

From “Culturalism” to Cultural Studies

Toward An Embodied Working Class

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Class consciousness is “the way in which ... experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional form.” (E.P. Thompson)¹

[T]he terrain was often, cultural, centering on identity, dignity, and fun. We tried to turn work into pleasure, to turn our bodies into instruments of pleasure. Generational and cultural specificity had a good deal to do with our unique forms of resistance, but a lot of our actions were linked directly to the labor process, gender conventions, and our class status. (Robin Kelley)²

At the October 1991 North American Labor History Conference at Wayne State on “Men, Women, and Labor: Perspectives on Gender in Labor History, the keynote speakers had finished presenting stimulating papers when a voice from the audience questioned the

- 1 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working-Class*, as quoted in Mari Jo Buhle, “Gender and Labor History,” in J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris, eds., *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesi* (Dekalb 1989), 56.
- 2 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York 1994), .3. Other references from this book will appear directly in the text.

exclusion of both African American workers and the work of African American labor historians from current synthetic interpretations.³ That voice was Robin Kelley's. Already Kelley had taken the essence of the "New" Labor History and had made it his own in the prize-winning *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*.⁴ In that work, he relied upon religious traditions and folk expressions to explore the "cultural hybridity" (13) that marked the African American encounter with Communism (elaborated upon in "Part II. To Be Red and Black" of *Race Rebels*). And he did so with sensitivity to gender as well as racial differences. Thus Kelley's lament derived from his own recognition of the ways that he — and others — had enriched the "culturalist" turn in labor history. *Race Rebels*, a reworking of previously published essays, complicates further our understanding of the black working-class; its racialized gender-ing of labor history and class-ing of cultural studies provides a starting point for future scholarship.⁵ Kelley's working-class exists as an "embodied social subject," to adopt a phrase from feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis, whose race, gender, and age markings undermine any purely economist notion of class.⁶

- 3 Since then, the Fall 1994 *Labor History* has recognized the development of African American and racial ethnic working class history through a special issue that addressed new approaches to and understandings of 'race.' See especially, Alan Dawley and Joe William Trotter Jr., "Race and Class," *Labor History* 35 (Fall 1994), 486-94.
- 4 Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill 1990).
- 5 For studies drawing upon culture as well as class, race, and gender, see Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley 1991); Joe William Trotter Jr., *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932* (Urbana 1990); Tera Hunter, "Domination and Resistance: The Politics of Wage Household Labor in New South Atlanta," *Labor History* 34 (Spring-Summer 1993), 205-20; Elisabeth Clark Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity in Washington, D.C.* (Washington 1994).
- 6 Teresa de Lauretis, "Upping the anti (sic) in feminist theory," in Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York 1993), 89.

Originally a term of opprobrium,⁷ “culturalist” also stands as a badge of honor, describing the direction that E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman — the most influential of Thompson’s American followers — gave to the “new” labor history. According to Alice Kessler-Harris, “In this ‘culturalist’ approach, power was intrinsic in the capacity of workers to retain customs, values, language, and traditions in the face of a destructive capitalism.” Drawing upon anthropology and quantitative methods, such practitioners turned to the community study — moving from the workplace to other spatial locations to uncover the culture of working people and reflect upon the relations of those cultures to society as a whole.⁸ Initially — as Kessler-Harris more recently has argued — men, their institutions, and their ways of being and knowing maintained a privileged place in the study of labor history, all the more so for being naturalized under the rubric ‘worker’ — an obscuring of the gendered construction of labor history as well as the historical reconstruction of working-class life.⁹ But as Leon Fink so aptly

- 7 See Richard Johnson, “Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History,” *History Workshop* 6 (Autumn 1978), 79-100; for a positive spin, Leon Fink, “Looking Backward: Reflections on Workers’ Culture and Certain Conceptual Dilemmas within Labor History,” in *Perspectives on American Labor History*, 5-29.
- 8 . Alice Kessler-Harris, “A New Agenda for American Labor History: A Gendered Analysis and the Question of Class,” in *Perspectives on American Labor History*, 218-19. Leon Fink reminded me of Kessler-Harris’ fine formulation which he uses in “Culture’s Last Stand? Gender and The Search for Synthesis in American Labor History,” *Labor History*, 34 (Spring 1993), 179.
- 9 Alice Kessler-Harris, “Treating the Male As Other: Re-Defining the Parameters of Labor History,” *Labor History*, 34 (Spring 1993), 191-5. Ava Baron has best expressed this position in “Gender and Labor History: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future,” in Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca 1991), 1-46, and her equally pathbreaking, “On Looking at Men: Masculinity and the Making of a Gendered Working-Class History,” in Ann-Louise Shapiro, ed., *Feminist Revision History* (New Brunswick 1994), 146-71. This is a revision of an address given at the Conference on “Reworking American Labor History: Race, Gender and Class” in April 1992, in which the other keynote speaker was Robin Kelley. There he presented some of the material that forms chapters 2 and 3 of *Race Rebels*.

explains, "Notwithstanding the gendered boundaries (inherited from Marxist definitions of class) of the 'founding fathers' of the new labor history, their very mode of analysis practically encouraged an ever-widening search for lived experience, and effectively invited a re-drawing of boundaries so long as the new configurations respected indigenous voices."¹⁰

The gendering of labor history had concentrated on the dyad male-female without fully racializing them, although the best work recognized difference between women. It seemed an advance enough to analyze masculinity without fully explicating the constructions of various forms related to ethnicity and race as well as occupation and skill. What some of us did for gender,¹¹ Kelley does for race: expand the boundaries of labor history. Like David Roediger,¹² he explicates racial codes and practices of both white and black workers and does so with the lessons of a gendered labor history fully in mind so that we can see black men and black women, working-class African American men and working-class African American women, working-class 'white' men and working-class 'white' women in the full complexity of their embodied beings. For not only was the worker of the "new" labor history male, he was a white male, unless one was discussing enslaved laborers. Kelley reminds us just how complex our categories must be if we would write an (em)bodied working-class. He also understands that work itself contains gendered and racialized meanings, that "the racialization of the same work can, in effect, change the gendered meaning of certain jobs."⁽³¹⁾

The "new" labor history intersected with the development of cultural studies in Britain, as exemplified by Raymond Williams,

10 Leon Fink, "Culture's Last Stand?" 187.

11 See the essays in Baron, *Work Engendered*; see also Sonya Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century England* (Berkeley 1992); Sonya Rose and Laura Frader are editing a book on class and gender in European labor history.

12 David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York 1991); *Toward the Abolition of Whiteness* (New York 1994).

Richard Hoggart, and Stuart Hall, and institutionalized in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.¹³ This approach to “culture” explored the expressions of working-class life, considering signifying practices, codings, recodings, uses, and feelings. First focused on the construction of Gramscian hegemony, cultural studies shifted its understanding to the production of multiple meanings, “how groups with least power practically develop their own readings of, and uses for, cultural products — in fun, in resistance, or to articulate their own identity,”¹⁴ by incorporating the factors of race/ethnicity, gender, and nation to class analysis. Working-class creations of new meanings out of pre-existing signs and cultural objects and/or products, such cultural critics realized, occurs not in a political or economic vacuum, but in the context of material interests and power relations. As an interdisciplinary (some say transdisciplinary or even counter-disciplinary) approach, cultural studies explicates “all forms of cultural production ... in relation to other cultural practices and to social and historical structures.”¹⁵

We might understand cultural studies as the method of American Studies or what happens when textual criticism and ethnography embrace history. Some labor historians might argue that in the study of Tonya Harding, Madonna, or other popular icons, cultural studies becomes lost in the labyrinth of language, led astray by French theory.¹⁶ If the post-structuralist/post-modern project tends to elide both the “hidden injuries of class” and present configurations of power, such obscuring of the methodological intent of its British founders is more cause to engage in a new course of critique

13 For one account of this history, see Simon During, “Introduction,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 2-20; see also, Carolyn Stedman, “Culture, Cultural Studies, and the Historians,” in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York 1992), 613-21.

14 During, “Introduction,” 7.

15 Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg, “Cultural Studies: An Introduction,” in *Cultural Studies*, 4.

16 See Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: the Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia 1990).

than a rationale to reject the culturalist probe. Such critique must reconnect class to culture, power to language, agency to discourse, struggle to expression.

The essays in *Race Rebels* exemplify the best of culturalist labor history as well as illustrate a more recent turn to cultural studies — a cultural studies fully cognizant of structural materialist factors, like the political economy of WWII or the deindustrialization of late twentieth century urban America. Like historians of women, Kelley engages in a redefinition of the political, a necessary move when analyzing the subaltern or those blocked from participation in politics as defined by the dominant (i.e., electoral politics and political parties.)¹⁷ In this he has learned from slavery studies, especially those scholars who view slavery as a system of labor which generated cultures of survival and resistance in the everyday.¹⁸ Indeed, for Kelley — like those associated with the Freedmen and Southern History Project — *Black Reconstruction* by W.E.B. DuBois remains the inspirational text.¹⁹

Kelley is a counter institutionalist, not hostile in an ad hoc manner to institutions but aware of alternative spaces of class consciousness and formation that can go on and shape the direction of public, more formalized, protest. He explores the resistance strategies of workers outside of trade unions and of an African American working-class that stood apart from the organizations of black politics, dominated as they were by the bourgeoisie or middle-class. Drawing upon the concept of “intrapolitics,” as articulated by anthropologist James C. Scott, Kelley describes “the daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts that often

17 I've engaged in a similar strategy in “The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Activist Women Redefine the ‘Political,’” in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York 1993), 213-45.

18 For Kelley's acknowledgment of this influence, see notes to Chapter 1, 233, n.6.

19 W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Park Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy, 1860-1880* (New York 1935).

inform organized political movements.”(9) For him, “politics is not separate from lived experience or the imaginary world of what is possible ... politics comprises the many battles to roll back constraints and exercise some power over, or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives.”(9-10)

Thus everyday acts of resistance, what some have labeled as pre-political — borrowing from one’s employer, wiggling, taking time off while on the job, or “spit[ting] in a bus driver’s face”(9) — provide the basis through which black working people came to participate in what Kelley acknowledges as “mainstream” politics, such as the voting rights and public accommodation campaigns of the civil rights movement. His conceptualization of public transportation as “moving theaters,” as sites of “performance” and “military conflict”(57) provides a new lens to view a standard subject in civil rights history. So does his discussion of how the involvement of poor people in Birmingham during the 1960s made public the hidden transcript of their resistance.

In looking “to the places where the noble and heroic tradition of labor militancy is not as evident,”(13) Kelley descends to the world of the hipster and gangsta rapper. But before he applies his critical eye to these male sub-cultures, he uncovers a long tradition of resistance to work, labor that was unrewarding, alienating, lacking in dignity, a product of “racist and sexist oppression.”(22) Not to work, to spend one’s time dancing or drinking or playing sexual games, becomes a form of resistance to a society that denies meaningful labor, where sweat is merely filthy lucre, without any monetary reward.

So Kelley turns his attention to the spaces and forms through which the black working class took “back their bodies for their own pleasure rather than another’s profit.” Segregation, as historian Earl Lewis has pointed out, generated “congregation,” spaces of “pleasure and fellowship, fun and games.”(45) The blues club, dance hall, and (female) beauty parlor or (male) barber shop could serve as sites of resistance, supplementing the more respectable black church and mutual benefit association.

In celebrating such race rebels, Kelley verges on the romanticism that critics of culturalist labor history charge discredits the approach. But he pulls back. Kelley understands the limits as well as the complexities, how escaping the servitude of wage labor could enmesh one in a culture of consumption that demanded new ties to the pursuit of cash. The “underground subculture of black working-class youth during” WWII not only rejected the work ethic, but “in their efforts to escape or minimize exploitation, Malcolm and his homies became exploiters themselves.”(163) Kelley sees the limits of such rebellion even as he names as resistance the hair conking, petty thievery, and women abuse (which he condemns) of Malcolm Little, what Malcolm X himself dismissed as his brainwashed criminal past. Moreover, for some the space of leisure was the place of labor. Kelley’s connection of pleasure to production provides a stunning analysis of the ways that women’s bodies serve as workplaces: sites of exploitation but also of empowerment since “labors not associated with wage work — dancing, sexual play, intercourse — [turned] into income.”(49) Dancing offered rewards not to be found in domestic service.

This doubled-edged sensitivity comes through in discussions of dress. “Seeing oneself and others ‘dressed up’ was enormously important in terms of constructing a collective identity based on something other than wage work, presenting a public challenge to the dominant stereotypes of the black body, and reinforcing a sense of dignity that was perpetually being assaulted,” he notes.(50) As recent cultural criticism recognizes, clothes and the bodies under them contain multivalent meanings.²⁰ White Southerners chaffed at black women dressed like ladies, or white women; style could replicate that of the better classes in a quest for respectability while challenging the power structure at the same time. The Zoot Suit, adopted by black and Chicano youth during WWII, represented the

20 So are bodies. See Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley 1993) and Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York 1993).

ultimate challenge to both the work ethic and patriotism. Its abundant use of cloth when the state channeled materials and labor power to war production derided sacrifice for the war effort in a manner equally flagrant of the work ethic as the hipster life style of its wearers.

Kelley recognizes cultural conflict within the black community between a politics of respectability, located in the church and among the middle class, and this expressive culture of the night. But religion played a complex role. As his own research on Alabama showed, “when black working people entered the house of labor, they brought the spirit, culture, and rituals of the house of God with them.”(41) Here the cosmological imagination of slave culture found new form; the spiritual world remained a potent weapon to fight evil — and the bosses. Religion provided the basis for inter-racial unity among Southern workers, even if not all ministers supported trade unionism.

Class joins culture, race, and gender in these explorations. Kelley brilliantly connects the masculinism of Garveyism with that of the Communist Party; the “struggle as a form of masculine redemption”(111) that he uncovers in these radical movements persists in new forms among youth whose rebellion seems less political, but equally oppositional. What distinguishes Kelley from the cultural criticism dominant in many English departments is his grounding of text in structure. He would “understand the elusive cultural politics of contemporary black urban America” by looking “for meaning in the language, dress, music, and dance styles rising out of today’s ghettos, as well as the social and economic context in which styles are created, contested, and reaccented.”(181)

“Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics: ‘Gangsta Rap’ and Postindustrial Los Angeles” is a tour de force and not only because it explained to me the music listened to by both my students at Howard and my own ex-urban, Jewish teenage son. (But do they hear the same thing? Do they really absorb such anti-woman lyrics? How does the alienation of youth, a generational identity, somehow cross class and race to be taken advantage of by commercial culture?) In a self-critical move that also indulges in the pleasure of

experience, the “remix version” that concludes the essay turns the tables on cultural studies to remind us that music is sound, feelings, movement and not only text to be decoded. Though decode Kelley does, with an appreciation of the poetry of rap as well as its messages. Again a double vision informs critique. “Virtually all gangsta rappers write lyrics attacking law enforcement agencies, their denial of unfettered access to public space, and the media’s complicity in equating black youth with criminals,” Kelley explains. “Yet, the rappers’ own stereotypes of the ghetto as ‘war zone’ and the black youth as ‘criminal,’ as well as their adolescent expressions of masculinity and sexuality, in turn structure and constrain their efforts to create a counternarrative of life in the inner city.”(185) He situates critiques of work and the capitalist economy in the very real economics of the record business, linking the gangsta style to the outlaw status that deindustrialization has wrought.

In exposing how “Ghettocentricity, like Afrocentricity draws its arsenal from the dominant ideology,”(212) Kelley explicates attempted “appropriations reversals of racial stereotypes”(213) that too often reinforce rather than challenge the dominant construction of black men as hypersexual criminals. But even the exaggerated masculinity of the gangsta, with its return to the pimp as hero, reflects larger cultural trends that blame women, especially the black woman, for cultural dislocation and poverty. Democrats and Republicans alike embrace the notion that “the cause of the current crisis lies not in economic decline but in the collapse of the male-headed family.”(217) Kelley understands the complexity of misogyny, rooting it in fear of female power and sexuality no less than economics and policy. He is so good at excavating the gendered and generational positions of men and women within cultural expression that I wish that he applied his gaze to the workings of the family itself. He has learnt from feminist scholarship that the family is a site of racialized gendered class formation, that we learn resistance as well as accommodation, subversion of hierarchy as well as our place within hierarchies there. But he never subjects the family to a contextual and concrete historical analysis.

Hovering behind Kelley's working-class actors is the state whose policies not only have led to black disadvantage but also, as George Lipsitz (who provides a foreword to these essays) has shown, to white advancement.²¹ Though present in some of these essays (particularly those on Birmingham in the 1940s and 1960s), it lies in the background. Kelley inspires me to bring a culturalist lens to the state itself to more fully write the ways that racialized gendered understandings of class and culture provide the terrain upon which politics in its alternative and dominant forms plays out.²²

- 21 George Lipsitz, "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the 'White' Problem in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 47 (September 1995), 369-87.
- 22 The black working class in World War II brought understandings forged on the streets, churches, clubs, homes, and shopfloors of its community to complaints filed with the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice. I am exploring this process and working class conceptions of fairness and equality in my work in progress: "From 'Fair' Employment to The 'Opportunity' Society: Race, Gender, and Rights in Modern America."