorporated into the workings of racial capitalism, further reproducing the hegemony of the west in a globalised structure of art, knowledge and (multi)cultural power.<sup>55</sup> The challenge remains how these initiatives in their operations as experimental praxis are able to deconstruct or transverse the divisions between aesthetics, knowledge, institutions and activism.

In a time of reactionary diversity management in British universities and galleries, especially with the crisis in the humanities, the appositional mode of collective thinking and doing outlined above is putting pressure on the institutions to address this critical militancy. It is too early to assess the impact of US Black Critical Thought on Black British Arts or the UK university sector and its disciplines, but without doubt modes and forms of thinking and practice have emerged that offer alternatives to the settled orthodoxies of race and Cultural Studies. We are still at a stage where the key Black thinkers and texts are being deciphered and comprehended. Although there have been some recent attempts to explain and apply US Black Critical Thought on this side of the Atlantic, we contend that these have in the main failed to appreciate the types longer histories and heterogeneous flows of Black British Cultural Studies and the alignments of race and class that inform the contemporary situation and which we have sought to map out.<sup>56</sup> This article represents an initial attempt in the process of tracing this complex genealogy.

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55. Gayatri Charkravorty Spivak has consistently argued for a clear conceptual distinction to be made between the migrant to the west and the ‘Third world’ subaltern. See for instance Gayatri Charkravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 2012, for sustained set of arguments about the politics of aesthetic education across global divisions of teaching, labour and culture.

56. R.L. ‘Wanderings of the slave: Black life and social death’, *Mute*, 5 June 2013. <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wanderings-slave-black-life-and-social-death>. Accessed 1 March 2019. K. Aarons, ‘No selves to abolish: Afropessimism, anti-politics and the end of the world’, *Mute*, 29 February 2016 <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/no-selves-to-abolish-afropessimism-anti-politics-and-end-world>. Accessed 1 March 2019. Chris Chen, ‘The limit point of capitalist equality: Notes toward an abolitionist antiracism’, *Endnotes No 3: Gender, Race, Class and Other Misfortunes*, September 2013.