

*In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics
and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights
Era*

by Richard Iton

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‘They who play it safe are quick to assassinate what they don’t
understand...’

– Erykah Badu, 2010

In Search of the Black Fantastic is a critical quest which interprets the historical harmonisation and discord of black aesthetics and black politics. The loaded title conjures an interesting set of images for its prospective reader. ‘Black Fantastic’ is deliberately provocative; suggestive of something wicked, magical and deliciously sinful; a witty, subversive play on ‘dark’ narratives and the fetishisation of skin tone. For Richard Iton, the fantastic serves as a space of the other, both spatially and racially. He uses it to ‘destabilise’ and fragment the arenas of so-called ‘rational’ modernity (p.289-90) via ‘underground’, ‘deviant’ strategies (p.16). Though his evocation of the ‘surreal’ is rather too broad, and, therefore, misleading in my view, the fantastic genre is more usefully deployed to encompass African-American cultural production from the last half-century.

Iton raises issues of black identity and the position of its voice(s) since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and ‘60s. He justifies that his ‘aim is to be suggestive rather than comprehensive’ (p.191) with a political and historical mapping of African-American

cultures taking priority over an in-depth study of its various practitioners. Though brief references are made to African, Asian and European associates, he primarily focuses on the subject of blackness in North America. Iton rightly employs the rigorous post-structural language of French philosopher Michel Foucault and Palestinian cultural critic Edward Said in order to stress how this material may participate in reverse discourse – the presence of the ‘other’ as an intrinsic ingredient of modernity; the transgression that proves the existence of a boundary (Foucault, 1994). The application of such theoretical standpoints may seem to clash with the accessibility of the popular cultural genres of blues and hip-hop, but Iton successfully uses such theories to articulate the urgency and vitality of black politics since the 1960s, highlighting the central importance of art, music and literature as modes of representation in this complex history.

The rupture and (re)convergence of aesthetics and politics in African-American cultural history places the high/low debate at the centre of this study, discussed as ‘formal politics’ versus ‘popular culture’ (p.130). Jazz music appears particularly ripe for commentary in this regard, though thankfully Iton restrains himself from the Adornian cliché of its supposedly kitsch cultural status, discussing its practitioners in more unexpected terms. When it comes to addressing hip-hop, Iton notes a shift in emphasis from the aural to the visual and from a period of 1970s ‘earnestness’ to ‘80s ‘irony’ (p.105). Here the radio is marked as obsolete, beaten by the MTV age when hip-hop suddenly appears to dominate in an aggressive retinal encounter with its consumer. Though visual art is prioritised for its political commitments, and as the most immediate mode of representation, elsewhere in Iton’s study, he notes the

disillusionment with the wide dissemination of visualised music, and observes an unpredicted nostalgia for pre-civil rights folk music and black solidarity. He also charts an important shift from black counter-culture to middle-class 'superpublic' during what he calls the 'post-post-civil-rights era' (p.104). The rise of black capitalism is viewed as hypocritical, participating in the very society and politics which were previously protested against. There is a significant absence of an African-American left-wing (p.138). Furthermore, Reggae and hip-hop are discussed together as problematic 'avant-gardes' in their conscious rejection of black precedent genres, and in their apparent maintenance of sexist and homophobic prejudices, which again seem to alarmingly dispense with the equality drive of the earlier Civil Rights Movement. Throughout, Iton discusses the 'elasticities of black masculinity' (p.91), whilst devoting critical attention to queer and feminist narratives, especially in terms of their marginal status in the music scene.

Like all research, this book is of its moment – one wonders what this study would have looked like had it been published one or two years later. For instance, the election of the first black president, Barack Obama, in early 2009 would certainly seem pertinent to the questions raised in this book. Likewise, the recent music video 'Window Seat' by the neo-soul singer Erykah Badu (2010), who controversially stripped whilst she was being filmed undercover in downtown Dallas, the site of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963. Badu's earlier 2001 album 'Mama's Gun' serves as one of Iton's key examples in his fifth chapter, and is rightly placed in a fantastical dialogue with the artist Kara Walker; practitioners who both present an intermedial 'fusion' of artist and performance as 'shrieking commodities' (p.125). Similar parallels are

drawn between the musicians Tracy Chapman and earlier folk singer Odetta. At times Iton could have made more of Walker's playful, dichotomous shadow art, and Odetta's throaty lyrics. There also appears to be no mention of the African-American artist and philosopher Adrian Piper (b.1948) who has radically questioned notions of 'passing' between racial categories in her practice and writing, nor any reference to French feminist Hélène Cixous (b.1937) whose writing on gender and racial marginalisation would also seem relevant here. However, Iton's extensive endnotes, which take up a third of the book, are evidence of thorough research and passionate engagement with his topic. In general, certain figures are referred to in passing as illustrative examples of particular tendencies and political stances. Chapman's songs are, for example, praised for their issue-raising abilities, including 'marginalisation ("Subcity"), interracial tension ("Across the Lines") [...and] apartheid ("Freedom Now")' (p.190).

The book's concluding chapter, 'Space is the Place', examines responses to 2005's Hurricane Katrina, specifically in terms of the search for an appropriate language with which to discuss the unfolding disaster. The media's uncomfortable analogy of Katrina's 'victims' with African 'refugees' (p.284) is representative of the gross negligence and horrific lack of action during the Bush administration. Iton finds Kanye West's (surprisingly) perceptive assessment of the situation, 'George Bush doesn't care about black people' (p.286), poignant in this regard. Iton's finale is cunningly subtitled 'Fade to Black' in which he urges his reader to look beyond the shadowy abyss of pigeon-holing towards a fantastical bridging of politics and those cultural modes of representation which unite us all

as individuals through a continuum of challenging, (re)questioning, fragmentation and reassembling of values.

Bibliography

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