BEYOND THE 'NATION THING':
BLACK STUDIES, CULTURAL STUDIES, AND
DIASPORÁ DISCOURSE
(OR THE POST-BLACK STUDIES MOMENT)'

Rinaldo Walcott

The tale of diaspora...holds a subversive resonance when contrasted with that of the nation-state. At the same time that European powers constructed national dialogues, African slaves were being uprooted from communal and other social systems in various parts of the continent, and scattered about the New World like filaments of a shaven gem. Africans and their distant relatives in the New World have abided by, and sometimes revolted against, the myth of national borders ever since.

Embedded in the tale of diaspora is a symbolic revolt against the nation-state, and for this reason the diaspora holds a dual significance. It suggests a transnational dimension to black identity, for if the notion of an African diaspora is anything it is a human necklace strung together by a thread known as the slave trade, a thread which made its way across a path of America with little regard for national boundaries (Michael Hanchard, "Identity, Meaning, and the African-American", 40).

In the current intellectual moment, African American Studies is undergoing a rarely commented upon but nonetheless significant transition from being a nationally-specific episteme to one that is more transnational in scope. The effects of debates in cultural studies, in general and black British cultural studies in particular have forced students of Africana, Black Studies and African American Studies to revisit relationships between them. The political implications of such reconsiderations inform the relationship, un-
derstandings and misunderstandings African and African diaspora scholars, intellectuals and cultural workers share. Given this critical juncture, I believe it is important to revisit old debates and foundational mandates of African American and Black Studies in order to answer three critical questions the present moment poses.

The questions are as follows: To what extent is African American Studies coterminous with Black Studies, and what are the implications of this presumed correlation for people of African descent who are neither U.S. American nor North American? To what extent are U.S. African American intellectuals culpable in the reproduction of this correlation and what are the consequences? To what extent are present interlocutors neglectful of the histories of the intellectual foundations and institutional creation of African American Studies, Africana Studies, Black Studies etc.? These questions cannot all be answered here but they provide the impetus of the discussion which follows.

Is a genealogy of Black Studies possible? And what would a possible genealogy of Black Studies look like? Is a genealogy of Black Studies a question of charting the lines of the black diaspora? I ask these questions at the outset in order to help us think what a genealogy of Black Studies would be, what story it might tell, what traces it might bear and leave. My own response to these questions is an ambivalent one which vacillates between a "Yes" and a "No". This vacillation is occupied with how exactly the discourse of diaspora lends itself to what has become the established field of Black Studies. Part of my concern here is to ask questions of Black Studies in an attempt to reconcile, at least for myself, the relationship and tension between Black Studies, diaspora discourses and cultural studies. These three paradigms play a central role in my study of those people we have heuristically come to call Black peoples.

The question of genealogy is always a question fraught with difficulty. Any genealogy always seems to drag along with it the question of origins. While I am not in principle opposed to discussions of origins, I am always suspicious of such conversations. Conversations concerning origins seem to always insist upon neat and tidy borders, borders which often refuse to acknowledge their permeability and most often their confinement and restrictions. Genealogy also drags along with it discourses of family which tend to produce moments of discipline, regulation and confinement, romance stories which do not hold up to scrutiny. And yet it seems imperative that as Black Studies garners more attention inside and outside the academy, the question of origins and family or genealogy becomes a contested question. However, we must be careful to also question the logic of origins in our conversations concerning genealogies and their traces, because to question the logic of origins is to situate the conversati of the conversation concerning B if we come to it with both respect and of merely thinking of genealogy as a line which into many and varied directions. genealogy as a kind of intimacy of partition, negation and even decay might be able to approach what I in Black Studies. These tensions are constituted for me as an outsider and part of a certain kind of im and simultaneously repulsive. It is the starkness of this that makes me think of even more curious in the essays on genealogy suggested that knows this is especially so in the essays on genealogy. This is especially so, in the essays on genealogy. This is especially so, in the essays on genealogy. This is especially so, in the essays on genealogy. This is especially so, in the essays on genealogy. This is especially so, in the essays on genealogy. This is especially so, in the essays on genealogy. This is especially so, in the essays on genealogy.
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origins is to situate the conversation somewhere else. The somewhere else of the conversation concerning Black Studies might be better appreciated if we come to it with both respect and irreverence.

Instead of merely thinking of genealogy as a line of descent, we might think of genealogy as a line which is fractured and therefore shoots off into many and varied directions. I want to also suggest that we think of genealogy as a kind of intimacy—a kind of familial antagonism, an aggression, negation and even deception. It seems to me that in this way we might be able to approach what I see as the tensions of diaspora discourse in Black Studies. These tensions of diaspora discourse in Black Studies are constituted for me as an outsider—doing Black Studies north of the 49th parallel—as a certain kind of imperial gesture that is at once full of desire and simultaneously repulsive. It shall be quite clear later what these seeming harsh words might suggest when I suggest a diaspora reading practice from the north. Therefore, I want to insist that reading practices are crucial to my intervention when I do Black Studies in and from the north.

To write within and against Black Studies is a curious occupation. It becomes even more curious in the light of Mae Henderson’s critique of “younger black scholars whose work builds on the foundation laid by the Black Studies movement in the 1960s and 1970s” (58). Henderson’s introduction to “Cultural Politics: A Special Section, Rethinking Black (Cultural) Studies, Part I,” with essays by Nahum Dimitri Chandler, Wahneruma Lubiano and Henderson is a curious and astutely positioned set of writing lodged between official history and personal narrative which seeks to rescue Black Studies from the “onslaught” of black cultural studies and cultural studies more generally.

These narratives of Black Studies represent themselves as both heroic and sacrosanct. Yet I insist that these narratives must be troubled or at the very least worried. The heroic story of Black Studies that is narrated in all the essays suggests that knowledge of the historical might bring salvation. This is especially so in Henderson’s contribution. In what Geoffrey Hartman, in The Fateful Question of Culture, would call an “eventful history” (59) Henderson “recounts[s] this personal and historical genealogy of Black Studies—one which was as emancipating for me as was feminism in the 1980s—in order to express the chagrin I feel some twenty-five years later when I hear Black Studies referred to as “victim” or “oppression” studies...” (58). This comment is a clear reference to Manthia Diawara’s much cited and anthologised essay “Black Studies, Cultural Studies, Performative Acts.” The essay is also anthologized in Henderson’s Borders, Boundaries and Frames: Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies as “Cultural Studies/Black Studies”. Later in the Callaloo essay she takes up and takes on Diawara as...
she credits Black Studies with shifting the terms of engagement in the much more formerly "Eurocentric conceptions of culture" (58) in the American academy.

I wonder, however, how Henderson’s introduction and essay would have read had she considered a discourse of diaspora in her reading of the relationship between cultural studies and Black Studies, and what is now heuristically called black cultural studies? I wonder if her borders, boundaries and frames would have altered her cultural criticism had she mediated on the role of diaspora in her response to the emergence of black cultural studies? I wonder what it would mean for Henderson to read the emergence of black cultural studies as "an act of creation rather than one of violation" (26), as she eloquently puts it in the introduction to Borders, Boundaries and Frames following her discussion of Diawara’s essay there?

The above questions are not merely rhetorical and yet they do not require sure and certain responses and I will not attempt to answer them. Rather, what I want to do in this essay is to ask about what we might not be able to tolerate in Black Studies. By the question of toleration I do not mean a liberal invocatio what we cannot live with. Rather, I intend a much more disturbing invocation of what we would suggest is a post-Black Studies moment. Henderson herself acknowledges the contingency of the Black Studies project. Therefore, I want to take her sincerity and work with it as a way to think about the relationship between the trinity of Black Studies, cultural studies and diasporic discourses.

In Harold Cruse’s 1967 flawed classic The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: From its Origins to the Present the question of genealogy is always immediate and urgent. For these purposes, I am particularly interested in the chapter “1920’s-1930’s—The West Indian Influence”. In that chapter, Cruse makes the claim that the West Indian migrant to the U.S. was rather more conservative than his African American cousin. In this claim, family relations are at stake. However, Cruse’s discussion is interesting for a number of reasons in relation to the Black Studies project. Cruse’s utterances are concerned and occupied with pinning down exactly who is the proper and correct citizen and exactly who gets to speak with legitimacy and authority in the name of blackness (in the name of the family). This is a concern that we cannot overlook in our contemporary deliberations of the Black Studies project. For we must read Cruse’s chapter as one of the first contemporary nativist arguments within Black Studies. Others have since occurred.¹⁰

Not all of Black Studies is hostile to outside incursions, or to diasporic conversations and dialogues. In Black Studies, Rap and the Academy, a book that has not often been given the credit it deserves, Houston Baker.
in a concentrated and meditated analysis of contemporary Black Studies, focuses on home, but an underlying diasporic conversation is evident. Baker tells not only a heroic story but also a "new story." In his new story is the argument that since Black Studies was founded as a social, scholarly, and pedagogical enterprise to deal with black culture, it would have to account for the relationship of such studies to black urban culture. Black urban culture, I believe, provided much of the impetus for Black Studies's founding, and surely in our own era, it is the focus of quite extraordinary transnational creative energy (2-3). I would make one addendum to Baker's insight: the transnationality of Black Studies is not a recent phenomenon. Even Wahneema Lubiano in her contribution to the special section of *Callaloo* acknowledges that, for her, Black Studies is an amalgam of the contributions of African American intellectuals and academics and other black diaspora intellectuals and academics to re-thinking and acting on various conceptions of blackness and modernity.

In Lubiano's genealogy of Black Studies, Frantz Fanon and C.L.R. James loom as large as Stephen Henderson and Larry Neal in the intimate relations of the family. Yet what is curious about her essay is her insistence on demonstrating the emergence of an indigenous American cultural studies, an utterance which undermines her attempt to "map the interstices" between Afro-American Studies and cultural studies. In her essay, Black Studies is the example of American grown cultural studies.

Lubiano's essay is a skillful and thoughtful interstitial argument which strategically replays the historical conceptual ground of Black Studies. Lubiano offers us a different kind of genealogy from the kind evident both in Henderson's and Chandler's *Callaloo* essays. Her essay may provide the clearest basis for studying the tensions of family intimacy. Lubiano's genealogy works largely through Gerald McWhorter's, St. Clair Drake's and Russell Adams's meditations and investigations of the arrival of Black Studies as a concerted academic configuration in the American academy. Her essay is careful to mark out the scene of cultural studies, placing it in relation to moments from Black Studies that parallel those of cultural studies. Thus, Lubiano's essay seeks to uncover the places where various methodological questions coincide in the two different but clearly related fields. Her genealogy is a genealogy of thought and method which stays clear of naming Father Figures and Founding Narratives.

This is not the case for Nahum Chandler's essay. He argues that DuBois's "The Study of Negro Problems" is the text that marks the inauguration of Black Studies. Chandler writes:

DuBois puts forth a comprehensive plan calling for an exhaustive study of the Negro in the United States. He formulates this project more systematically, comprehensively and, with regard to a con-
cept of truth, more rigorously than had yet been done. This is the site of the fundamental innovation in discourses called scientific or academic concerning the Negro—one of DuBois’s central contributions—not acknowledged widely enough. I consider this text the founding programmatic text of African American Studies in the United States” (86).

Indeed when one reads “The Study of Negro Problems” Chandler’s insights are an astute reading of DuBois; however he concludes,

This [the essay] was the original call. It was not until the 1960s that DuBois’s call would be answered in a comprehensive manner. When such a view arrived in historiographical scholarship, for example, it produced a reorientation of both African American and American history on a major scale. DuBois had rightly suggested that this shift in epistemological frame could propose something new for how we conceptualize human sociality” (86).

There we have the full story: a founding narrative in DuBois’s essay and a clear founding father in DuBois.

The logic of Chandler’s argument appears astute and “right on” and yet there is a lingering problem with his analysis of what is at stake in the current contestations in Black Studies and the emergence of black cultural studies. Chandler reads everything in relation to white American-ness and therefore reads DuBois as a central figure for the rethinking of the intimacy between African Americans and Euro-Americans. This reading may be useful in these times of ethnic absolutism; however such a reading also constructs a kind of meta-American-ness in which African Americans take their rightful place in history after “truth” is made evident. Chandler concludes by arguing that DuBois allows for a particular questioning of white identity which opens up the question of modernity. He remarks,

In this, we see, in a new way, the general significance for modernity as such of a consideration of the problematic that opened the scene and space of the work of antecedent thinkers in this project concerned to elaborate a study of Afro-America or of Africa and its Diaspora in general. This is our responsibility (88).

One of the scholars of black diaspora and modernity that Chandler is writing against in his essay is Paul Gilroy. What is curious about his response to Gilroy’s reading of DuBois is that Chandler comes quite close to a similar reading himself. However, I think that Chandler’s reading has different implications. Embedded in his position of responsibility and his invo-
tion of diaspora is what I earlier referred to as the imperial gesture of the established Black Studies project. I ask again what might we be able to not tolerate in Black Studies? Can other black voices speak back with authority and not be disciplined into what Slavko Zizek calls “the national thing”? Is a sustained discourse of diaspora too troubling for Black Studies?

In Henderson’s, Chandler’s and Lubiano’s essays there is no agreement on the genealogy of Black Studies. Henderson argues for the Souls of Black Folk and DuBois as founding narrative and father; Lubiano stays clear of such claims but her discussion is clearly grounded in the moment of academic inclusion in the 60s; and Chandler argues for DuBois’s “The Study of Negro Problems.” Instead, I want to tentatively suggest another moment which involves a diaspora turn and reading. By recalling elements of the DuBois/Garvey debate we may be able to clarify some of the issues at stake.

**DUBOIS, GARVEY AND THE BLACK STUDIES PROJECT**

We might think of the DuBois/Garvey debate as diaspora discourse meets “nation thing”. This is one of those moments that complicates how DuBois is currently appropriated and reinscribed as a diasporic and Pan-African figure. I am not, by the way, trying to argue that he is not a diasporic and Pan-African figure. In Adolph Reed Jr.’s long awaited and much anticipated study W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line, he argues most persuasively for much more complex readings of DuBois’s various positions. Reed’s re-readings suggest that the closest we might be able to come to making sense of DuBois’s various positions is to read DuBois as an ambivalent figure. Thus, Reed points out that when we characterize DuBois as “an elitist integrationist” (4) in his conflict with Garvey we must recognize that a few years later he left the NAACP because of its lack of support for strengthening black institutions, even in the face of segregation. Such positions of DuBois confound how we might read and interpret his many political moves.

Nonetheless, I think it useful to consider DuBois’s response to Garvey and the UNIA movement as one of those skirmishes that shapes the black diaspora and that demonstrates the American-ness of African Americans. Cruse wrote that

Due to the apathy in Jamaica, Garvey could not initiate his movement in the West Indies until it was established in New York; and even then, examination of his policies at home and abroad revealed a marked duality—Garvey’s nationalism in the United States took on a revolutionary character but his Jamaican policies were strictly reformist. Garvey’s ultimate undoing was his blindness to many
facts about America, particularly differences in the psychologies of West Indian and American Negroes. His markedly pro-British bias left him wide open to charges by W.E.B. DuBois that he was "trying to solve the West Indies problems with Britain in the United States" (119).

There is much in the above quote to which one might respond: Did not DuBois try to use the American situation as a blue print for all Blacks? Did not many African Americans become members of the Garvey movement? Did not large numbers of black people elsewhere join the Garvey movement (in Montreal, Canada the Chapter of UNIA is still active today)? Did not "West Indians" have a longer history out of slavery and therefore a different relation to structures of white supremacy and negotiations with it? I ask these rhetorical questions not to position "West Indians" as "superior" to African Americans but rather to gesture at what might be at stake in the undertone of the claims of Cruse.

However, what is even more important about Cruse's claim is the way in which it positions DuBois within a particular American paradigm. DuBois is positioned as the right kind of representative of blackness within the American scene. I want to say that my comments here are not meant to rehabilitate Garvey. Rather, I am attempting to move towards what might be one of the signal events in diasporic historiography, one that inaugurates the tensions and aggressions in the limits of the family discourse in Black Studies, and therefore ushers in the tensions between outer-national desires and "nation thing" politics. Cruse's use of the term cousin is an important signal here. Who gets to speak for the family is crucial.

I am particularly fascinated by three essays that DuBois wrote on Garvey. If Reed is correct that we must always read DuBois as an ambivalent figure regardless of his various utterances; his interpretation of DuBois's essays on Garvey is persuasive of Reed's ambivalent thesis. Reed suggests that DuBois saw Garvey not only as a threat but that he also admired Garvey in many ways. This reading by Reed allows for different readings of the DuBois-Garvey debate to emerge and also for better sense to be made of some of DuBois's essays on Garvey. In the 1920 Crisis essay, "Marcus Garvey," DuBois appears simultaneously to admire Garvey and to reject his project. In this essay, it appears to me that DuBois is clearly exiled to Garvey's ability to articulate a black nationalist economic project that attracts attention among the masses. DuBois writes: "On the other hand, full credit must be given Garvey for a bold effort and some success. He has at least put vessels manned and owned by black men on the seas and they have carried passengers and cargoes." But whatever DuBois gives Garvey, he is also willing to take away. This "family feud" is important because I maintain, it pinpoints one of the intentions between cultural studies Black Studies establishment disco Reed also argues that contempt downplayed the central argument of Bois-Washington debate, and inst metaphor because it is more apply similar issue occurs if one observe Garvey and DuBois has not garnered fascination with diaspora. I think many reasons and thinking along reans was Garvey's deep respect DuBois was not just countering a co so loudly, he was continuing to sti with a substitute and one not conn. But this debate, more than anythin tion-centred discourse collide with must be ready to acknowledge that than its relation to reforming a spec it is not only the desire to reform At in Callaloo, but also an attempt to i the Black Studies project with any certain kind of "censoring" of black the essays. I want to suggest that the defenses are really responses to diaspora inci being concerned mainly with "the r in the underlying references to the E Atlantic. While Gilroy's text might its particular African American ass theses assertions. One might read Gil with which "family" members mig asked within the contexts of Black he undermines the "nation-thing" to other voices whose pleasures, s through a relation to African Ameri These other voices can and do ex African American artifacts, politics; are both complementary and not so the critique of black cultural sti this conversation because those of u
maintain, it pinpoints one of the initial flashpoints that leads to the current tensions between cultural studies discourse, diaspora thematics and the Black Studies establishment discourses.

Reed also argues that contemporary reappropriations of DuBois have downplayed the central argument of Souls of Black Folk, which is the DuBois-Washington debate, and instead played up the double consciousness metaphor because it is more applicable for our conservative times. A similar issue occurs if one observes that the diasporic skirmish between Garvey and DuBois has not garnered much discussion in our contemporary fascination with diaspora. I think that DuBois had to oppose Garvey for many reasons and thinking along with Reed, I propose that one of those reasons was Garvey’s deep respect and almost reverence for Washington. DuBois was not just countering a cousin who should not have been speaking so loudly, he was continuing to stage his debate with Washington – albeit with a substitute and one not connected to the halls of white supremacy. But this debate, more than anything, demonstrates the ways in which nation-centred discourse collide with diaspora desires. In such a context we must be ready to acknowledge that much more is at stake in Black Studies than its relation to reforming a specific nation. Thus it becomes clear that it is not only the desire to reform America which underwrites the responses in Callaloo, but also an attempt to articulate exactly who can speak within the Black Studies project with any legitimacy and authority. Therefore a certain kind of “censoring” of black diaspora voices is implicit in some of the essays.

I want to suggest that the defenses of Black Studies in the Callaloo issue are really responses to diaspora incursions into an idea of Black Studies as being concerned mainly with “the nation- thing.” The tension is exhibited in the underlying references to the Du Fara essay and to Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic. While Gilroy’s text might exhibit flaws which pertain to some of its particular African American assertions, his intervention is larger than those assertions. One might read Gilroy’s text as fundamentally concerned with which “family” members might speak and which questions might be asked within the contexts of Black Studies. Gilroy’s contribution is that he undermines the “nation- thing” discourse of Black Studies and brings to it other voices whose pleasures, desires and possibilities are articulated through a relation to African American presence but not only.

These other voices can and do enter into discordant conversations with African American artifacts, political positions and the like, in ways that are both complementary and not so. It is the not so that seems to be driving the critique of black cultural studies. I bring diaspora discourses into this conversation because those of us who work through Black Studies via
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diaspora discourses often articulate our practice as one of black cultural studies. This articulation allows for a particular economy of black desire which is founded in trans-Atlantic slavery and its aftermath, including contemporary migrations, but is mediated by our relations to specific nation and outer-national, national, postcolonial and migrant black disappointments and desires. This fleeting psychoanalytic approach to diaspora positions tolerate black difference as the very basis for any kind of black possibility. Without it, the family will always remain always already fractured.

Diaspora Discourses and Desiring: A Diaspora Reading Practice

In Emerge magazine there is a section called “Diaspora Watch” in which news items from the African continent are found. This curious but intimate relation has always baffled me. For many, Africa is the natal or imagined natal land and therefore can not be marked diaspora. Emerge’s practice of marking the diaspora from an American perspective also finds itself in academic practice. At a Black Caucus meeting at the MLA in Toronto, a diaspora panel was suggested where only African American scholars would be speakers. Responses to the narrowness of the panel were greeted with “we will do the others the following year”. Here again the question of reading practice is apparent.

In Borders, Boundaries and Frames, Mac Henderson, drawing on Stuart Hall, Henry Giroux and Lata Mani, argues for a reading practice that expands one’s sense of community. It calls for border crossing reading practice that re-situates and relocates but also dislocates. She states “Border crossing yields... "double vision"—it expands our field of vision without being expansionist; it includes without consuming; it appreciates without appropriating; and it seeks to temper politics with ethics” (27, emphasis added). Henderson here articulates what the project of black cultural studies might be: to destabilize the assumed subjects of blackness. The question of address is at stake in black cultural studies. Just exactly who is being addressed is never certain nor clearly demarcated. Yet political and ethical or politico-ethical questions are central to the interacances and articulations of black cultural studies. These concerns are concerns which occupy the terrain of explicitly diasporic work.

Toni Morrison framed this concern in Playing in the Dark as a “critical geography... space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration... without the mandate for conquest” (3). Henderson’s introductory essay with its call for more open and fluid borders, boundaries and frames in multicultural America is influenced by Stuart Hall’s concerns in the essay “New Ethnicities”. In “New Ethnicities” Hall argues concerning diaspora that “the black experience sequences which this carries for it hybridization and ‘cut-and-mix’... (44)” should be more than analyses and readings. In this final diaspora desire, fantasy and memory and the past. He is still ab and the challenges to the nation’s making multiple and conflictive complex moves that black cultural diaspora as both a connection and articulation of desiring “the nation and reworking it as something else”.

So if the Henderson-Chandler is read as a response to diasporic Pan-Africanism—but a discordant aggressive and antagonistic questioning what is at stake in this want to make a case for a diaspora recognises that the past is not sac can take from it. As well I want to cultural artifacts and exchanges b tives which might both enhance t and simultaneously destabilize an In this sense I am therefore argued philosopher would call a “whatev The “whatever” of Black Studies is not a simple and uncomplicated regulative and restricting context of the study of black we read blackness as a sign with beyond “the nation thing.” Denios diasporic peoples have always had nation and transnational identific relation to both the structures of people in other places. I think her to Canada, for example.

If established Black Studies a ever of diasporic desire and work through its difficult know a staging of the attempt to grapp
Understanding the complex nature of Black Studies and its relationship to the concept of diaspora is crucial. The black experience, as articulated by the term "diaspora," involves a process of unsettling, recombination, and counterfactuals. This process, as described by Rinaldo Wilcox, involves the interaction between diaspora desire, fantasy, and memory in relation to cultural sharing, borrowing, and the past. He argues that the specific experiences of nation and the challenges faced by the nation are sometimes too confining, requiring multiple and conflicting identifications across nations. It is these complex movements that black cultural studies attempts to make. Recognizing diaspora as both a connection and disconnection provides a site for the articulation of desiring the "nation-thing" and simultaneously undermining and reworking it as something more.

So if the Henderson-Chandler-Lahine response to black cultural studies is read as a response to diaspora discourse—not the romance story of Pan-Africanism—but a discordant and contradictory sometimes even aggressive and antagonistic conversation and dialogue, we might better understand what is at stake in the defense of Black Studies. However, I want to make a case for a diaspora discourse or black cultural studies which recognizes that the past is not sacred, that it guarantees no more than we can take from it. As well, I want to suggest that a diaspora reading of black cultural artifacts and exchanges brings to the table for discussion perspectives which might both enhance the reforming strategies of specific nations and simultaneously destabilize any too-easy sameness in black discourses.

In this sense, I am therefore arguing for what Giorgio Agamben, the Italian philosopher, would call a "whatever" of Black (cultural) Studies. The "whatever" of Black Studies is too disturbing to tolerate for some. It is not a simple and uncomplicated whatever. It is a "whatever" that refuses the regulating and restricting confines of "the nation-thing" discourse in the context of the study of black peoples. This is particularly important if we read blackness as a sign within (post)modernity that has always been beyond "the nation-thing." Denied citizenship within specific nations, black diasporic peoples have always had to articulate relations between place/nation and transnational identifications which position them in ambiguous relation to both the structures of nation and their narratives and to black people in other places. I think here of Paul Robeson’s complex relationship to Canada, for example.

If established Black Studies and its articulators cannot tolerate a whatever of diasporic desire and queer queries, then black cultural studies must work through its difficult knowledge elsewhere. Black cultural studies is a staging of the attempt to grapple with difficult knowledge. But I further
want to suggest that the staging happens in what kinds of reading practices we are willing to tolerate and hear; how our reading practices might disturb the safety of what we think we know; and how our reading practices might gesture to the success of the contingency of the Black Studies project. My claim is not that the struggle for full citizenship is over, but to situate struggle within its history and to assert other and different kinds of responses. Recognising the successes and, important for these purposes, the failures of the social movements of the 1960s and 70s might require us, as Kobena Mercer put it, to "acknowledge[e] the disappointment consequently upon the loss of such a utopian vision in the face of the relentless rightward political shifts of the past ten to fifteen years" (1996, p.119) We need a theory of post-civil rights black disappointment. I am suggesting that black cultural studies is an attempt to grapple with the post-liberationist era in all its complexities and still retain a speaking back to and even a confrontation with conservative forces of all stripes.

What is at stake as we "read" in the era of a renewed discussion of the black diaspora? This question allows us to focus on what might be at stake when reading practices are at stake. What I mean by reading practices are the histories, memories, desires, free associations, disappointments, pleasures and investments we bring to any given texts. By reading practices I want to further signal, or at least suggest the possibility of a diaspora reading practice.

A diaspora reading practice does not only decode and encode diaspora in a text. Texts are also read for their repression and disavowals of diaspora histories and consciousness. This is a reading practice which is informed by the peregrinations of, at least, an Atlantic consciousness. In this regard the reading practice that I am suggesting is one which can tolerate the possibility of being wrong given the vastness of the Atlantic zone. But more importantly it is a reading practice which can tolerate that we bring different histories, desires and needs to texts we read. Therefore the reading practice which I am calling a diaspora reading practice is one which can bear to tolerate that what is at stake in our reading of any text has much to do with our interactions within, across and outside our given localities, regions, nations and continents.

A diaspora reading practice is an economy of reading which attempts to read for "blacknesses" and to attempt to understand how national and international practices and desires inform our readings. But equally important it is a reading which seeks to be transgressive in the contexts of all official readings of blackness. It is also a reading which is crucial to make sense of what (with short hand doubt) I call the diaspora queer speaker. It is above all a tentative reading.

Diaspora reading practices are both an insight means that we understand the possibility of belonging. There are others. A diaspora and returning these other spaces, places and times that the transmission of various spaces is one habitus of belonging. How folks regionally and nationally is never the same, difference, even when the difference is of belonging are ephemeral imaginary; the more important. Important, because our boundaries of restriction. Instead any as allow for the pushing of local borders. Thus the reading practice might be one of a beguished local utterances of resistance and reading practice is that its possibilities amply evident but rather must be read i cinematic representations of archives it.

A DIASPORA READING PRACTICE
WATERMELON WOMEN AS EX

In this regard, I am seduced by Cheryl Richards's first black lesbian feature film, Watermelon. Of the issues that require us to think con Black Studies project. In Watermelon, Cheryl Richards, a black woman actor who pia 1930s and 40s. As with Isaac Julien's Lo and the question of the archive is up to a celluloid irreverence to history as also suggests that when you look for Langston-Julien, in Watermelon Woman you look for Cheryl's film is a quintessential essay to screen a certain kind of diaspora and pain of History and it is also a film ab	orical narrative. Danye returns to the life and to turn her story into a heroic contemporary black lesbian existence genealogical promise, the place where possible fulfillment of some special power really offer us is the ability to play in the trinity: history, memory and fiction. V beyond-the-boundary feeling.
Diaspora reading practices are both local and beyond the local. Such an insight means that we understand that the nation is not the only signal of belonging. There are others. A diaspora reading allows for uncovering and returning these other spaces, places and sites of belonging. One might argue that the transmission of various images within and outside nations is one habitus of belonging. How folks make use of these images locally, regionally and nationally is never the same. It is usually a repetition with difference, even when the difference is minor. Many of these diaspora sites of belonging are ephemeral imaginary spaces, but this I might argue is all boundaries of restriction. Instead any reading and use of these images can allow for the pushing of local boundaries to expand and possibly change. Thus the reading practice might be one where outer-national identifications beget local utterances of resistance and vice versa. The wonder of such a reading practice is that its possibilities for transformation are not immediately evident but rather must be read in their locality. I think that reading cinematic representations of archives is a good case in point.

A DIASPORA READING PRACTICE: WATERMELON WOMEN AS EXAMPLE

In this regard, I am seduced by Cheryl Dunye’s Watermelon Woman, the first black lesbian feature film. Watermelon Woman provides for us many of the issues that require us to think contrapuntally within and against the Black Studies project. In Watermelon Woman, Dunye sets out to find Faye Richards, a black woman actor who played minor roles in some films in the 1930s and 40s. As with Isaac Julien’s Looking for Langston, history, fiction and the question of the archive is up for grabs in Dunye’s film. The film is a celluloid irrevencence to history as salvational. To paraphrase Gates, who suggests that when you look for Langston in Looking for Langston you find Julien, in Watermelon Woman you look for Faye and find Cheryl.

Cheryl’s film is a quintessential diaspora artifact—it might be said to screen a certain kind of diaspora consciousness. It is a film about the Pain of History and it is also a film about the lack of salvation in the historical narrative. Dunye returns to the archive to uncover Faye Richards’s life and to turn her story into a heroic narrative that might be useful for contemporary black lesbian existence. However, the archive bedrock of genealogical promise, the place where one trace leads to another and the possible fulfillment of some special promise fades her. All the archive can really offer us is the ability to play more carefully with another kind of trinity: history, memory and fiction. What then is at stake is desire—that beyond-the-boundary feeling.
Dunye’s film peels back the layers of history, memory, and fiction to reveal a black lesbian desire. The possibilities for inventing, fabricating and processing the public scripts for black female life in Hollywood are laid bare. As film and cultural critic Kass Banning puts it “The Watermelon Woman transforms the search mode into obsession and turns “truth” on its head—shaping desire into fiction”. Current diaspora celluloid history is not only obsessed with the lost person/persona but current diaspora cinema is obsessed with the archive. A certain kind of archive fever is one of the transnational maladies affecting diasporic celluloid fantasies and desires. For black people to enter the archive is to enter the world of fiction which is really to enter history—because that is all black people really are—a fiction.

Given this, there should be no surprise that Dunye stylistically and narratively situates the film between a Spike Lee “joint” and an Isaac Julien “normal” film. Dunye cites Spike Lee in loving and critical ways. In the tradition of Lee as director/writer she is an on-screen presence, and a captivating on screen presence. She is. Her citation of School Daze is explicit. Her reference to Lee grounds her film in the locality of a certain American cinematic politics and history and gestures to how her locality informs what kind of dialogue and conversation her cinematic tour will take. But the tour is not a monologue.

In fact Dunye is involved in a transnational dialogue. Her citation of Isaac Julien and in particular her citation of The Attendant is an important diaspora signal which speaks volumes about the “new positions in black cultural studies”. The citation of The Attendant in a quite contentious scene is an interesting citation practice. The scene in question is one where tensions exist between two black women and Cheryl’s white girl friend. [The Attendant is a film about the complexities of black queer desire, including S/M in a post-slavery world when life, death and sexual practices might also be at stake. The film takes place in a museum.] Searching for Faye, Dunye, like Julien before her, found the interesting and complex politics of identity and community. The question of making community is then central to the film and its mode of address to its audience. But Dunye’s citation of Julien also references the disturbing effect that queer studies has brought to Black Studies and simultaneously we might begin to read why black cultural studies emerges.39 These cinematic citations recall the late Marlon Riggs’s “Unleash the Queen” essay and bring with them no romance or sentiment nor heroic histories—easy affirmation is out. The family is dysfunctional. The struggle to make community is front and centre.

The archive fever exhibited in black diaspora cinema has different implications for black celluloid theorists and for Black Studies. Dunye's...
Julien, Riggs are not correcting and furnishing realist counter-opposition to Hollywood like the most recent Melvin Van Peebles offering, Classified X. The only real for these folks is a real time, the psychic real is at stake. We go to the archives to recover what has gone missing, to discover what we imagine might be there. Dunye’s return to the celluloid closet/archive to recover and then recover the black lesbian from the editing floors of history and to credit her existence (Faye’s biography is literally told to the audience as the credits role at the end of the film) is pedagogical in many ways for Black Studies.

Those who oppose the utterances of black cultural studies refuse to engage their locality in a conversation that gestures, even references something more. Diaspora discourses insist on something more. I am therefore suggesting, in fact, calling for a Black (cultural) Studies that can bear to tolerate what Michael Hanchard and Carole Boyce Davies call “elsewhere”. I am also calling for a Black (cultural) Studies that can bear to tolerate the “whatever”. This is not an “elsewhere” and a “whatever” that is deteriorated but rather this “elsewhere” and “whatever” is a transnational sensibility, granted sometimes ephemeral, but always politicised, one that recognises that one locality of blackness cannot stand in for all of blackness and that even on the North American continent blackness is differently lived and expressed. Thus we need, in fact, we must require, a Black (cultural) Studies which can do more than merely reference the locality of its nation as though that locality is not always already transnationally configured and inflected. 20

The economy of blackness and therefore Black Studies must expand. Diaspora discourses that can mediate between the politics of nation and home, and recognize the something more of blackness are imperative in this moment when the collapse of large scale social movement is evident and the nation-state as we knew it in the eventful moment of Black Studies institutionalization is waning in the face of global capital’s demands. Nations have not outlived their purposes despite celebrations that often seem to suggest so. Nations are also not all we require. But to give the last word to Canadian poet Dionne Brand, it is sometimes useful to know when to give up “land to light on.”

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Leslie Sanders and Michael Hanchard for their insightful comments on both the ideas of this paper and its organization. I thank Carole Boyce Davies for inviting me to participate in the conference which allowed me to revise these ideas from a different perspective.

Beyond the 'Nation Thing'

3. Wahneema Lubiano's genealogy in "Mapping the Intercepts Between Afro-American Cultural Discourses and Cultural Studies; A Prolonged Monogamy" is one of the most recent and interesting reconfigurations of Black Studies institutional genealogy in the American academy; see also Houston Baker's, Black Studies, Rap and the Academy.

4. These last questions are formulated with much in mind. A study of the history of the debates between DuBois-Garvey, DuBois-McKay would be very useful; debates between Gilroy-Chandler, Gilroy-Dyson, and a plethora of nation-diaspora skirmishes is important to flesh out the significance of the tensions in Black Studies. As well the ways in which different intellectuals/scholars within the Black Studies project are positioned in both their political stances and the nuances of their politics is crucial. For example the political difference between Harold Cruse and Larry Neal, or in more general terms the difference between a more nation-centered approach as opposed to a more diasporic approach. Attaching names to these "positions" is important, but even more important is making the historical-cultural distinction between different inflections of the Black Studies project. The distinction might be understood as how individual intellectuals view themselves in relation to the nation. The Black Studies project has never been a singular project despite attempts to rewrite its history into a singular nation-centred one. I thank Michael Hanchard for his careful and insightful reading, commentary and suggestions for clarifying this argument.

5. While an argument can be made for the continuing marginalization of Black Studies in the American academy it is also important to point out that within Black Studies its own self-generating discourses have produced what can be described as "official" positions. These positions provide particular content and directives of what might and might not count as a part of the Black Studies project. One of the first "outside" discourses to invade the Black Studies "official" discourse was feminism. Others like queer theory have since arrived. Therefore established field of Black Studies I mean to signal the terms upon which blackness is often conceptualized as singular and therefore other aspects of blackness must make a case in the face of this singularity for a different perspective and reading.

6. See L. Berlant "Intimacy: A Special Issue"(1997)
7. See D. Britzman (1998)
8. In her 1996 Callaloo essay Henderson makes the argument that the Black Studies project was a contingent project.
9. See Paul Gilroy's critique of the discourse of family in Black Studies in "It's A Family Affair." I cannot develop the importance of the family discourse here. However it is crucial to note that the trope of family continues to play a crucial and defining role in Black Studies. The discourse of family does not have to be immediately understood as restrictive since all kinds of family formations exist but we should be cautious in our use of it.
10. See Chandler's critique of Gilroy; and for a more popular example see "Black

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Like Them” special issue on Blacks in America *The New Yorker.*


12. By “the national Thing” Zizek means to signal the ways in which “Collective enjoyment through national myths” are lived out. But he is further concerned with the ways in which the other or the outsider is understood or at least read as attempting to “steal our enjoyment.” It seems to me that a similar tension is at stake in the relationship between diaspora discourses and Black Studies. That is diaspora discourse appears to steal the thunder of the nation-centered Black Studies project. I have abbreviated Zizek to “the nation-thing” as a way of pointing to the ways in which Black Studies has evolved into a site for the national enjoyment of a “black thing” and how that “black thing” has evolved into a “thing” that is mainly conceived as only located within the confines of a specific nation.

13. Reed’s study does not attempt to demarcate a specific arrival of African American studies with DuBois, but one could use his study as the basis to argue for other and sometimes more persuasive moments for Black Studies based on DuBois. But what is really at stake here is which fiction will be the sustaining fiction of Black Studies systematic and programmatic study in the academy. And why.

14. The essays are: “Marcus Garvey”; “The Black Star Line”; and “A Lamatic or Traitor”.


16. See in particular for a recent discussion of the impact of Garvey on African American politics and the debate’s usefulness for Black Studies, Watkins-Owens’s *Blood Relations.*

17. I make use of Agamben’s formulation of the whatever one way in which the uncertainties and commonalities of “blacknesses” might be formulated in the face of some room for surprise, disappointment and pleasure without the recourse to disciplinary and punishing measures. This is whatever that can tolerate not knowing what blackness is in advance of its various utterances.


WORKS CITED


Beyond the 'Nation Thing'


AFRICAN-CENTERED
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Joyce Ann

In the 1997 gathering of the National Co proponent of Afrocentricity and a lead referred to Alice Walker’s novels as pica
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