Politics & Pleasures in the Nineties

BY Darrell Moore

black Popular Culture: A Project By Michelle Wallace

Gina Dent, ed. (Seattle Bay Press 1992) 373 pp illustrations

Black Popular Culture marks a stirring watershed in the ways in which Black intellectuals produce, theorize, and interpret black culture. The book, edited by Gina Dent, is based on presentations and panel discussions at the "Black Popular Culture" sessions held at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Delta Center for the Arts in December 1991. The conference, conceived and executed by Michelle Wallace, brought together 28 distinguished American- and England-based black intellectuals from the academy and art world into the same space for three incredible days. The alchemy created by the mixture of a supportive physical space and the exchanges generated by the presentations of Hazel Carby, Julianne Malveaux, Isaac Julien, Manning Marable, Marlon Riggs, Tricia Rose, and Judith Wilson (to name a few) resulted in exciting and stimulating discussions that ultimately move the idea of "Black Studies" toward an historical articulation of the contradictory and complex manifestations of black presence in the diaspora, particularly in the United States.

Black Popular Culture is the collection of participants' presentations, most of which were written specifically for the conference. Also included are the discussions following each panel. Although the text cannot be expected to recreate the conference's energy, for me it somehow does. The book is organized into five chapters that correspond to the panels at the conference ("Black Popular Culture: Theory and Criticism," "Gender, Sexuality, and Black Images in Popular Culture," "The Urban Context," "The Production of Black Popular Culture," and "Do the Right Thing: Post-nationalism and Essentialism."). This enables Dent to maintain the coherence of the conference and to include general discussion. The individual essays are engaging and sharp and, as a collection, it stimulates critical reflection and a recognition of the need to reevaluate the assumptions and terms of the study and discussion of black popular culture.

In her 1990 essay "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture" Wallace argued that How one is seen (as black) and, therefore, what one sees in a white world is already crucial to one's existence as an Afro-American. The very marks that reveal you to the rest of the world, your dark skin and your kinky, curly hair, are visual. However, not being seen by those who don't want to see you because they are racist, what Ralph Ellison calls "invisibility," often leads racists to the interpretation that you are unable to see.

Wallace pointed out something that had up to that moment eluded me: that there exists an internal and external vodoo to draw parallels between Afro-American music and everything else cultural produced by black Americans. To bring Wallace's point of contention home for me, an ad for a retrospective of painter Archibald Motley's source at the Chicago Historical Society came across the airwaves of Chicago's public radio station this same afternoon I read Wallace's essay. The ad described Motley's work explicitly and exclusively in terms of jazz. I was struck by the way in which the cultural production of jazz is being reduced to its musicality, to its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, to its inroads toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counternarratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary, black popular culture has enabled the inside, and the mixed and contradictory modern of some mainstream heroes of American culture to discuss that is different other forms of left, other traditions of representation.

Cornell West's sobering analysis of "Religion in black America" makes a connection between the breakdown of black community traditions that support black individuals in racist America, and the commodification of those traditions. He argues that the proper starting point for the crucial debate about the prospects for Black America is the nihilism of those who increasingly pervades black communities. This kind of nihilism needs to be understood not as a philosophical doctrine that there are no rational standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) loneliness. This usually results in a muting from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others.

Corporate market institutions have contributed greatly to the above by producing the illusion that their products provide pleasure and status to consumers. Thus, one of the questions is how to talk meaningfully about these seemingly contradictory analyses together. One way is to recognize that ideology, or the assumed reality, in an unstable intersection between the social, political, and economic structures and specific historical conditions that creates meaning for practices. Thus, understanding the ways in which the Chicago Historical Society went about advertising their Motley retrospective represents the structures of exclusion and operates in a political and funding climate that advocates equality based on the shifting meaning of multiculturalism.

The struggle to create meaning and practices conducive to the emancipation of black people in serious business to the contributors to this volume. It is a conscious struggle waged primarily among self-conscious intellectuals, according to bell hooks, "to see things that other folks don't and to call them out." Calling out or "thinking critically about a cultural product" enhances rather than reduces the pleasure we derive from a text.

[Experiencing black cultural production from the standpoint of progressive critiques does, in fact, change the nature of our pleasure. It compels the black consumer to make a break with modes of passive consumption. It intervenes in the kind of non-critical, materialistic thinking that would have us assume everything in the name of blackness is righteous and should be celebrated. As well, it breaks with that other critical tradition that merely raises the simple question of negative and positive representation. Ironically, it is this power to intervene and disrupt that f "denies criticism so essential to cultural production and yet leads to it to be regarded with fear and suspicion (by blacks)."

Similarly, progressive critiques of "aristocratism" (to use Hall's concept elaborated earlier in "Rediscovery of Ideology") taken out a position that can be won, but cannot possibly capture popular culture itself for our side against the opposition. The "enishment of pleasure" leads to the possibility of joy which is ultimately the experience of a society. And joy is an essential concept that, according to West, forces one to look out and make connections so that there's the possibility of collective engagement. To the contrary, pleasure is commodified and individuated, the consequences of production, distribution, and consumption in capitalist societies. How do we create and experience joy in our capitalist society? And what does this have to do with "the problematic of the visual" (art, photography, and video in black culture?)

For Wallace, the conference represented a space where her "eye against music," to the extent that it defines the parameters of intellectual discourse in black communities, could be wielded, hopefully in solidarity, with other black intellectuals struggling toward emancipation. Such a struggle necessarily utilizes the resources historically developed within black communities. Greg Tate, on "Malcolm X and the problem of black male genius," argues that the seductiveness of artists like Davis isn't from an awe at his skill. It's from his vision that they unleash in others that make them truly arresting and irresistible, those who can dream about and decolonize their audience's dream spaces. Or to unlock their nightmares.

The struggle will, in what may well be a century, to utilize those resources to break free of the traditions that have colonized the range of black production, consumption, and critique. The destruction of the ways in which we understand our relations to the visible clearly has a role to play in the emancipation process. In her "Afterword" Wallace reiterates that the purpose of the conference was to
nurture critical practice among African-American intellectuals... to move the center of African-American discourse beyond... public institutions in the process of planning this conference,... is one example of this... and was not, was interrupted by Convall... I feel compelled to say that this... continuously.$$...Do not hallucinate.
The history of race and rights, Patricia Williams names racism spirit murder — an injury to an individual's and collectivity's self, spirit, and humanity through the abuse of power, contract, and law upon the objects of property, contract and law. And if we take Hall seriously when he argued in 1964 that the first step in transforming the society is to transform the law, it is the critical thing about identity is that it is partly the relationship between you and the Other. There is no identity without the dialogical relationship to the Other. The Other is not outside but also inside of the Self, the identity. So identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambiguous position. Identity is also the relationship of the editor to oneself.

Black people cannot help but "see" the socially constructed pathologies of race that much of the white other "sees," especially if it takes the form of a crisis that brings us face-to-face with the overlooked concerns in ways that are not available to other media.

Many of the essays in this volume indi
crity argued that the answer to the question of the social
primary task of the visual is to reconcile
black women to the narrative of the black
central church and the tradition of music.

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ating those aspects of black life that have fostered joy over time.

The most distinctive and inter alia answers. First, Crenshaws's executive director of Third World Newreel, argues for black control of the production of the moving image. For her, black control amounts to nothing less than those pro
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