The Schoolboys and the Hobo

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For Albert MURRAY

The Black Culture of the United States is seldom, if ever, compared to that of the other Black Americas[1]. When it is, the continuity between these cultures tends to be emphasized, rather than their separateness and relative originality. The fluctuating views of those critics and historians who tried to assess the amount of Africanism present in U. S. Black Culture should have made the point clear, though: there has never been any doubt as to the African character of Caribbean or Latin American Black cultures. But how African is the Black culture of the U.S. has been the subject of much controversy. In a concise paper which is quite a good introduction to the study of U.S. Black culture, Bernhard Ostendorf summarizes the problem when he says that the "consensus school" of historians and social scientists "assumed that the anonymous (Black) masses had no culture of their own and either shared the dominant cultural values or aspired to them."[2]

Against this view, which implies the inferiority or pathology of U.S. Black Culture, the tendency was, in the 60's and early 70's to insist on the African heritage and "reject large parts of that culture which grew out of 350 years of shared history."[3] While Ostendorf goes on from this point to a study of Black culture in terms of DuBois's "double consciousness", what I would like to pinpoint in this paper is the conflict between orality and literacy which is interwoven in all the contradictions and complexities correctly shown by Ostendorf as at once underlying and expressing Black culture in the United States.

Oral Character of U.S. Black Culture.

The oral character of U.S. Black culture has been recognized by a number of authors whose work has by now become classic.[4] Ostendorf himself pays his dues to orality and summarizes current research in parts IV (Oral versus Literate Culture) and V (Black Oral Culture, especially pp. 229-246) of his paper. But the one researcher who seems to have best perceived the acute *conflictual* nature of the orality versus literacy plight is William Labov. In *Language in the Inner City*,[5] Labov has shown that at a certain age, Black children are faced with the choice of speaking standard English, and sounding "lame" to their peers, or sticking to their own dialectal version of black street English.[6] Thus, upward mobility, whose primary condition is the competent use of standard English, conflicts with in-group solidarity, which demands use of the vernacular dialect. The "lame" speakers of today are likely to be the winners in tomorrow's rat-race, and oral agility in the vernacular may well prove disability in the future.[7]

The attitude of the schoolboys who refuse to speak "lame" results from complex loyalties and also from that peculiar ethos known as the "culture of poverty."[8] It is obviously related to the choice of the "bad nigger" as a model, and

one can safely assume that in fact it aims at "adjusting to the reality of the street."[9] The problem is why this attitude has remained so vigorous while it obviously works against the economic and social interests of the community: was the handicap of two centuries of slavery so great as to hinder the progress of the Black community some 130 years after it was abolished, as the "consensus school" asserts? Or has it to do with social identity? Is it a matter of insufficient or misguided leadership?

If the first two factors can be elaborated into a plausible explanation, Negro leadership certainly cannot be blamed for underrating the importance of education and literacy. It is true that Booker T. Washington's doctrine laid the stress on vocational studies rather than on the liberal arts. Nevertheless, to him *literacy* was the prime condition of any progress, (together with baths and toothbrushes). His career was that of an educator before he became a leader of Black opinion. Because it stressed the collective dimension of the Black minority rather than the individual success of some of its members, it is said to have shown more concern for communal solidarity than DuBois's opposite doctrine of the "talented tenth". But both insisted on the necessity for all Blacks to acquire literacy and education. Though DuBois acutely perceived the importance of certain aspects of Black oral culture, both he and B. T. Washington seem to have paid little or no attention to the split which the passage from orality to literacy was to inflict on the Black community. But before we come to this central question, it is worth recalling some essential features of Black orality.

Blues and Afro-American Culture.

Oral retention in U.S. Black culture falls into three categories. The first one includes such undoubtedly verbal genres as the dozens, signifyin', preachin', folktales and the like. The second one associates a musical as well as a verbal tradition and includes the blues, and the songs and ballads whose transmission, once purely oral, is now largely dependent on the new orality of the media. The third one is only musical and in the process of losing much of its native orality: I mean jazz and related musical expression. In fact, if most studentss of the subject recognize the importance of music in Black culture, they fail to adequately emphasize its link with orality: this is due to the fact that *musical* literacy has not been studied along with what is usually known as literacy. Walter Ong does not even mention musical literacy in his standard handbook, *Orality and Literacy*.[10] But there is no doubt that, apart from the case of ragtime piano players of New Orleans days, musicianship did not involve the ability to read musical scores before the late 20's. And the jazzman's craft, anyway, involves a form of competence which cannot be written down. Albert Murray is particularly emphatic on this point:

> The Afro-American tradition, on the other hand, is largely oral rather than written. Even its music is likely to be transmitted through auditory means rather than by notation even when both pupil and teacher are musically literate.[11]

And again:

> ... when great Negro musicians like Armstrong, Basie, Ellington, Parker play by ear, they do so not because they cannot read the score but rather

because in the very process of mastering it they have found it inadequate for their purposes.[12]

Because it is both verbal and musical and because of its popularity among the Black community, at least during the first sixty years of this century, the blues is considered the core of Black American culture in the U.S.,[13] and within the short format of this essay, I have chosen to focus on the blues, as the most typical form of its expression.

Murray, in *Stomping the Blues*, notes a contradiction, or at least an ambivalence in the relationship between the music and the words of the songs,[14] while Levine insists on the fact that if the words almost invariably refer to individual experience, and the grammatical subject of the lyrics is most often "I", the performance itself is oriented toward the creation of a strong communal feeling and the reinforcement of in-group solidarity.[15] Murray even estimates that the lyrics of the blues, which are so often the basis of commentary on the significance of the blues,[16] are not quite so important as the music:

> ... the definitive element of a blues statement is not verbal (...) Folklore oriented social historians (sometimes also known as compilers of oral history) and tone-deaf lexicographers -not blues musicians and Saturday night revelers- seem most inclined to ascribe primary significance to the literal content of blues lyrics. Blues singers almost always seem to be much more preoccupied with vocal subtleties than with rendering the lyrics as written.[16]

However individual the performance itself may be, as John Szwed said, "the blues are directed individually to the collective"; in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* Lawrence Levine quotes Norman Manson, a trumpet player who backed classic blues songers like Ida Cox, Mammie Smith and Ma Rainey as saying:

> (the blues) do express the feeling of people and when we used to play around through Mississipi in those cotton sections of the country, we had the people with us! They hadn't much outlet for their enjoyment and they get together in those honky-tonks and you should hear them. That's where they let out their suppressed desires, and the more suppressed, the better the blues they put out, seems to me.[17]

The individual dimension of the blues appears even more clearly if they are contrasted with the essential communalism of the work-songs, prison-songs and ballads from which they partly originated. The image of the lonely vagrant songster living from hand to mouth is obviously the inverted image of pre-Emancipation conditions, continued in such Southern institutions as the chain-gang and work-camp organization. It is certainly excessive, though, to relate this "individualism" to the Benjamin Franklin-Horatio Alger ethos of hard work and thrift which B. T. Washington strove to communicate; Levine presumably anticipated the objection when he wrote the following passage in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, a passage which obviously calls for discussion:

> The individualist ethos, always strong in the United States, was perhaps ideologically most persuasive in the decades before and after the Civil War. In the latter period especially, the nation was imbued with the notion that

Man could progress according to the Horatio Alger model, that the individual molds his own destiny. Freedmen had this message thrust upon them by the Yankee school teachers who flocked South to create institutions of education, by the black school teachers produced by such new institutions as Hampton and Tuskeegee, by the popular press, and by the endless oratory of black and white politicians, preachers, businessmen, and 'leaders" of every sort. *This is not to suggest that there was a direct relationship between the national ideological emphasis upon the individual, the popularity of Booker T. Washington's eachings, and the rise of the blues.* Psychologically, socially and economically, Negroes were being acculturated in a way that would have been impossible during slavery, and it is hardly surprising that their secular music reflected this as much as their religious music did. [18] (my italics)

Thus, Levine uses the central notion of individualism to connect the three different attitudes inherent in the American dream, Booker T. Washington's teachings and the blues. In spite of his precautions, I am not satisfied with such a vague concept as "individualism", which can have very different meanings. Not only do the values of the blues contradict to a large extent the ideal of entrepreneurship, hard work and common sense handed over by the Puritans, but the very notion of individualism has an altogether different content according to the "puritanical" ethos or the blues ethos.

For one thing, the theme which so many blues have in common is that of solitude and estrangement. Not even Murray, in his distrust of blues lyrics would, I hope, question that. The typical persona expressing himself or herself in the blues is a marginal individual who has just suffered sentimental, sexual, or economic loss, finds in the song relief from that blow inflicted by fate and thus reinforces his or her resilience and stoicism. The undeniable element of self-pity bizarrely finds a kind of compensation in the freedom inherent in the breaking of social ties: once again, stability has not been achieved and vagrancy is the only future left to the protagonist. Yet, the blues persona does not have to choose his or her marginality, but must cope with it as a result of adverse conditions. He does not resent it either, especially if he is a male singer: the blues most often express a craving for social and emotional stability, but they are underlaid by the knowledge that only the position of a marginal man can enable one to perceive the happiness associated with long-term relationships or a regular job. One cannot help feeling that there is a kind of relief on the part of the blues singer in being barred from these petty bourgeois satisfactions and spared the responsibility they entail.

Riesman and Glazer in *The Lonely Crowd*,[19] pointed out that whereas in traditional societies man depended entirely on the social environment, the Puritan ethos defined an "inner-directed" type capable of autonomy thanks to a set of individualistic values (self-help, self-reliance, etc.) and technological know-how instilled by his education. The professional or semi-professional blues singer, when he appeared in the first decades of this century, was both dependent on the group within the context of a community which preserved strong traditional and oral characteristics, and unable to satisfy its demands in terms of marriage, family-life and a regular income, owing to the economic and social disruptions which followed Emancipation. His individualism was not so much a decision as the result of the economic impact of the larger society on an economically marginal group. These factors of disruption are well-known and need only be briefly recalled: they are the replacement of the plantation system by sharecropping, and

the industrialization of the North, creating a strong demand for Black labor. In addition, the entertainment business was booming and blues performers greatly in demand on all sorts of occasions in small communities as well as in the honky-tonks and barrel-houses of the towns. Finally, the fact is that once vagrancy had become a habitual mode of life, it was not easily discarded. Moreover, it is likely that, in Frontier days, it had not been so much marginal as rather common: the frontiersman was more of an adventurer than an entrepreneur. In short, the bluesman was more or less bound to remain a vagrant. His hedonistic day-to-day lifestyle was sharply opposed to the Protestant ethic of thrift and hard work, and the version of it which inspired the new programmes of the Black schools and churches. Rather than on their book-oriented knowledge, his survival depended on the tricksters' ingenuity, handed over by oral tradition.[20]

Though the various versions of the "Bad Man" myth extoll these values in oral tradition, there is no evidence that the "Bad Man", and more particularly the blues singer, was an example to the Black Community as a whole. He rather seems to have been perceived both as a hero and outcast, a status which was more or less common to popular entertainers,[21] notably musicians, and which they may have inherited from the griots of West Africa. According to Samuel Charters,

> (the) ambiguous position of the griots in the African societies, (was) carried over into the attitudes toward the singers in the societies which the Africans built up in the United States and the Caribbean.[22]

Being at once a hero and an outcast, the blues singer at the beginning of this century epitomized the link which existed between the oral ethos and marginality, and which resulted from tradition as well as from orality not being able to fulfill the demands of an increasingly industrial age. Among a minority cut off from any significant role in the mainstream society, except perhaps as a scapegoat, and faced with an acute problem of identity, the passage from orality to literacy must have been a complex and often excruciating process, which is not over yet.

It involved a choice which never was, nor indeed could be made clearly. This choice has been beautifully fictionalized in Albert Murray's novel, *Train Whistle Guitar*.[23]

The Schoolboys and the Hobo.

Murray's novel is strongly reminiscent of Mark Twain, since it tells the boyhood and education of Scooter and his friend Buddy Marshall in Gasoline Point, a small community on the banks of the Mississipi, not far from Mobile. Like Tom Sawyer (or the young Ellison), the boys greatly admire adventurers and frontiersmen; Murray speaks of

> being also explorers and discoverers and also wagon train scouts as well as pirates and cowboys among all the other things you had to be besides being also a schoolboy...(*TWG*, p. 37)

Especially they are fascinated by a vagrant blues singer, Luzana Cholly, who visits Gasoline Point from time to time. One day they play truant and hop a freight train to go and meet him, with the intention of telling him that they want to be his

followers. The two boys do meet Luzana Cholly at the expected place, but with hardly a word he puts them back on a train to Gasoline Point and rides with them. Back to where they started from, the schoolboys share a can of sardines with the hobo and hear him unexpecxtedly lecturing about "going to school and learning to use (their) head like the smart, rich and powerful whitefolks" (*TWG*, p. 29):

> He said the young generation was supposed to take what they were already born with and learn to put it with everything the civil engineers and inventors and doctors and bookkeepers had found out about the world and be the one to bring about the day the old folks had always been prophesying and praying for. (*TWG*, p. 30)

The vagrant urges them to go "*further than Old Luze ever dreamed of. Old Luze ain't been nowhere. Old Luze don't know from nothing*" (*Ibid*, author's italics).

On the part of the author of *Stomping the Blues*, *The Hero and the Blues* and a biography of Count Basie, the passage certainly cannot be read as an onslaught on blues culture. One could also put forward a naturalistic interpretation, saying that Luzana Cholly is not aware of the wealth of knowledge and wisdom of which he is the repository, and that he has been stultified by the "inferiority" or "pathology" argument of the partisans of literate and national (vs oral and communal) culture. But there is nothing to indicate that he is wrong or that his point of view is unduly restricted.

Yet, Luzana Cholly's sermon is not only an extension of the educationist's discourse on the necessity of improving oneself or actualizing the "talented tenth". It is the recognition of the limits of Black oral culture -the result of extreme conditions and of a misadaptation to the modern world- the recognition too that it is not a tradition sanctified by religion and legitimated by the social order. In fact, I tend to think that the oral culture of the black people in the U. S. *had to be invented all the time*. Whereas traditional African orality is largely turned toward the past, which often only survives in the griots' memory, the American slaves were cut off from their roots, and their tradition had to be invented, especially after Emancipation, when the communal context in which a certain amount of Africanism had been able to survive was destroyed. This is not to say that African orality is set once for ever and that there is no adaptation to the present conditions in the performances it elicits; on the contrary, adaptation and improvisation are of the essence, but it continually tends to reshape existing material and owes its legitimacy to the recognition of its traditional and historical character.[24] The Black American culture, "living in style", as Murray describes it, is an answer to the anger and frustration of discrimination, and implies an intensely active and imaginative attitude on the part of the group as a whole and also of every individual. It is not the rejection of orality, but the emergence of a new orality, in which the present may be more important than the past and form more essential than content.

Indeed Murray sees tradition not only as "that which continues" but also as "the medium by which and through which continuation occurs"[25] and that medium seems to be essentially improvising the present rather than recording the past, however creatively. Hence a unique mixture of tradition and experiment:

> In any case, it is for the writer, as for the musician in a jam-session, that informal trial and error process by means of which tradition adapts itself to

change, or renews itself to change. It is, that is to say, the means by which *the true and tested in the traditional regenerates itself in the vernacular.*[26] (my italics)

The idea is echoed by Levine, saying of jazz that "it manifested the simultaneous acculturation to the outside society and inward-looking, group orientation that was so characteristic of black culture in the twentieth century."[27]

Toward a Definition of the Vernacular.

It is now clear that Murray's "regeneration in the vernacular" supposes a definition of the vernacular as different from the "traditional". Kouwenhoven, to whom Murray is directly indebted, insists that in America, there are no "folk arts", i. e. arts and techniques entirely determined by tradition, or at least that, where such arts do exist, they are not part of American culture, but consist of residual pockets of Indian or European traditions. What comes closest to these folk arts, though entirely different because liable to rapid evolution, is the vernacular arts, i. e. "non traditional forms and patterns of many sorts (...) objects shaped empirically by ordinary people in unselfconscious and uninhibited response to the challenges of an unprecedented environment"[28].

What Murray undoubtedly, though somewhat implicitly, adds to this definition, is the social and ethnic dimension of the vernacular, its spontaneous use as a value to reinforce the cohesion of the community. In view of what we have discussed hereabove, we might restrict Kouwenhoven's definition of the vernacular to that part of culture which reinforces social or ethnic identity while ensuring adjustment to a new environment within the framework of a set of communal values. In the case of the black community, there is no doubt that this description should take account of the conflict between orality and literacy. Thus, it would connect with what Kouwenhoven declared he was most interested in, viz. the "interaction between the cultured and vernacular tradition,"[29] and which presumably ought to have a name of its own -if only that of neo-vernacular.[30]

Thus, when Murray's schoolchildren had to go back to school, they did not turn their backs on Luzana Cholly and the blues tradition. Rather, they acknowledged that this culture is "tradition regenerated in a new context."[31] It is not a sum of the various elements that go into its making, but an entirely new culture, an "emergence", in the language of system theory, i. e. a combination which offers new properties, different from those of the elements from which it was combined. In Afro-American culture, jazz music offers the best possible example of such an emergence, and rightly did Murray make it the central metaphor of the Black life style, what he calls the "riff-style", and which he sees as superior to purely traditional culture:

There is probably more to be said for the riff-style life style that Negroes have developed in response to the adverse circumstances of their lives in the United States, than can be said for the culture they were so brutally stripped of.[32]

One may not agree with his view that the "riff-style life style" is superior to African tradition, but there is no longer any doubt that it is very different. Murray's problem, like Ralph Ellison's, has precisely been to integrate the oral, vernacular,

culture into his writing: indeed he says that what he attempted in *Train Whistle Guitar* was a verbal equivalent of Duke Ellington's and Count Basie's music.

The interference between orality and literacy can be isolated as the central element to which the black culture of the United States owes its originality. The Black community as a whole is still paying dearly for sticking to the more convivial values of a vernacular culture, in the sense that we have tried to define. But it has taught the world at large a very important lesson about the relative values of literacy and orality. There is no doubt that it will be enlarged by what is now taking place in Africa and other places where literate and oral cultures are in contact.

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1 - However, the problem is discussed in the following: Frank Tannenbaum. *Slave and Citizen.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948; Stanley Elkins. *Slavery in American Institutional and Intellectual Life.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959; Régis Bastide. *Les Amériques noires.* Paris: Payot, 1961.

2 - Bernhard Ostendorf, "Black Poetry, Blues, and Folklore: Double Consciousness in Afro-American Oral Culture." *Amerikastudien*, 20 (1975) p. 211.

3 - *Ibid.* Cf. Ron Karenga's contribution to Addison Gayle: *The Black Aesthetic.* New York: Doubleday, 1971.

4 - For a summary of the question and a bibliography, cf. Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin' and Testifyin'.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.

5 - William Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular.* Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1972.

6 - On Black English, and for an updated bibliography, cf. John Baugh, *Black Street Speech: Its History, Structure and Survival .* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983.

7 - Labov, op. cit., pp. 285 ff.

8 - Oscar Lewis, *La Vida .* New York: Random House, 1965.

9 - Ostendorf, op. cit. , pp. 219 ff.

10 - Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy.* London: Methuen, 1982. Musical orality is discussed in Robert W. Stephens: "The Study of Music as a Symbol of Culture: the Afro-American and Euro-American Perspectives". *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 10, 4 (Winter 1986): pp.180-184.

11 - Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black experience and American Culture .* New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1970: p. 183.

12 - *Ibid,* p.61.

13 - cf. LeRoi Jones, *Blues People*. New York: Morrow, 1963.

14 - Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976.

15 - Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

16 - Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, p. 79.

17 - Levine, op. cit. , p. 234. John Szwed is quoted without a reference, on the same page.

18 - *Ibid.* , p.223.

19 - David Riesman and Nathan Glazer, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. Abridged Edition: Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955. pp.23 ff.

20 - On the vagrancy of blues songers, cf. Giles Oakley, *Devil's Music*. London: B.B.C., 1976.

21 - The theme inspired the famous story by Eudora Welty, "Powerhouse", anthologized in *A Curtain af Green and other Stories* . New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1941.

22 - Samuel Charters, *The Roots of the Blues: An African Search*. London, Melbourne, New York: Quartet Books, 1982.

23 - New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974.

24 - Cf. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* . Oxford: Clarendon Press,1970.

25 - *The Hero and the Blues*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973. p. 72.

26 - *The Omni-Americans*, pp. 184-185.

27 - *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, p. 238.

28 - John A. Kouwenhoven, *Half a Truth is Better than None: Some Unsystematic Conjectures about Art, Disorder, and American Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. p. 23.

29 - *The Omni-Americans*. p. 185.

30 - In the case of jazz, which Kouwenhoven discusses at full length in *Made in America: The Arts in Modern Civilization.*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1948, chapter 10, -one might suggest that the passage from vernacular to neo-vernacular took place around the end of the 20's when the bands grew bigger and musical literacy became more and more necessary for the musicians. By the early 40's, the transition was completed; bop, the new

style which emerged then, is definitely neo-vernacular. It is interesting to note that in spite of its sophistication, it never acquired "legitimate" status.

31 - The *Omni-Americans*. p. 185.

32 - *Ibid.*