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ABSTRACT
In this response to Wallace's new study I reflect, in particular, on an implicit conversation between the analytical perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu and Stuart Hall which is threaded through the study as a whole. Part of what makes The Culture Trap as compelling as it is, I argue, is the deft but tricky balance that Wallace strikes in this regard, and I explore some of the ways in which that balance is enacted, particularly in relation to questions about how we understand "culture", and about how far we can treat culture as a site of resistance to forms of social domination.

In a widely discussed article, first published in this journal in 2009, David Theo Goldberg urged a move away from a comparative approach to the study of race and racisms. The drawing of comparisons between racist practices as experienced in different contexts can, of course, be morally compelling and politically motivating. Yet, Goldberg reminds, those who object to such comparisons are often able to dispute them by pointing to differences or by asserting the force of "disanalogies" (2009, 1,276). It comes as no surprise, for instance, to read reports that a recent "roadmap" agreement between the UK and Israeli governments includes a provision by which the former will publicly repudiate the use of the term "apartheid" to describe the actions of the latter in Gaza and elsewhere (Gelblum 2023, 32). More broadly, Goldberg's argument is that the comparative method, not least because its analysis is "generated outwards from within the parameters – the bounded reference points – of states" (Goldberg 2009, 1,277), can make us less attentive than we ought to be to the ways in which different historical expressions of racism are mutually constitutive; how racism in any

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given place may be causally inter-related with – bolstered, sustained, and often actively informed by – racist practices elsewhere.

Amongst the many things that might be taken from Derron Wallace's compelling new study *The Culture Trap* (2023) is a powerful qualification to Goldberg's argument. That is to say, a demonstration of the extent to which a comparative approach might be used precisely *in order* to more effectively call exceptionalist thinking into question. Wallace draws on extensive ethnographic data collected in two publicly funded schools – one in London and one in New York – to explore the different treatment of Black Caribbean students in those two settings. In the US, he notes, Black Caribbean students are over-represented in selective institutions and tend to be celebrated as a "high-achieving Black model minority" (xvii). In the UK, however, where Black Caribbean students have historically had lower "attainment scores" than those reported for other ethnicities, they are frequently and stigmatisingly represented "as a chronically underachieving minority" (xvii). It is, in that respect, an explicitly comparative question which Wallace sets out to address, one pithily articulated by Ms. Bell, the teacher with whom he first discussed these issues: "I just really want to know why our Caribbean young people fail here and succeed in the schools over there" (189)?

Both that "failure" and that "success", Wallace shows, are routinely explained – in political and institutional discourse and to some extent amongst pupils themselves – through an exceptionalist account which, although differently configured in each case, interprets the educational outcomes and experiences of Black Caribbean young people in terms of some perceived or presumed aspects of their "culture": detachment or lack of effort, on the one hand; aspiration and hard work, on the other. It is precisely the fact that Wallace contrasts the different treatment of Black Caribbean pupils in these two distinct educational contexts which allows him to undermine the naturalizing force of these judgements – what he terms "ethnic expectations" – and to shed light on the various ways in which those expectations "operate as a slow state of injury" (95) upon the pupils in question. Wallace shows us, through a series of powerfully drawn and pithily analysed vignettes, that these essentializing expectations about Black Caribbean culture are not merely explanatory – that is, are not used simply to account for differences in educational outcomes – but are "*made* to matter in schools" (80). By informing institutional practices such as academic "setting" or streaming, by legitimating the differential treatment of pupils, those expectations also act formatively, helping to establish the very distinctions to which they purport to be a response. They are, in other words, not merely "in the head". Rather they "organize and regulate social practices […] and consequently have real, practical effects" (122). (For this reason, as one of Wallace's participants in London recognizes, contesting the force of those expectations requires pupils to do more than challenge interpersonal expressions of prejudice, it requires a willingness to think against the

institution itself: "I don't believe what that school believes about me" (176)). In all of this, of course, and as other writers have also demonstrated, the installation of culture as the dominant explanatory frame for social inequalities has the effect of eliding "the significance of race and the prevalence of racism in schools", such that culture becomes, in effect, "an alibi for racism" (7; cf. Appiah and Gutmann 1996, Chapter 2; Balibar 1988).

Wallace's study, it might be argued, is somewhat different from those which Goldberg has in mind in that its comparison concerns the treatment of the "same" community in two different national (and, indeed, two different imperial) contexts. Nonetheless, the analytical power of that comparison is just what allows him, so effectively, to do the work Goldberg enjoins on us: to reveal that what

> social agents might take as given, as supposedly natural conditions of the social, were socially composed by the relatively powerful over the backs of the relatively powerless, how, far from natural, they became naturalized, cemented and retained in place by a mix of design, default, ongoing social labour, habitus and carelessness by the (re-)production of relationalities. (2009, 1,280)

Moreover, although Wallace is deeply attentive to the historically and socially situated specificity of different trajectories – a brilliant early chapter, for instance, traces the way in which the expectations of parents regarding state schooling in the US and the UK are "rooted in the history and legacy of two competing Empires, and their differing relationships to the Anglophone Caribbean" (57) – his study is at pains to make explicit the continuities in these processes across contexts. It is thus a central claim of the work that Black Caribbean pupils in both the UK and US face the *same* "trap" – a discourse which repeatedly turns individual achievement into justificatory evidence in support of an essentializing account of culture – even if that trap acts to position them differently in each case. In short, it seems to me, this is a work which eloquently exemplifies how a comparative account can help us better contest a racializing politics articulated through presuppositions about culture and claims about purported cultural differences.

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Near the start of *The Culture Trap* Wallace acknowledges and pays tribute to two particularly significant theoretical influences. On the one hand, he tells us, his work takes up and builds on "Stuart Hall's critical consideration of race, culture and diaspora by considering schools as central sites of cultural construction and contestation" (2023, 19). On the other hand, it consolidates and extends his long-standing critical conversation with the work of Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. Wallace 2016, Wallace 2019), aiming to "deepen [the latter's] conceptualization of the reproduction of cultural and class inequalities in schools by exploring race as an always already contributing dimension of class relations" (2023, 19). The

author makes good on both of these ambitions through the course of the study, characterized as it is by a sensitive attention to the "cultural meaning-making strategies in the lived experience of Black youth" (11) and, no less, by a determination to disclose "the secret life of social class, in which class distinctions are misrepresented as wholly cultural distinctions" (117). Yet in some ways, and as those two quotes perhaps suggest, Hall and Bourdieu make for rather uneasy conceptual bedfellows. *The Culture Trap* is as engaging as it is, it seems to me, not least because of the deft but tricky balance which Wallace has to strike in seeking to navigate – to make productive use of – the tension between these two theorists and their respective accounts of social life.

Apart from anything else that productive tension is evident in an implicit difference of view over the extent to which cultural practices offer resources for a critical understanding of social relations, and for resistance to the inequalities sustained by those relations. Bourdieu was not the wholesale pessimist that some of his detractors make him out to be on this issue (see Fowler 2020) but it certainly is the case that he was broadly sceptical of what he called the "populist mystique", of celebratory accounts which took culture as a site of straightforward contestation against social power or which ignored the degree to which cultural understandings might be conformed to, or can serve to normalize, forms of domination. It is typical of his hard-headed realism to have noted that

> any critical analysis of a notion which bears closely or remotely on "the people" is apt to be identified immediately as a symbolic aggression against the reality designated – and thus immediately castigated by all those who feel duty bound to defend "the people", thereby enjoying the profits that the defence of "good causes" can bring. (1991, 91)

Wallace's study bears the hallmarks of that bracing scepticism, not least in his exploration of the ways in which Black Caribbean young people, even as they navigate the ethnic expectations imposed upon them, might also come to reproduce aspects of those expectations, or of the logic of exceptionalism which undergirds them, for themselves. In the US context, he reports, that reproduction was evident in the extent to which Black Caribbean pupils tacitly acceded to a symbolic differentiation between "our culture" and that of African American students. As Wallace puts it, with characteristic elegance and concision: "They reset the culture trap for African Americans and culturally assimilated Black Caribbean and African students in order to free themselves of it" (120–121). In the UK, conversely, some pupils defended themselves from the essentializing reach of teacherly expectations by asserting a more subjective form of distinction, distancing themselves, as individuals, from stereotypical representations of "yardie" or "street" culture.

At the same time, however, and even in the context of making this argument, Wallace's account also emphasizes the strategic and oftentimes

subversive quality of these moves. Thus, he says, for instance, of the pupils with whom he worked in London: "they recognised that these views [stereotypes of the underachieving or badly behaved Black Caribbean pupil] were invidious misrepresentations […] Nevertheless, they drew on what they perceived to be cultural misrepresentations to stage their own self-representation"; they were "willing to accept the idea that some Caribbean individuals conformed to the stereotype. They just refused to be counted among them" (126). That emphasis on the stubborn persistence of acts of resistance and refusal certainly owes more to Hall than it does to Bourdieu. Indeed, by attending to the ways in which those tactics were articulated *inside* the very processes by which forms of inequality are reproduced Wallace recalls Hall's account of culture as the site of a restless and immanent struggle for position:

> Cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination […] it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture, it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it. (1993, 106–107)

This is just one example, but it gives a sense of the way in which Wallace's study is vivified by the constant interplay between these two approaches. Apart from anything else, that conjunction serves as a reminder that Bourdieu's scepticism in relation to the question of cultural resistance is not unrelated to the fact that he pays such meagre attention to processes of racialization, and to the consequences of those processes, at least in his studies of European cultural fields. In seeking to explain the reproduction of inequality within those fields Bourdieu describes a process which is, after all, one of domination but also of incorporation; social actors come to learn their place *within* the field, come to internalize the "doxa" that legitimates that domination. What Bourdieu does not adequately acknowledge, of course, is the degree to which the racialized boundary of whiteness has been, for those so designated, a key part of how that domination has been effected, of how the incorporative force of symbolic violence is enacted. Conversely, the exclusionary quality of processes of racialization established in the contexts of empire, as well as in postcolonial settings, has often been met with a Du Boisian 'second sight', as George Yancy (2008), Satnam Virdee (2017) and others have reiterated. It has been met, that is to say, with a refusal to accept as given the operations of a social power which positions racialized communities not as submissive insiders but as antipathetic others, as figures of an exterior against which that culture defines itself. In that sense, it is precisely by virtue of his inattention to race that Bourdieu also loses sight of powerful traditions of cultural resistance. Wallace's study moves in the spirit of Hall in the way in which it builds on the critical sense-making of his participants, and in its attention to more formalized sites of cultural resistance, not least the supplementary schooling established

in the UK by Black Caribbean parents and teachers, a tradition which continues to furnish young people with "the political imagination to practice institutional defiance" (178). Yet, at the same time, Wallace never surrenders that Bourdieusian scepticism with regard to the populist mystique and, even in the second half of the study, which focuses on how pupils negotiated and contested the ethnic expectations which bore down upon them, he remains closely attentive to ways in which unequal opportunities and possibilities consequent on more or less privileged class backgrounds were re-coded as evidence of either subjective differences or cultural distinctions. His reading of the ways in which agency relates to and is shaped by historical structures, the interweaving of resistance and determination, is as unsentimental as it is sensitive. Although the contexts in question are very different, I was often reminded of Abdulmalek Sayad's remarkable studies (e.g. 2004) which also emerged in a critical collaboration with, but also in critical departure from, Bourdieu's ideas.

At the same time I also occasionally found asking myself – in what, I hope, is the same supportive spirit in which Ania Loomba once asked the question of Edward Said's use of Foucault and Gramsci in *Orientalism* (1998, 90) – just how far those two horses can be ridden together? I ask this question not so much as a conceptual one but with the nuts and bolts of qualitative analysis in mind. Where, for instance, in the example described above, does the line get drawn between culture understood as a conduit of symbolic violence – in Bourdieu's sense – and as a site of criticality or resistance – in Hall's sense? Presumably, the moment at which pupils were willing to accept that some aspects of those narratives or expectations were *true,* at least when applied to others, was the moment at which they no longer recognized them as "invidious misrepresentations'? Or is the argument that the acceptance of those narratives was of a merely strategic, provisional kind, a necessary manoeuvre within the deeply unequal symbolic economies created by the school? If so, how it is possible to tell, for instance, a statement of strategic essentialism from straightforward essentialism? In short, and to persist with Loomba's metaphor: I was curious about how, when analytical push came to shove, Wallace judged which horse needed to bear the most weight at any given moment.

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All of this is perhaps one expression of a wider question which, it seems to me, runs through the analysis of *The Culture Trap,* and which concerns the way in which we conceive of culture and how we understand the causal significance of culture in respect of social relations. Wallace's study as a whole is staunchly oriented against a "culturalist" account of such relations, against an account by which culture becomes a "definitive explanation of group educational and economic outcomes" (5), or for which culture becomes a way of concealing or exonerating what are actually the consequences of

classed, gendered and racialized inequalities. But that critique is tempered by the author's qualifying insistence that understating the sociological significance of culture is no less of a mistake than overstating it. That two-sided claim is reiterated at various points of the study, including in this passage from the conclusion:

> Culturalist explanations that posit culture as *the* key factor shaping the divergent representations and experiences of Black Caribbean people on both sides of the Atlantic are flawed not only because they exaggerate culture's influence, but also because they do not account for the structural and historical factors that inform ethnic groups' success. Nevertheless, culture *still* plays a critical role in shaping the day-to-day lived experiences of Black Caribbean people, informing everyday meaning-making, ritual representations, and situational strategies used to address ethnic expectations. (196)

Reading this over again, I wonder whether, conceptually speaking, the "culture" which figures in the first sentence here is quite the same "culture" as that which figures in the second? Are both sentences talking about the same conceptual object? After all, the "culture" referred to in "the culture trap" of the book's title has no causal role of its own to play in forming or shaping the social relations and hierarchies which Wallace unpacks, it forms no part of the answer to Ms. Bell's question. The fundamental point of his analysis in that regard is that "Black Caribbean culture", in and of itself, does not help to explain the different educational outcomes experienced by pupils in London or New York. Rather, "culture" here is something like a floating signifier; it is an example of what happens, in Hall's terms, when "the systems of classification become the objects of the disposition of power", of how classification becomes "generative" in and through the practices and orders which it legitimates and justifies (1997, 2). The expectations and practices enacted in the name of culture are what are socially effective, on this account, not that culture itself. Tendentially, at least, this leans towards a view in which cultural differences are understood as the discursive consequence, rather than the pre-existing cause, of these classificatory processes. They are realities which are constituted "within, not outside, representation", as Hall puts it, in a passage that Wallace quotes at the outset of the study (2023, 53).

By contrast, the "culture" which lies on the other side of that segueing "nevertheless" in the passage quoted above absolutely *does* have a distinctive and causal sociological significance of its own. Culture here describes something which is clearly more than a signifier. It refers rather to materially and historically grounded practices which critically shape lived experience and are thus substantively and historically meaningful in their own right. This is culture as a set of political and creative resources with the potential to affect social outcomes and to sustain social agency, it offers "a way of

making sense of the norms, practices, and processes that govern the social world" (196).

Nothing in that latter conception of culture requires that it be understood as a fixed or unique quality and *The Culture Trap* is consistent in its repudiation of those kinds of arguments. As Wallace points out, towards the end of the study, the very fact of being able to explore, empirically, the divergent experiences of Black Caribbean communities in the UK and the US "provide [s] an important comparison that troubles essentialist claims about culture as a single, uniform essence" (192). Nonetheless, tendentially at least that view would seem to allow for the possibility of culture as a distinct social reality shaped by particular historical trajectories and experiences. To that extent, then, cultural specificity is not *just* a discursive production; it is something with at least one foot resting "outside representation". Here, one feels, the study leans more towards Bourdieu's emphasis on the material and affective aspects of culture – the extent to which it lies rooted in embodied dispositions and historically engrained practices – even though it finds greater resources for resistance in those realities than Bourdieu tends to. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that although a central contribution of *The Culture Trap* is its critique of the way in which "culture has re-emerged as an acceptable way of defining differences between groups and drawing distinctions between them" (4), the study also comes close, at various points, to putting claims about culture to just that use, as when Wallace rejects structuralist accounts of racial and ethnic inequalities because they are guilty of "underestimating the power of culture that informs groups" distinct social experiences' (11).

Quite possibly, in posing things this way, I am slipping towards a rather unhelpful "either/or". Stuart Hall, after all, talked about culture as *both* a means of struggle *and* simultaneously, what is fought over; both weapon and prize, as it were (2002 [1981], 192). Bourdieu, for his part, attends to both the materiality of cultural practices, but also to the way in which claims about culture are articulated within wider symbolic economies. Nonetheless, I do find myself wondering, in reflecting on all of this, and as others have wondered before, whether the term "culture" can definitely bear all that we ask it to bear, analytically speaking? Perhaps, in some ways, the concept, in itself, becomes a kind of trap? However we might respond to that, what makes *The Culture Trap* so compelling is the lucidity with which Wallace grapples with exactly this complexity, critically tracking the slippery and often contradictory politics of culture in its various meanings and social realities. Not the least of what emerges as a consequence of his incisive account is a renewed understanding of something which both Hall and Bourdieu, in their different ways, insisted upon: culture as, above all, a locus of struggle.

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