

Critical Black Feminist Theory - Romy Opperman

Patricia Hill Collins – Black Feminist Thought “Black feminist thought’s identity as a ‘critical’ social theory lies in its commitment to justice.”¹

Hortense Spillers – “It seems to me that critical theory (...) melded the aims of *criticism* and *theory* in working out the protocols of a responsive and responsible view of socio-political order.”²

- “the alternative model of neither/nor”³
- “The Idea of Black Culture”⁴ 12/03/2021 18:35:00

Adorno: “Culture has become ideological not only as the quintessence of subjectively devised manifestations of the objective mind, but even more as the sphere of private life. The illusory importance and autonomy of private life conceals the fact that private life drags on only as an appendage of the social process. Life transforms itself into the ideology of reification – a death mask. Hence, the task of criticism must be not so much to search for the particular interest-groups to which cultural phenomena are to be assigned, but rather to decipher the general social tendencies which are expressed in these phenomena and through which the most powerful interests realize themselves. Cultural criticism must become social physiognomy. The more the whole divests itself of all spontaneous elements, is socially mediated and filtered, is ‘consciousness’, the more it becomes ‘culture.’”⁵

Sylvia Wynter’s Critical Black Feminist Theory

“I remember when I started reading Adorno – I still remember that first page – I couldn’t realize at first that I was finding it difficult, not because of what he was saying but rather because he was thinking in an entirely new way, everywhere questioning the presuppositions that underlay what he was saying. That was, for me, a remarkable breaking through moment. So the essay, “We Must Learn to Sit Down Together” is also me trying to break through to a new way of thinking.”⁶ (Scott and Wynter 2000, 153)

SW: “I think what I like about Adorno was that for the first time I was being introduced to a mode of thinking that was alien to my English university training. It's very difficult to break out of the American and English pragmatic, empirical way of thought because it so powerfully seems to relate to the everyday world in which you are living. And so, that is what Adorno made me begin to think about. The reality of our everyday world. To think about an alternative way of thinking about the real, how it is instituted, produced, rather than merely how it is. With Benjamin, the attraction was that he, more than Adorno, I think, lived the contradiction of his

¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Second Edition (Taylor and Francis, 2002).

² Hortense Spillers, “Critical Theory in Times of Crisis,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 681–83, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8663578>.

³ Hortense J. Spillers, “Notes on an Alternative Model - Neither/Nor,” in *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*, ed. Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989).

⁴ Hortense J. Spillers, “The Idea of Black Culture,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 (2006): 7–28.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997, 29).

⁶ David Scott and Sylvia Wynter, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe* 8 (September 2000, 153).

situation of being both as a European and a Jew. As we Live the contradiction of being both the West and not-the-West.”⁷ (Scott and Wynter 2000, 165)

“We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture” (1968 and 1969)

“This pretended objectivity and detachment is the common stance of what I call, for convenience, the 'acquiescent critic.' In attempting to write from outside the process in pretending detachment, the 'acquiescent critic', accepts the status quo, by accepting his own fixed point outside it. He falls into the trap of which Adorno spoke

~ ‘He the cultural critic speaks as if he represented either unadulterated nature or a higher historical stage. Yet he is necessarily of the same essence as that to which he fancied himself superior. The insufficiency of the subject ... which notion to which it opposes itself as independent and sovereign’”⁸

“Given my particular position, I cannot pretend to objectivity nor impartiality in my approach to these critical essays. Nor can I pretend to function purely as a critic in relation to them. I prefer to bear witness to my own reaction on reading what is after all a feedback report on the body of writing now labelled West Indian.”

“A new ‘culture’ for us is not a luxury, not and no longer the playmate of an elite soul; it must be instead the agent of man’s drive to survive in the twentieth century.

Adorno is right when he says

“Today, adjustment to what is possible no longer means adjustment; it means making the possible real.”⁹

“Creole Criticism: A Critique” (1973)¹⁰

Epitaph from: Benjamin *Illuminations*

“Ethno or SocioPoetics” (1976)

Engages with Adorno – *Negative Dialectics*

“The WE of the West could only be defined by the Negation that the OTHER constitute.”

“It is our intention in this paper to suggest that the black experience in the New World has been paradigmatic of the non-Western experience of the native peoples; and that the black experience constituted an existence which daily criticized the abstract consciousness of humanism; that the popular oral culture which the black created in response to an initial negation of this humanness, constitutes as culture, *the heresy of humanism*; and that is why black popular culture - spirituals, blues, jazz, Reggae, Afro-Cuban music - and its manifold variants have constituted an underground cultural experience as subversive of the status quo Western culture as was Christianity in the catacombs of the Roman Empire. For it was in this culture that the blacks reinvented themselves as a WE that needed no OTHER to constitute their Being; that laid down the cultural parameters of a concretely universal ethnos.”¹¹

⁷ Scott and Wynter. 165

⁸ Sylvia Wynter, “We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism 1,” *Jamaica Journal* 2, no. 4 (1968): 23–32. (26, 25, 26).

⁹ Sylvia Wynter, “We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism 2,” *Jamaica Journal* 3, no. 1 (1969): 27–42.

¹⁰ Nijah Cunningham, “The Resistance of the Lost Body,” *Small Axe* 20, no. 1 (2016): 113–28. Norval Edwards, “‘Talking About a Little Culture’: Sylvia Wynter’s Early Essays,” *Journal of West Indian Literature* 10, no. 1/2 (November 2001): 12–38.

¹¹ Sylvia Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics* 2, no. 2: Ethnopoetics: a first international symposium (1976).