# Reflections on *The Culture Trap*: On Doing Ethnographic Cultural Sociology

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*The Culture Trap* by Derron Wallace is an impressive account of how essentialist readings of culture produce 'ethnic expectations' resulting in the unequal schooling of Black young people in Britain and America. My contribution to this symposium focuses on what we can learn from *The Culture Trap* in terms of how we go about doing ethnographic cultural sociology. This focus stems from the following comment made by Michael Burawoy in *Ethnography Unbounded*, which has stayed with me since I first encountered it more than decade ago:

> In the social sciences the lore of objectivity relies on the separation of the intellectual product from its process of production. The false paths, the endless labors, the turns now this way and now that, the theories abandoned, and the data collected but never presented – all lie concealed behind the finished product. (Burawoy, 1991: 8)

In addition to these observations, *The Culture Trap* reminds ethnographers of another important aspect of the knowledge production process which is too often absent in the presentation of the final text: the unexpected, but powerful, role played by ethnographic conversations and encounters in shaping the direction of our research.

When reading *The Culture Trap*, I was immediately struck by Wallace's ability to narrate ethnographic interactions with such richness and thick description. These accounts are more than just mere scene setting. While they transport the reader to the localities and, more specifically, the schools in London or New York where Wallace's comparative research on race, culture, immigration and education was conducted, they also serve an important purpose. Which is to say, they skilfully show the reader the significance ethnographic conversations had in shaping *The Culture Trap*. This, for example, is evident in Wallace's narration of a conversation with Pastor Williams, 'who first urged [Wallace's] serious consideration of the social and educational history of the Caribbean diaspora' (p. 53). Perhaps more striking are Wallace's conversations with Ms. Bell, a Black school teacher at the school in London where for almost a year Wallace was a 'community organizer'. As Wallace explains, conversations with

Ms. Bell, could be moments of 'deep intellectual awakening' (p. xx is the page number in the books preface).

It is exactly such unplanned, but profoundly respectful, forms of dialogue and encounter with the people, both inside *and outside* of the university, that can significantly shape the direction of our research. Alas, such wonderfully inspiring encounters and relationships are too often omitted from the final text that is presented to the reader in favour of neat theoretically informed accounts depicting an objective, critical engagement with academic literature which is then used to chart well-planned, smooth journeys from project inception through to project completion. This is not to say that Wallace's approach is not theoretically informed. Neither are the ethnographic encounters and conversations offered to us in *The Culture Trap* a matter of mere happenstance.

As Andrew Smith (2023) has already pointed out, *The Culture Trap* draws heavily on sociology's storytelling tradition and, in particular, the work of Stuart Hall and Pierre Bourdieu. Wallace also draws theoretical insights from Caribbean anthropologists such as David Scott and Deborah Thomas. More specifically, *The Culture Trap* applies learnings from Scott's practice of 'discerning and engaged thinking-with-others', and Thomas' approach to the 'co-construction of meaning in social situations' (p. 20). Documenting the influence of Ms. Bell and others is also evidence of a strong commitment to deep listening that is intended to capture the 'substance and style, voices and viewpoints, arguments and accents in the analytical and sonic registers' (p. 19) of those with whom Wallace interacted. This brings me onto another important aspect of the practice of doing ethnographic cultural sociology worth discussing: *The Culture Trap* reminds us that how we 'handle' and present people's stories, lived experiences, voices and accents, thoughts, understandings and analyses really does matter.

When reading *The Culture Trap*, I was reminded of Simon Charlesworth's (2000) *A Phenomenology of Working Class Experience*, and specifically Charlesworth's commitment to authentically presenting the voices of his research participants without subjecting their words to forms of academic violence that erases accents and dialects. Indeed, as Wallace explains, *The Culture Trap*

> strategically retain[s] the original linguistic, attitudinal and behavioral expressions of participants – without doctoring them to conform to formal academic conventions for rendering speaking as it if were writing – in order to invite readers into the participants' ways of being and knowing across cultural, institutional and diasporic settings (p. 20).

Indeed, Wallace has not succumbed to the pressures of dominant white, Anglocentric and classed forms of syntax which are too often imposed on scholarly knowledge production. Thus, we must commend, the painstaking work Wallace has undertaken to protect, present and, at times, 'translate' the words of participants. Herein lies one of the key strengths of *The Culture Trap* – its ability to do justice to the thoughts and lived experiences of participants and those who might be thought of as 'co-theorists' by 'hearing, sensing, and feeling what participants experience in their daily lives' (p. 20).

In listening so attentively, Wallace captures what Du Bois (2015 [1903]) might have referred to as the 'double consciousness' of the young Black people who participated in

this research and provided the raw ethnographic data which inform Wallace's analysis of the connected, but spatially contingent, nature of *The Culture Trap* on both sides of the Atlantic. To borrow a concept from Stuart Hall (1973), Wallace shows that the young people who informed his research were acutely aware of how their bodies, voices, behaviours and perceived intellectual abilities might be 'decoded' in raced, gendered and classed ways. When reading *The Culture Trap*, I found myself reflecting on autoethnographic encounters and conversations with students that I have worked with over the last few years who have similarly developed a real sense of the ways in which they are evaluated through the intersectional construction of 'aesthetic', 'performative' and 'moral' boundaries (Sayer, 2005)  which both shape their experiences of classrooms and how they produce knowledge through their coursework. These boundaries serve as the basis for what Wallace refers to as 'cultural expectations': that is, the 'casual, sometimes calculated, and at other times unconscious assumptions' which rely on the intersection of ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexuality and disability to predict, if not justify, inequities in treatment, opportunity and educational outcomes. As Wallace demonstrates, those whom we teach arrive at such dual self-perceptions from the learnings drawn (often painfully) from lived experiences of education systems, as well as how students react and resist the oppressive nature of schools by expressing agency through everyday forms of 'deference' and 'defiance'.

Wallace also compellingly narrates the way in which everyday cultural racisms undergird notions and perceptions of scholastic ability, competence and propriety, as well as how cultural racism, in the form of 'ethnic expectations', are a critical factor in the reproduction and maintenance of *inter-* and *intra-racial* divisions, hierarchies and tensions. It might be argued that *Wallace* skilfully captures the way in which anti-Black racisms, 'rooted in the history and legacy of two competing Empires' (p. 57) greases the wheels of systemic racism today. Thus, *The Culture Trap* is not just a study of contemporary cultural racist discourse. It is a powerful account of how racist discourses become social forces. Put differently, Wallace captures the interaction of the different historically informed components of which systemic racism is composed – that is, racist ideologies, attitudes, emotions, habits and actions, institutional cultural practices and policies – showing the reader how they both fit and work together to perpetuate and maintain patterns of racialized and intersectional inequality in schools.

## Concluding Thoughts

*The Culture Trap* concludes with an account of a conversation between Wallace and Ms. Bell several years after Ms. Bell had asked to be kept informed about research and its findings (p. 189). Reflecting on this conversation, Wallace humbly points out that he 'didn't realize it until Ms. Bell questioned me, ethnic perceptions are relevant, implicitly and explicitly, to a host of ethno-racial groups' (p. 193). Indeed, *The Culture Trap* draws attention to how 'ethnic expectations' shape the schooling of Asian, African American, African and white working-class students. Moreover, Wallace explains that:

there is another side of ethnic expectations that is commonly accepted and often unspoken in schools. Consider the surprise expressed when students from Roma, Indigenous, African American, and other historically disadvantaged ethno-racial groups defy long-standing [colonially informed] societal assumptions, or when they rise above expectations. (pp. 192–193)

When reading this passage, I was reminded of Avtar Brah's reflections on her involvement in 'Black politics' in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s in which Brah posed the following question: 'How do we work through "difference" without creating divisions?' (see Back and Brah, 2012: 43–44). Like Wallace, Brah also notes the influence that Stuart Hall had on her 'thinking about difference' and 'questions of solidarity'. Interestingly, during one conversation, Ms. Bell 'leaned forward in her seat and asked, "So Mr. Wallace, tell mi now, wah we ago do 'bout all dis? [. . .] We need solutions' (p. 201). In response, Wallace suggests that the biggest problem is 'not necessarily identifying solutions [. . .] It's political will [. . .] It's not like the government and school leaders don't know what to do' (p. 201). On this note, *The Culture Trap* points towards the need to transform teacher education programmes, the importance of abolishing 'setting' in Britain and 'tracking' in America in favour of implementing and monitoring mixed 'ability' classrooms and teaching. Ms. Bell also reminds Wallace of the need for school leaders, teachers, parents and students to institutionally and introspectively 'examine biases and ultimately eliminate ethic expectations', further adding that 'It's very hard to find teachers and parents who are willing to just admit what they are doing [. . .] the students are willing sometimes (p. 206).

On the question of political will, education systems remain at the forefront of an ongoing culture war on both sides of the Atlantic (see Harris, 2020; Koram, 2020; Lang, 2020; Stubley, 2021), as well as in the white settler colony which today we commonly referred to as Australia (see Wilson, 2021). In the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter protests and cries of 'Rhodes Must Fall', we have witnessed politicians, academics and sections of the right-wing media mount a sustained backlash against critical race theory and the decolonization of education systems. The situation already felt bleak before we saw the response to student protests calling for an immediate cease fire in Gaza. In such moments I typically turn to Gramsci who once wrote that:

> I have become convinced that even when everything is or seems lost, one must quietly go back to work, starting from the beginning (cited in Thomas, 2010: 103).

In conclusion, Wallace draws on Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz's 'archaeology of the self' to argue for:

> The consistent investment in this work to change ideologies and institutions, beliefs and behaviors, and attitudes and actions is how we eliminate and dismantle the culture trap. (p. 207)

Substantively engaging with *The Culture Trap* and bringing it into dialogue with some of the literatures discussed here, might just provide the resources which could shape how we, as educators and researchers, go back to doing anti-racist, anti-colonial work. We might start with small steps such as undertaking an unflinching self-review of our

own biases. We might reflect on how we do cultural sociology and how we listen and engage with the people we meet on our teaching and research journeys. We might draw on the theoretical and conceptual resources which Wallace offers to us to reflect and spark conversations about the spaces where we work and how different biases and expectations shape the everyday lives of our students and colleagues. Perhaps these small steps, at a moment when things feel bleak, might just help us set an altogether different kind of trap which lays the foundations for a counter-hegemonic education system and society intent on radically overhauling racism and its intersection with other modalities of oppression.

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# Unmasking the Racial Politics of Culture: A Response to Reviews of *The Culture Trap* and Further Comments

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I wish, first, to express my deep and sincere gratitude to the five sociologists of race, culture and education who with great care offered complimentary and sobering reviews of *The Culture Trap* in this symposium. Knowing that these scholars found *The Culture Trap* to be 'an impressive example', 'a powerful indictment', 'a useful tool for novice ethnographers', 'an impressive account' and 'an outstanding example of comparative sociology' is deeply gratifying. Their wide-ranging perspectives on the racial politics of culture, discussed in *The Culture Trap*, strengthen my resolve to continue pursuing comparative cultural sociology that centers Black youth in London and New York City, especially given the dearth of such scholarship, and its capacity to bridge and extend US, British and international cultural sociology.

In *The Culture Trap*, I ask: How do dominant achievement claims inform the day-to-day educational experiences of Black Caribbean students in London state schools and New York City public schools? More precisely, how do the real and fictitious formulations of 'Caribbean culture' shape the social incorporation and academic advancement of second-generation Black Caribbean youth in these global cities? As reviewers point out, *The Culture Trap* is also deeply concerned with identifying which historical-structural forces shape the representation of Black Caribbeans as high-achieving in the USA and underachieving in Britain? *The Culture Trap* explores these and related questions, offering a critical account of the affecting influence of culture and structure in the lives of second-generation Black Caribbean young people in Britain and the United States.

As Diane Reay and Stephen Ashe rightly suggest, *The Culture Trap* challenges interpretations of culture that seldom consider the contextual conditions under which cultures develop their power across national and temporal boundaries. In the tradition of Stuart Hall, I argue that cultures are not static formulations with universal attributes across time and space. How ethnic groups like Black Caribbeans (re)imagine, articulate and practice cultures is contingent on their situated contexts – or, more precisely, their experiences in the context of reception, and the political-economic factors that shape that context. Moreover, as Bedelia Richards points out, the specific cultural strategies ethno-racial

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groups marshal to differentiate themselves as distinctive, and to signify their social status are informed by their racialized structural positions and social circumstances in the host society. These nuances are often elided in public discourses and educational debates. But such perspectives are necessary for challenging the preponderance of cultural essentialism in schools – casual yet consequential universalisms that undermine the variation within groups and instead promote a fixed formula about which groups achieve and why. *The Culture Trap* is a critique of the inordinate emphasis placed on cultural explanations of inequalities that ignore structural accounts. Culture *and* structure matter.

In his review, Dave O'Brien asserts that culture and structure inform the ideologies we promote in schools and society. I concur. I substantiate this claim in *The Culture Trap* by highlighting and theorizing the ethnic expectations teachers and school leaders hold of Black Caribbean, African American, Asian and Latinx youth. Whether in London or New York City, ethnic expectations – an iteration of the culture trap – function as a double articulation (Hall, 1986, 1996). It is at once a performative voicing of ideas about the achievement prospects of individuals and a purposeful crafting of group identities based on presumptions of traditions, attitudes and beliefs about education. As reviewers such as Hugo Ceron-Anaya indicate, ethnic expectations are complex cultural assumptions mobilized to negotiate race and achievement in British and American societies, where education generally, and schooling specifically, functions as a mechanism for racialization. While the configuration of ethnic expectations differs between the United States and Britain, particularly for Black Caribbean youth, its character as a project – or more precisely, a projection – of cultural differentiation is consistent across the Atlantic (Gilroy, 2013). In the USA, ethnic expectations aim to foster positive cultural distinction for Black Caribbeans, despite, or perhaps because of, the weight of anti-Black racism. Whereas, in Britain, ethnic expectations are operationalized to disparage Black Caribbeans, even as they try to resist anti-Black racism and ethnic stigmatization in and out of schools. In this respect, the culture trap – and its varied expressions such as ethnic expectations, the model minority myth, and the culture of poverty thesis – unmasks the racial politics of culture, and, arguably, even the cultural politics of race.

The question that often intrigues cultural sociologists who engage the pages of *The Culture Trap*, particularly those interested in the structural roots of cultural inequalities is: What explains the different social positions and contrasting representations of Black Caribbeans on both side of the Atlantic? In *The Culture Trap*, I argue that the divergent experiences of Black Caribbeans in the USA and Britain are attributable to differences in immigrant selectivity, the order of Black migration, the persistence of Caribbean immigration (or not), and the timing of arrival in the context of reception. The import of these and other macro-level factors notwithstanding, there remains a need to understand the role of schools as cultural institutions that shape immigrant incorporation, influence racialization and perpetuate inequality (Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Warikoo, 2010). For too long, sociological research on Black immigrants, particularly in the USA, has ignored (or underestimated) the impact of schooling on the educational attainment and experiences on second-generation Black Caribbeans in Britain and the United States (Clergé, 2019; Imoagene, 2017; Medford, 2019; Treitler, 2015). And the select works that consider

schools very rarely explore cultural influences from cross-national perspectives (Warikoo, 2011). *The Culture Trap* attends to the aforementioned empirical and analytical gaps in the literature.

The very thoughtful reviews in this symposium underscore the fact that *The Culture Trap* makes at least three key contributions to the field of cultural sociology. First, as Bedelia Richards and Dave O'Brien affirm, the book goes beyond the consumption patterns and aesthetic choices of Black youth and considers how ethnic culture, and contrived conceptions of it, shape the sedimented narratives on Black youth in schools and related cultural institutions. Second, as Diane Reay suggests, the book's commitment to triangulating perspectives from key social actors (teachers, administrators, parents and peers) enables fuller, more complex understandings of young people's cultural worlds. Third, a specific focus on the racialization of achievement, as understood and experienced across Black ethnic lines, as noted by Hugo Ceron-Anaya and Stephen Ashe, elucidates how and why Black ethnic achievement distinctions are complex, context-specific, cultural formulations reflective of the racial politics of culture – perspectives that seldom receive in-depth analytical treatment in cultural sociology (Wallace, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2023).

While *The Culture Trap* focuses on Black Caribbeans in London and New York City, the theoretical model the book advances has implications well beyond the case of Black Caribbeans, as African Americans, Asian Americans, British Asians, Black Africans and a host of other ethno-racial groups are also caught in the culture trap, though they are positioned differently in it. It is my hope that future research in cultural sociology will build on *The Culture Trap* and usher in additional ideas that urge us to take schools seriously as cultural institutions, and Black youth as savvy, agentic political actors in schools and society.

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