

An aerial, high-angle photograph of a city street grid, likely New York City, showing a dense pattern of streets and buildings. The image is in black and white with a halftone dot pattern.

**RACE &
CLASS**

Black America on the street and the campus

*R. Pathmanaba Iyer
27-B, High Street,
Plaistow
London E13 0AD*

Black America: the street and the campus

© Institute of Race Relations 1993
ISBN 0 85001 041 1
Cover design by Aileen & Aileen
Typeset by Nancy White
Printed by the Russell Press, Nottingham

Black America: the street and the campus

© Institute of Race Relations 1993
ISBN 0 85001 041 1
Cover design by Arefin & Arefin
Typeset by Nancy White
Printed by the Russell Press, Nottingham

RACE & CLASS

A JOURNAL FOR BLACK AND THIRD WORLD LIBERATION

Volume 35

July-September 1993

Number 1

Black America: the street and the campus

Introduction	v
Culture and rebellion JAN CAREW	1
The Black Panthers: Heike Kleffner interviews GERONIMO JI-JAGA PRATT and MUMIA ABU-JAMAL	9
Guerrilla artists of New York City IVOR MILLER	27
Rap, race and politics CLARENCE LUSANE	41
Black popular culture and the transcendence of patriarchal illusions BARBARA RANSBY and TRACYE MATTHEWS	57
Public enemies and private intellectuals: Apartheid USA RUTH WILSON GILMORE	69
The appropriation of Frantz Fanon CEDRIC ROBINSON	79

The politics of cultural existence:
Pan-Africanism, historical materialism
and Afrocentricity
SIDNEY J. LEMELLE

93

Beyond racial identity politics: towards
a liberation theory for multicultural
democracy
MANNING MARABLE

113

© Institute of Race Relations
ISSN 0306 3965

Introduction

Black America is in ferment. There is rebellion afoot. But, as yet, it is a rebellion waged in the cultural realm – over cultural issues such as identity and belonging and nationhood or, if over political issues such as racialised poverty and police brutality, still with cultural weapons such as music and film. The first is being wrought in the lush groves of academia, the second on the mean streets of the city. The first, though affording the black dispossessed a sense of worth and a pride of place, leads them finally into an inward-looking, reactionary nationalism, incapable of contesting the system that dispossesses them. The second, though expressing the raw anger of the street against oppression and exploitation, is in itself oppressive of women and exploitative of the young – a capitalist project, in effect, and of no real threat to the system either.

What compounds the problem, though, is that whereas in the '60s, the rebellion on the street swept into the campus and politicised it, today those very successes have enabled the campus either to stand aloof from the street and romanticise it, or to 'join' the street and lead it back into a romanticised Africa. Where once, that is, there was an organic relationship between the street and the campus producing the organic intellectual, today the street cultures of resistance have been appropriated by academia and 'disciplined' into literary theory and cultural studies, and therein depoliticised. Or, they are being drained of their revolutionary energy by being drawn into cultural nationalist culs-de-sac.

This issue of *Race & Class* takes stock of the rebellion in Black America. In 'Culture and rebellion', Jan Carew recalls, with the immediacy of poetry, the excitement and promise of the black rebellions of the late 1960s when culture, as Cabral had said, was taking on political, economic and military forms to overthrow the oppressor. But it was the system that won out in the end – with black capitalism, on the one hand, and massive state repression, on the other. The first bought off the intelligentsia and the would-be governors and mayors, the second perverted the revolution and murdered the revolutionaries. Those who survived were thrown into prison, hopefully for ever. Two such men whom we have interviewed here are the Black Panthers Geronimo ji-jaga Pratt and Mumia Abu-Jamal, the one in maximum security and the other on death row. But prison has neither dimmed their political vision nor dulled their revolutionary fervour. Keeping them, and others like them, in prison for so long is, as Geronimo says, meant to remove all progressive leadership from the street and substitute instead the pimps and drug-dealers and gangsters as role-models for the young. And that keeps the youth from the 'basic principles of liberation and basic humanism for all people – for the Mexican people, the Indian people, for all the struggling

peoples'. But then, the whole of America today is, as Abu-Jamal points out, fast becoming 'the prison house of nations'.

How those nations broke their bonds in the '70s and early '80s and came together as artists and peoples and as artists for the people, 'transforming their segregated society into a city-wide community', is the story that Ivor Miller culls from the testimonies of the artists themselves in 'Guerrilla artists of New York City'.

But today, black popular culture, while still vibrant with revolutionary potential, has, in its expression through film and music, become increasingly nationalist, money-oriented and sexist. 'The macho boasting, misogyny, violent fantasies and false consciousness', writes Clarence Lusane in 'Rap, race and politics', 'exist side by side with an immature, but clear, critique of authority, a loathing of the oppressive character of wage labour, a hatred of racism and an exposé of Reaganism.'

In their study of 'Black popular culture', Barbara Ransby and Tracey Matthews extend Lusane's analysis on rap to Afrocentrism and the commodification of Malcolm X to show how the various forms of cultural nationalism, though carrying within them 'an oppositional edge', are redolent of 'a very male-centred definition of the problems confronting the black community, and propose pseudo-solutions which further marginalise and denigrate black women'.

Ruth Gilmore ponders the role of black intellectuals in all this (in 'Public enemies and private intellectuals') and deplores their ongoing self-privatisation through 'individual careerism', 'romantic particularism' and 'insider trading' at a time when 'apartheid, the political logic of late capitalism ... privatises and individualises what should be collective and public, and explains away collective differences through group individualism'.

In the pursuit of such privatisation, argues Cedric Robinson, black scholars have, through the rigor and mortis of textual analysis, controverted Fanon's diatribe against the national bourgeoisie and made him an ally in their own self-deceiving project. But this 'Appropriation of Frantz Fanon' is only one of the ways in which black academics interiorise the cultural insurgency around them. There is also the return to 'traditional African ways' that Afrocentricity advocates and which Sid Lemelle, in 'The politics of cultural existence', characterises as 'ahistorical and idealistic' – in contrast to Pan-Africanism which at least has 'the *potential* to be a revolutionary "philosophy of praxis"'.

In a fitting conclusion to the volume, Manning Marable, in 'Beyond racial identity politics', argues that only a race/class synthesis can provide the basis on which all the oppressed communities of the US can equally unite. It is 'our ability to transcend racial chauvinism, inter-ethnic hatred and old definitions of "race" [and] to recognise the class commonalities and joint social justice interests of all groups ... [that can] break down the ancient walls of white violence, corporate power and class privilege'.

A. Sivanandan

JAN CAREW

Culture and rebellion

Millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth.

– Virginia Woolf¹

God gave Noah the rainbow sign,
No more water, the fire next time!

– A slave song

I walked the streets of Detroit, Cleveland, Newark and Washington DC immediately after the Black rebellions in the late 1960s. These became euphemistically labelled ‘The Martin Luther King Riots’, but it was Malcolm X who had warned repeatedly that, given the all-pervasive racism in America, rebellions would, inevitably, erupt in inner cities across America – and they did.

The ‘fire next time’ that James Baldwin had forecast in his apocalyptic essay had burnt itself out by the time I walked up and down those mean streets. The anatomy of America’s inner cities was laid bare in the wake of those cleansing fires. The culture of the streets then burst out of a humus of decay like exquisite wild flowers flourishing in a dungheap. The poetry, songs, drama, music – plus new creative infusions of words, images and rhythms into everyday language of the street – were an organic part of the cultural regeneration that took place in the wake of those Black rebellions and the nationwide protests against America’s cruel, immoral and deadly intervention in Vietnam. Islamic philosophy posits that the world is

Jan Carew is Emeritus Professor at Northwestern University, Illinois.

Race & Class, 35, 1 (1993)

continuously regenerating itself every moment of the day. Rebellion against oppression, injustice and greed, therefore, is as natural a part of the rhythms of life of the oppressed as breathing.

The Black, urban rebellions in the 1960s illuminated questions of race, class, gender and the consciously ignored, but visceral links between the Black Power movement, the martyrdom of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, the civil rights struggle, the struggle for women's rights and the anti-Vietnam war ferment. In short, American imperialism was in the throes of a crisis, and the primal impulses of this settler society were once again driving it to resolve its social, political, economic and racial crises, at home and abroad, by force. But, since a changing kaleidoscope of racism had always been at the heart of its concerns – from Plymouth Rock to Little Rock – the patterns of repression and resistance manifesting themselves in the 1960s and early 1970s were at once new as the 'Days of Rage' in Chicago during the bloody Democratic Party Convention, and old as Sir Walter Raleigh's predatory intrusion at Roanoke.

It was at this stage that I was inducted into the academic world. It was a time when irreverent and rebellious students were creating radical networks across the nation, demanding a say in the selection of professors and compelling the universities to make their curricula more relevant. In short, it was a time when fundamental changes seemed imminent, when popular culture burst out of the confines of staid middle-class institutions and spilled out into the streets.

When President Nixon ordered the bombing of Cambodia, for example, it seemed as if campuses would become catalysts for a revolution. But there were hidden factors that made this very unlikely at the time. The cold war economy, in which billions of dollars were being fed into the maw of an insatiable military-industrial complex, had created a high level of employment and reinforced a class and racial hierarchy with white males at the top and minorities, women and poor whites at the bottom. This hierarchy, with its built-in racial and class antagonisms, gave the ruling class ample opportunity to play divide-and-conquer games; to contain and neutralise the motive energies of the anti-war, Black Power and civil rights struggles; to obfuscate the fundamental issue of women's rights and to pretend that the overall struggle of working people of all races did not really exist. In this divide-and-conquer game, too, privileged white male workers and a small, but vocal, coterie of blacks were induced to jump onto a right-wing bandwagon. The rebellion, therefore, ran its course and petered out, and right-wing forces, far better organised than those of a fragmented Left, moved openly into the centres of power.

Jules Michelet, that great French historian whose writings both enthral and educate the reader, tells us in his *Historical View of the French Revolution* that Robespierre, that archetype of a cunning

revolutionary, never allowed 'his mind [to] soar into the regions of speculation',² and that, unlike other leaders like Sieyes and Mirabeau, 'he [Robespierre] knew where power resided, and where he was sure to find it'.³ Michelet proceeds to describe the nexus of power that Robespierre had identified so unerringly:

There were then two powers in France, two vast associations – one eminently revolutionary, the Jacobins; the other profiting by the Revolution, seemed able to be easily reconciled to it; I mean the lower clergy, a body of eighty thousand priests.⁴

Michelet goes on to tell us that, on 30 May 1790, when Robespierre proposed that priests should be allowed to marry, 'his voice was drowned by the uproar of the whole Assembly'. But that dry, academic voice was heard outside of the Assembly and, in a month, Robespierre received 'verses in every language, whole poems of 500, 700, and 1,500 verses, in Latin, Greek and Hebrew'.⁵

The leaders of the Black Power and anti-war movements were never able to escape the euphoria that American capitalism, with its surfeit of baubles and trivia, induces. For, with 6 per cent of the world's population, America was squandering two-thirds of the world's resources. The distribution of the loot from this capitalist gang-rape was unjust, unequal and unfair, but there was enough trickling down to confuse those leaders that they did not, or, indeed, could not, identify the real sources of power. Nor could they understand the basic tenets of class and race antagonisms and the importance of solidarity with advanced, unionised workers. When they talked of 'people's power', they really meant a more enlightened white male middle-class power, and the most articulate proponents of Black Power had equally narrow and myopic goals. Spokesmen for a plethora of movements that sprang up during that season of rebellion, therefore, became so many 'Don Quixotes' tilting at windmills. I used this term 'spokesmen' deliberately, because the women had different and more realistic agendas. It was no accident that Fannie Lou Hamer was a key figure in resetting priorities that were askew, with a symbolical journey to Africa and the founding of the National Woman's Political Caucus and the Freedom Farm Cooperative.

And yet, as I walked past long stretches of burnt-out blocks in Detroit, I remembered seeing an unforgettable picture on television – and I was certain that it had slipped past the editors in the cutting room by accident, because, having seen it once, I never saw it again. It was the picture of a black man perched on the shoulders of a white man, and reaching for merchandise in a store from which the plate glass window had been eliminated. The only other occasion on which I saw this unusual brand of black/white collaboration was during the Attica prison uprising. There was a clear underlying message in both of those

very significant rebellions that black, white, Hispanic and Asian leaders had chosen to ignore.

I made my way past burnt-out blocks and came to charnel rows of houses with weather-singed, peeling facades and broken windows that were like eyeless sentinels looking down at children playing on the sidewalks. But voices, warm and sparkling as sunshine, occasionally sang out from gloomy, cavernous depths warning the children to be careful. I also noticed that, because of the burnings, sunlight was now invading spaces that had been innocent of its existence since the whites had fled to the suburbs and the mansions they abandoned had been subdivided into warrens and dark cubicles where 'Bigger Thomases' and their relatives by the hundred thousand had coted and dreamed and survived. The poet, Frank Marshall Davis, in his portrait of a ghetto dweller, had said, 'His life was a darkened cave where he had been shoved from birth' and 'for countless carbon-copy days, he groped aimlessly, until, one day, quite by accident he stumbled into an exit of death'.⁶ But those children whose playground was the streets had learnt to dice with death from an early age, to dodge traffic and stray bullets, and circumvent the trafficking of pushers, prostitutes, hustlers and cops on the take. As they played their games on cracked pavements, they were oblivious of the requiem-in-advance that an ebony tower poet had written for them. Their poetry was in their bones, in their feet and in their laughter as they danced between multiple skipping ropes that whirled like hummingbirds' wings, and their laughter trilled like birdsong and occasionally hit the high-pitched notes of a flageolet. Why is it that outsiders invariably write such poignant poems and lyrics about the people of the inner cities, whereas the ghetto folk never write requiems for their own sufferers, they write and sing paeans of resistance and hope instead?

After a while, the facades of burnt-out buildings began to look like impermanent movie sets, and on street after street blackened ruins looked like broken teeth stained with betel nut and grinning at the shining towers downtown.

Fires were still smouldering when I arrived in Washington DC to do a series of programmes for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation on the culture of America's inner cities after the Black Power and anti-war rebellions. Transparent, silken scarves of smoke were rising from the ashes when the late Larry Neal, a brilliant and gifted Black poet, took me on a guided tour. Years later, Larry would burn himself out like a comet to light up glooms that had settled on his spirit. He was one of those rare activist/poets for whom rebellion against oppression was like the breath of life. But one could sense that despair was never far from his pristine elation. He pointed out those businesses that had been most ruthless in exploiting the poor. Special attention had been paid to them, and they had been reduced to rubble. He showed me a used-car lot that

was empty and level as a tennis court. The owner, he said, had been notorious for selling cars, repossessing them and reselling them again and again. Every one of the cars had disappeared and the offices housing records of loans were burnt to the ground. Larry had been an active participant in what he described as 'our Black insurgency'. He showed me a truck that had obviously been hastily abandoned. He had saved the white driver's life, he told me, by stopping him and advising him to run like hell in the opposite direction, since an unfriendly crowd was waiting two blocks ahead. The city was as familiar to Larry as his own face in a mirror, and he'd shown the terrified white man a safe escape route.

There was a festive atmosphere on the sunlit streets down which we strolled. Many of the folk recognised Larry as we walked along and they greeted him with that careless, throw-away banter so characteristic of Black folks at ease. The rebellion had freed them for a moment in history from a thralldom of laughing to keep from dying, and an ineluctable surge of hope had possessed their spirits. They had struck out at the visible symbols and agents of their oppression – property that they could never hope to own, venal landlords, strong-armed rent collectors, bailiffs, the stealthy representative of loan sharks, the repo man who, backed up by the police, could repossess cars in a matter of minutes – and they were feeling good. But they also knew that, in forthcoming tomorrows, the ruling class whom they had frightened during days of rage would react like South American jaguars. One can frighten these creatures for a moment, but, after running away, they invariably return with fangs and claws at the ready to attack whomever or whatever frightened them.

Here and there, amidst buildings that were torched, an occasional, forlorn sign pleading 'Soul Brother' or 'Black Owned' graced the front of a building. But, apparently, there were 'Sold Brothers' as well as 'Soul Brothers', and venal owners as well as a few honest ones. Denizens of the ghetto, living close to the foundations of a towering edifice of exploitation the way they were, knew this only too well, because in some cases the signs were ignored and the building burnt down, while others were left alone.

Larry took me on a tour of that other, often forgotten Washington DC where Black folks had clustered since before the civil war. With a wry humour, he recounted how the nation's capital had, momentarily, become integrated, and how whole communities of Black rebels had imposed a racial democracy on this city for the first time since it had been founded. Motorists on their way home to their 'whites only' sanctuaries, he declared, would offer rides to Blacks waiting at bus stops. The reason for this sudden surge of white benevolence, Larry explained, was that a Black face was an insurance against attacks by angry Black crowds.

When we came to the end of the burnt-out sections of the city, it

struck me that, at the height of the burnings, the president of the United States could look out of his window and see his White House turn red in the glow of night fires, that he and Ho Chi Minh were sharing a common experience for the first time. I cannot recall having read a single inspired, Tolstoyan piece about what the president's thoughts were as he gazed at the city on fire from his seat of power. Presidential tapes, such as they are, have been banal, sprinkled with mundane ruminations, obscenities and mindless clichés. Profound thoughts or imaginative and original ideas have been conspicuously absent from them.

Joe Miles, a 19-year-old full-time official of the Socialist Workers Party, was my other escort during that historic visit to Washington. Joe had joined the SWP at 15 and was lively, intelligent, knowledgeable and utterly fearless, and, as a young Black organiser, he worked with the youth of all races, colours and creeds. He took me to the most interesting community centre that I had ever visited. Children, parents and people from all walks of life were there, and different groups of them were participating in classes in music, drama, dance, poetry, judo, karate, public health and child care.

These folk, breaking free from the formal programmes that these centres usually sponsored, were designing cultural programmes that spoke directly to the needs of their community. The rebellion had opened up new intellectual spaces for them. There was even a class being run by architectural students, who, together with a group of slum-dwellers, were designing the kind of communal housing that people really wanted. Looking at the designs and listening to their passionate discussions, I could not help thinking of Carolina Maria de Jesus, that archetypal Black Brazilian woman who had spoken for millions of the urban dispossessed in her *Child of the Dark*. Carolina, with three children by three different men, each of whom had, in turn, abandoned her, could be any of the women in the discussion group, I thought. For, like Carolina, there was a fierce, invincible, creative spirit locked up inside of their care-worn and all too often abused bodies. After the success of her book, a reporter had asked Carolina how she felt about being a celebrity after years of foraging in garbage dumps to keep herself and her children alive. 'Tell your readers', Carolina had said, 'that I have merely re-entered the human race.' These women who, a couple of days earlier, had taken to the streets to reaffirm their humanity, had also re-entered the human race. One of the Carolina incarnations slipped me a poem. Someone whispered to me that she had been a maid in white households all of her life, and had, all of a sudden after the rebellion, begun writing poetry. Her poem was entitled 'Silent Thunderstorm' and it told the story of her life and those of thousands of voiceless women in ten lines.

Down there on my knees, scrubbing your floor
 You dangle me like a puppet
 I answer your questions honey-mouthed
 Questions 'bout my John and my church
 and my children
 and my hopes and my dreams
 All my business...
 But make good use of me
 'cause there ain't no more generations like me coming.
 No more who'll bend down and scrub your floor
 while you kick them in the arse...⁷

When I left that group, I was drawn to other groups where older musicians were putting young ones through their paces. These groups were improvising riffs on a variety of instruments, beating out rhythms on drums, accompanying poems with music, reading rhythmic jazz poems, inventing scat lyrics and vocalising ballads and blues. And it struck me, once again, that this language of music was the one that spoke most eloquently from the souls of Black folk. And having erupted from ancient rhythms of life and primordial memories, that music became the most universal of all cultural forms – melodic sounds that constantly echo and re-echo in the mind's ear of millions. The sounds are commercialised, saddled with inane and banal lyrics, but in their purest form, they still touch something visceral, haunting and unforgettable in the hearts of those who have an inner ear for the cries of anguish, of affirmation and rebellion. It was out of the seminal rhythms that this rebellious period fostered that we inherited rock and roll, the ballads of the 1960s, the blue beat, reggae, socka, rap and hip-hop and several other innovative musical expressions. When one listens with an inner ear, one can hear echoes of protest and of affirmation in the best of all of these new musical creations, and one realises that, in fact, after the rebellions of the 1960s, *la luta a continua!*

I brought back other poems with me from that tour of the inner cities. They were written by men and women who could say, like the young poet in Watts, 'From the ashes I came and with me many others'. Theirs were pristine voices that had not been heard before. Their music can escape and echo across the globe, but they have to stage rebellions in order to make their written words leap across an infinite number of racist barriers.

Behind the facade of poverty and degradation in the ghettos, one can always find a turbulent and almost miraculous counter-culture. It is often hidden, buried, buffeted by despair. But on those all too infrequent occasions when the folk unite and rise up to stretch limbs stiff from too much kneeling, that counter-culture bursts out like flowers from cracks in a neglected pavement. Seeds of anger mutate

and produce flowers of hope, and even the most despised and abandoned, like the prisoners the Black Muslims managed to rehabilitate, can be brought back into 'the human race'.

I close with the words of two other poets, Norman Jordan and Clyde Shy, both from the Hough district of Cleveland, Ohio. They emerged in the wake of the rebellion of the 1960s to write, recite and sing their poems to eager listeners.

Black Warrior

At night while whitey sleeps
the heat of a thousand African fires
burns across my chest.
I hear the beat of a war drum
and enchanted by this wild call
I hurl a brick through a store front window
and disappear.

Norman Jordan (1968)⁸

The City

Blood and honey, wine and gunpowder,
innertubes and needles, marriage and murder
like the gutter for the drunk who sleeps
on his Bar-b-que box, and urinates in police cars.
This is unmistakably the city.

No one sees the lightning run and knock Mr Jones down!
Cries from the children say he'll be O.K.
he's just new in town.

Friday nights and love affairs
fighting wenches and torn up stairs
This is unmistakably the city.

Clyde Shy (1968)⁹

References

- 1 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York, 1989).
- 2 Jules Michelet, *Historical View of the French Revolution* (London, 1888), p.507.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid., p.508.
- 6 Frank Marshall Davis, 'Three Average Americans' (in *de Kim* Literair Pamflet. No.3), in *de Kim*, Nos 1-6/7, 1950-55 (Amsterdam, 1974), p.8.
- 7 Mary Mason, 'Silent Thunderstorms', in *Cotopaxi* (Vol.1, no.1), p.8.
- 8 Norman Jordan, 'Black Warrior', in *Cotopaxi*, op.cit., p.8.
- 9 Clyde Shy, 'The City', in *ibid*.

HEIKE KLEFFNER

The Black Panthers: interviews with Geronimo ji-jaga Pratt and Mumia Abu-Jamal

Geronimo ji-jaga Pratt and Mumia Abu-Jamal were both members of the former Black Panther Party for Self-Defense which, from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s developed, in the ghettos and inner cities of the US, a revolutionary black politics. The organisation, with its combination of practical social action, political self-education and adoption of the constitutional right to bear arms, grew rapidly.

It was finally broken apart by the extensive infiltration of its local chapters, together with the virtual elimination of its leadership, who were either railroaded into gaol or killed in FBI-instigated shoot-outs. Many former Panthers are still in prison on charges arising from that period; Geronimo ji-jaga Pratt has so far served twenty-three years, and is still in maximum security.

*Mumia Abu-Jamal's imprisonment stems from his involvement, as a former Panther and a journalist, in reporting on the radical black nationalist organisation, MOVE, one of whose communal houses was besieged by Philadelphia police for over a year, in 1977/8. (Some years later, in May 1985, Philadelphia police besieged and bombed another such house, killing eleven people – see Margot Harry's account in *Race & Class*, Spring 1987.) Abu-Jamal is currently on death row for the alleged killing, in December 1981, of a police officer.*

The interviews were conducted in October 1992.

Heike Kleffner: How did you get involved with the Black Panther Party (BPP) and what did you do before that?

Heike Kleffner is a freelance journalist and translator living in Berlin.

Race & Class, 35, 1 (1993)

Geronimo ji-jaga Pratt: I am from a small town in Louisiana, part of the national territory we feel should be liberated, and I grew up in a segregated situation. It was very much like you probably imagine a Black nation to be. The situation was pretty racist, on the one hand; on the other, it was full of integrity and dignity and the pride of being a part of this community. So, I grew up witnessing lynchings and other activities that you have probably heard about, that the Ku-Klux-Klan performed. There was an atmosphere of fear like that, but, too, of a close-knit family – the values, the work ethic, very respectful to everyone. Eventually, I joined the US army and ended up in Vietnam. This was during the '60s when a lot of change was taking place in the country. That change was interpreted to us down South in a different kind of way – because there, you grew up fighting; there was a constant state of warfare, because of the racial polarisation. Martin Luther King, the civil rights movement, etc., was not that popular there, because we were raised on the self-defence principle of fighting and defending our people from those kinds of racist attacks. That stayed with me all my life through the service and back out and eventually in the BPP.

HK: When did you first get introduced to the BPP?

GP: When I got out of the US army, I enrolled at UCLA and I was befriended by a brother who was the Deputy Defense Minister of the Southern California chapter, named Bunchy Carter. In fact, we ended up being room-mates. We were both taking the same classes at UCLA and, as a result, I became very familiar with the BPP and the movement as a whole. Being fresh from Vietnam, plus being from the South, opened my eyes to a lot of things. At that time, I was not a member, I was just a friend of Bunchy's; everybody thought that I was a member, because I was always with Bunchy. I had attended some meetings of the BPP with Bunchy – the national meetings in Oakland – and helped implement a lot of student programmes in conjunction with the BPP. But I had not joined. When Bunchy was killed in January 1968, he left a recording that resulted subsequently in my helping to rebuild their Ministry of Defense.

So, when you say 'joining the BPP', there was never really a formal joining. It was a coming together of different forces under the auspices, the banner of the BPP – it was not as cut-and-dried as people may think now.

HK: What did Bunchy's recording say?

GP: That if anything happened to him, he recommended that I take his place. It was a shock to me. I was blown away. I had already heard that he was dead and then, when I heard this... He had never asked me to join; he knew my position on things. It was like a coming together of two different worlds, two different sectors of a field of struggle and I wasn't so eager to join anything. I had grown up in an organisation that was based on the

principles of liberation that the BPP were struggling to comprise. So, when he was killed and he left that recording, and Bobby and Kathleen and all heard it, and then asked me, would I do this – it kind of threw me off. After a while, I decided to help build the Ministry of Defense – the Party was made up of different ministries, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture led by Emerald Douglass – and it became incumbent on me to take this task on.

HK: What did your job entail?

GP: I assumed the role of the Minister of Defense because Huey [Newton], who was the nominal Minister of Defense, was incarcerated. And I became a member of the first cadre of the Central Committee, the highest decision-making body of the BPP. I had to go to various locations and organise classes on defence – self-defence – and things of that nature. Also, we worked on technical defence and theoretical defence. Theoretical defence was comprised of more intellectual dialogue between individuals, so that you could understand the basics of warfare; the technical was the actual implementation of defence techniques, defending our offices, etc.

HK: Can you tell us a bit about the community programmes of the BPP?

GP: That commitment was ongoing. You had to contribute a certain amount of hours to the breakfast programme, to the clothing give-away programme, to the medical programmes. It was a constant thing, 24 hours, a full-time job. You had to maintain the political education classes, because those classes were primary, before anything we had to maintain political education. So, it was quite a busy time.

HK: When did you first learn about COINTELPRO* and when did you first become one of its targets?

GP: We began to feel the effects of COINTELPRO-type operations from the start. Even before I had gotten out here to California, those kind of things were being felt throughout the country, throughout the movement. But it became more intense at the end of 1968 and the beginning of 1969, shortly after J. Edgar Hoover issued his infamous proclamation that we were the greatest threat to their national security.

HK: Can you describe when and how you felt the effects personally?

GP: When I was shot at in my bed, four days after the assassination of

*COINTELPRO was the FBI's domestic counter-intelligence programme, officially ended in 1971, which, as well as the Black Panthers, targeted organisations like the American Indian Movement, the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee, the Weathermen, etc. Tactics employed included media disinformation, the use of false charges against individuals, the withholding of evidence, and even occasional assassination. See W. Churchill and J. Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression* (Boston, South End Press, 1988).

Fred Hampton in 1969. A very similar thing happened when a sister and I were in bed. They came and shot at the bed and they missed. Buck-shots and an assassination attempt. A few months prior to that I had been shot at on the streets by unknown assailants – there were three whites in a car, in the ghetto on the East Side of LA. I was going through Memphis, doing some work there and was shot at. I had been shot at quite a bit in Vietnam, and when the bullets are close, they make a cracking sound. These were very close. I was just lucky that they didn't hit me.

HK: Did you foresee then the split that was going to happen in the BPP?

GP: We had signs of it – not a split that actually occurred, but there were always some infiltrators, some agents provocateurs, who were just omnipresent, who you had to try to weed out and identify, and who were constantly trying to provoke this kind of separation within the ranks. It would come from various directions. It might be played out through fratricidal warfare between other organisations and the Panthers, or the Peacetoll Nation and the Panthers in Chicago. Then you had the anti-Castro Cubans, who were known as the Guzanos and who were used pretty much against the Panthers; you had the Minutemen, and, of course, the Ku-Klux-Klan and the John Birch Society. There was always someone, some kind of force coming at you like this and it wasn't so clear during this period that it was coming directly from the FBI or the CIA. But it became a serious topic of our political education classes and studies. Quite a lot of the findings that came out of those studies were presented to the central committee. A few times they were laughed at, because a lot of the leaders didn't think that we were that important; that the US would waste time using the CIA and the FBI.

HK: Did you work with any white organisations and how did you feel about those alliances?

GP: We had good relations with some white organisations throughout that period. In effect, we were criticised quite a bit by a more narrow nationalist black organisation for even working with organisations such as SDS, the Weathermen, the communist New Left, the youth alliances, the labour parties – all the way to the Communist Party. There were problems. We had to find ways of working with various forces moving in the same direction. And we understood that our entire struggle was really based on a class struggle, and that our adversaries would try to use the race factor to manipulate and to divide and conquer – when all along those people of other nations, other ethnic backgrounds, are in fact our allies and our friends. We enjoyed good relations with white people, brown people, red people and encouraged a united front at all times. In fact, we had a couple of united front conferences that were pretty successful – back in 1969.

HK: At what point was the BPP split up nationally?

GP: We were growing like wildfire, so fast that the leadership really had to slow down and try to see who was coming up. It was growing so fast, it went national, then international when Eldridge Cleaver went overseas. We had chapters in Havana and Algiers and Copenhagen. It just spread all over. It wasn't that easy to try to provide the kind of leadership needed to try to function properly.

HK: Do you think that such an organisation needed a hierarchical structure?

GP: That's a good question. I often brought that up for a topic of discussion during that period and I was accused of being too militaristic, of thinking too militaristically. But it was Amilcar Cabral who gave us a lot of insight into vertical structures as opposed to more horizontal structures. And that was discussed quite a bit – a lot of the formulas were actually put into practice in certain areas and worked pretty good. But there was still the matter of hooking it all together, because sometimes you would hook it together – say we hooked up the Boston chapter and the chapter in Jamaica, NY – the link that you would use would actually be an agent and you wouldn't know. That was the worst thing, being linked up through an agent, who was directly working for J. Edgar Hoover (FBI director at the time). So we had problems in security screening which became harder because we were naive; agents would actually come and advocate blowing up buildings, shooting police, doing things radically, going out and shooting somebody. And you would say, 'Oh, this guy, he is just crazy, but he is not an agent, just because he did some stuff like this'. Yet they were the ones provoking it all. A lot of the local leaders were suckered because of that.

HK: Did you think it was necessary to have hierarchical structures in order to control the organisation or to make sure that it stayed together?

GP: What we called vertical structures were more popular, and I was one of the ones who dissented from that. I thought that, since we were widespread, we needed a horizontal structure, based more on a cell system, that empowered the local leadership. But, because of the fear and the paranoia so prevalent among the national leadership, they would opt for the vertical. Their strong advocacy of this though was continually opposed by the actual practices of the police, who were constantly arresting and removing the national leadership. So, you had to reverse and revise and develop other forms of organisational control.

HK: What about the role of women in the BPP? It struck me in talking to different former Black Panthers and women, that sexism was right in there in the organisation. What is your perception of it in retrospect?

GP: When I became a member of the central committee, I was always in support of women's liberation issues, but we didn't have to be in support of anything, because the sisters would make sure that you respected them and that their points got across and were adhered to. One of the first sisters who comes to mind is sister Afeni Shakur and, of course, the sister they called my wife, known as Sandra Pratt. She was killed. Or Kathleen Cleaver – you are talking about some strong sisters, sisters you may not have heard about – like Amantelaba – but who were very beautiful, who you would listen to. We had to face our sexism and our machoism because of them. They would educate us – Joan Bird, Assata Shakur – and you would respect and love them, because they made you look into yourself; you became a better person because of them. So, the credit starts with them, because they took the initiative to educate us, to teach us. I wish I could sit here and name all of them.

HK: Can you describe how you ended up in prison, how you were framed and what the situation was over that?

GP: I was arrested on December 8th, 1970, in Dallas, Texas, on a warrant run out of what's known as the shoot-out in Los Angeles in 1969. I was extradited back to California a couple of months later to stand trial for those charges. At that time I was indicted for a murder – I was indicted for quite a few things and one of them was the murder that I am convicted of right now. At the time that I was indicted, it was just another charge that they threw in to maintain a no-bail situation. It wasn't taken too seriously, because they had done this before. Eventually, it became more and more obvious to us that the murder charge was something that they were really going to try and press.

HK: Looking at the rebellions in LA and speaking with young Black kids, it seems to me that they are mostly concerned with the everyday struggle for survival. How do you reach out to them, or do you see any force at this point that is organising these kids?

GP: There are quite a few forces out there that are organising them – conscious organisers like, in some situations, 'Educated Fools from Uneducated Schools', educating and organising them to lean right back on the system. Most of those children have stated very clearly that they are tired of being always in the position of 'we gotta ask him for a job; we gotta ask him for welfare; we gotta ask him for health care'. It is almost innate for them to speak of autonomy, and, although they don't even really understand what sovereignty and independence mean, their deepest desire is to be on their own, to work for themselves. They are tired of asking the government. That is the strongest argument in favour of nationalism, national independence. Just listen to them, from the rappers to the ones that go to church every day. They want to have their own presidents or prime ministers, their own supreme courts, their own police

forces, their own educational institutions. That is what I have been hearing every day. I get a lot of letters from them, and that is what they are looking for – someone who could help them build this vast nation of ours. There is kind of a rough, unrefined understanding that I sense from them, based on: they want theirs, not so much from the system, as from the hundreds and hundreds of years' wealth that was accumulated from slavery. I think there are a lot of ways that they can be organised and are being organised, whether we like it or not.

HK: How do you perceive the support for yourself and other political prisoners and prisoners-of-war from the Black liberation movement? A lot of young kids especially don't know about your case, or the cases of other Panthers.

GP: I think there is a conscious and systematic attempt on the part of the government to oppose any support that may be developing for us. The solution, I think, has to be based on our national efforts for liberation – that we are soldiers who fought for the liberation of our nation and our nation fights for the liberation of us. But if our nation does not realise it is a nation, then it's gonna constantly be victim of this kind of manipulation by our enemies. I don't now advocate so much 'Free Geronimo' as 'Free our Nation'; that our prisoners and our protectors and soldiers of that nation be provided for. The important thing is the freedom of our people. We were always sacrificial lambs for that, we understood that we were going to be killed, put in prison, or ostracised, because it is not a popular thing among those you fight against to fight for freedom and independence. And, in the process, support will come for Mumia Abu-Jamal and all other political prisoners and prisoners-of-war. One of the things that the white superstructure is afraid of is the coming together of various national forces such as the Native movement, the Chicano movement, what is called the white North American anti-imperialist movement, which are all based on the same principles, the principles of our independence. That is something I always try to make people aware of. We could talk about this a long time, but I know we don't have a lot of time.

HK: Do you feel that the support for yourself has got stronger in the last few years?

GP: Yes, it is constantly growing. But, if I could, I would take every ounce of support that I have for me and give it to Mumia and other prisoners-of-war. Mumia is a very beautiful brother. He was framed, his life is in imminent danger and we can ill afford to execute Mumia.

HK: Can you talk a bit about your prison conditions?

GP: My prison conditions are harsh. I am in maximum security imprisonment, and, after twenty-two years in prison, it is not common to be

maintained in what is called a level-four prison. The conditions are very punitive and repressive, ranging from the food conditions to the violence of seeing a person arguing and the guards shooting him from a tower, killing him. There are constant lies and manipulations. Just think of a COINTELPRO on a microcosmic scale. In fact, we found in some of the files the existence of an operation called PRISAC programme; it is directed against prison activists and ranges over spreading rumours, falsely labelling you, taking your letters, poison-pen letters. It is a constant state of warfare.

HK: What about the Black elected officials – do they support the demand of freedom for Black political prisoners at all?

GP: They like to individualise prisoners, because, by and large, they buy into the system's propaganda, that there are no political prisoners. You have to understand that in the New Afrikan nation you have a class situation. Within this class structure, we have what we call the black bourgeoisie. Malcolm X would make the analogy that they were the house Negroes as opposed to the field Negroes. A field Negro lives in the field, hoping that something bad will happen to the master, whereas the house Negro is hoping that master lives for ever, because he lives in his house, eats of his table, etc. The house Negroes do all they can to try to preserve the very system that we try to get away from.

The Black bourgeoisie individualise a lot – they might take an Angela Davis because it is fashionable to get behind Angela Davis to help her get out of prison and then they feel as though they have contributed; but they turned away from Ruchell Magee, who was actually shot and almost killed. So, a few may get behind Geronimo ji-jaga, because he knows Danny Glover or he has been to Vietnam, but they might oppose Sundiata Acoli, who is a very beautiful brother who should be supported a thousand per cent and should be freed. They might get behind Dhoruba bin-Wahad and Mutulu Shakur and ignore Marilyn Buck and Laura Whitehorn. It is a matter of us trying to educate them to the reality, what is happening, so they could broaden their support and base their decisions on principles as opposed to personalities.

HK: How about your parole hearings? Do they ask you to disavow your political beliefs?

GP: Ordinarily, you wouldn't find a person being kept in prison as long as I have because of what they say they are keeping me in prison for. To me, the parole hearing is only a formality. They have, by law, to review your case a certain number of times every few years. Since I have been in prison, I have known prisoners who have come in for heinous murders who have gotten out three times – not just once, but for three different murders and have gotten out. It is all a political machine comprised of ex-law-enforcement individuals who are manipulated by their bosses. Every now

and then you might run across one or two who seem to show a more humanistic understanding, but they are a minority.

It was a political situation that landed me in here, and it will be a political situation that releases me. And, after so many years, you cease to think so much about you yourself being released. Sure, I would love it, I love freedom, to be out of these places. But you don't dwell on that too much, you would go crazy. It is more broad; you think more about the liberation of society and your people, rather than this little, insignificant person who consciously joined a movement to struggle for liberation.

HK: What do you think about the explosion of the prison population in the last twenty to fifteen years?

GP: It was predicted. Huey Newton gave a lecture on that one time and we had foreseen that this was gonna happen. After the leadership of the BPP was attacked at the end of the '60s and the early '70s, throughout the Black and other oppressed communities, the role models for the upcoming generations became the pimps, the drug dealers, etc. This is what the government wanted to happen. The next result was that the gangs were being formed, coming together with a gangster mentality, as opposed to the revolutionary progressive mentality we would have given them. So, by eliminating or driving the progressive leadership – the correct role models – underground, killing them and putting them into prison – eliminating them – all of these younger generations were left prey to whatever the government wanted to put them into. It is another form of genocide, of killing off populations of Third World and progressive people who pose a threat to their system. And this is one of the reasons why people like me are kept in prison. They don't want me out there, because people like me will go out there and struggle to bring home the truth to those youngsters. They know those youngsters have a lot of respect for us, because we haven't betrayed anything, because we have stayed firm to our principles. Like I said, it is not just me, it is people like us who adhere to the basic principles of liberation and basic humanism for all people – for the Mexican people, for Indian people, for all the struggling peoples.

We have the biggest prison population anywhere in the world and the next one is in South Africa. Of course, there is racism involved. Here, in California, you have a lot of Mexicano and Brown people in prison. It's just so pathetic. They are being railroaded into prison, a lot of them don't speak English, and when they come to prison they are just branded – either you're in this or that gang – and, basically, they don't even know what they are talking about. Then they end up shooting themselves. We have been struggling for years to get the Crisps and the Bloods together in prison. We were successful in that a few years ago; it spilled out on to the streets and we are happy about that. Now, since the state and the government can't get the Crisps and the Bloods to fight each other, what

you see is them trying to get Mexicans and Blacks against each other. It is all being manipulated from above, designed to keep that death factor high. The best way is to have them kill each other off. It is presenting again what existed when I first came in, which George Jackson and others struggled against, by trying to get the prisoners together across racial lines.

* * *

Heike Kleffner: Could you say how you got involved in politics and what got you started?

Mumia Abu-Jamal: Well, my political life formally began with the Black Panther Party. I've been in a sense thankful to the Philadelphia police department for kicking and beating me into the Black Panther Party (BPP). As a youth, prior to joining the BPP, I remember the 1968 presidential campaign when George Wallace [former governor of Alabama] was running for US president on the third party ticket; I think it was the American Independence Party. I and several other young Blacks felt that there was something improper about this. So, we went to demonstrate against him at the Spectrum, which is a large sporting venue in Philadelphia. After our very brief demonstration and our expulsion from the Spectrum, we were attacked, beaten and locked up and hospitalised by Philadelphia policemen, who protested our presence. It was from that point forward that my eyes were opened to the militant movements that existed. I wasn't a member of any organisation, but I felt the need hence to be a part of one, to try to change that reality. People speak about fundamental rights; but when you are beaten when you exercise them, then they are not rights, terror and fear will push you away from the need to demonstrate or the feeling that you can freely do so. As a member of the BPP, I was active in the Ministry of Information – the part of the Party that dealt with propaganda, putting out the Party newspaper, putting out leaflets and maintaining communications between chapters like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, etc. Thereafter, when I left the Party, I continued, one could say, my propaganda efforts by going into journalism – broadcasting, writing and so forth.

HK: Why did you leave the BPP?

MAJ: Some reasons were personal, some political. Around the time of the fight between the East Coast and the West Coast Panthers, I felt that it was not my function, or my reason for joining the Party, to fight other Black Panthers. I felt that it was proper to fight the system, but when the system can manipulate you into fighting your own, then the system wins and the people lose. I think that period really reflected the destruction of the Party as a national presence, because, once it was split between coasts – between the Central Committee and reigning Party members of the West Coast and some of the most active chapters of the East Coast – then, for

all intents and purposes, it lost its effectiveness. Because, even though the Party began in the West, some of its most energetic and militant chapters existed in the East, because this is where some of the largest Black communities and some of the most dire conditions exist. Hence the call for, the need for, a Black Panther Party was very strong here – like the Philadelphia Chapter, like the Winston Haven, Baltimore and New Haven Chapters. Once that was split asunder, it could no longer function as the Black Panther Party, no matter what name it used. It was no longer a united Black political revolutionary organisation trying to achieve Black revolutionary political power.

HKJ: How would you describe your situation after you left the BPP? Did you feel that journalism was a way to go about your political aims?

MAJ: In some respects, but only to the extent that journalism is a tool to change people's consciousness, to give people insight, and, in another way, a kind of affirmation that their lives have value and purpose. When one reads the daily press or listens to what is broadcast on the regular 'white' radio stations and TV stations, you will perceive a picture, a slanted picture, of Black life that reflects it in the most improper terms. When media journalism and propaganda is used to reflect a positive side of people, the side that resists oppression, the side of people's inherent worth, no matter what their property or economic value, then that in itself is revolutionary, because this system tends to denigrate people who are poor. And most of the people on planet earth are poor. That is the kind of consciousness that drove me towards journalism. And, of course, through the Party I was trained in that field and was able to write from a radical revolutionary perspective.

HK: Your name is often linked to the radical MOVE organisation. MOVE was founded in 1970 in Philadelphia. During a time when the Panthers had already been destroyed by the state's counter-intelligence programme COINTELPRO and by internal infighting, MOVE attracted a lot of young Black as well as white and Latino people. MOVE describes itself as 'a radical, revolutionary organisation, fighting for life and against a system that destroys life and nature'. MOVE members live in communal houses, they do not send their children to public schools and they have a long history of confronting police brutality in the Black community and exposing the judicial system. As a result, MOVE was constantly involved in confrontations with the Philadelphia police, which resulted in several MOVE members being killed, as well as the imprisonment, over a decade ago, of thirteen MOVE members. When did you first meet MOVE?

MAJ: As a reporter. Of course, even prior to that I had read about them in the newspaper, like most people in Philadelphia, and had seen one or two MOVE people on the street. But when the confrontation started heating up in Philadelphia in 1977 and 1978 – and it was a very naked

level of repression that the Philadelphia police heaped on MOVE – I could not help but draw attention to it. The acting mayor of Philadelphia at the time, Frank Rizzo, and his police started a siege against a MOVE house in Powelton Village in 1977. The siege lasted over one year. By the end, police had cut off all water and electricity to the house, but people from the neighbourhood and supporters from the city supplied MOVE with the basic necessities. Finally, on August 8th, 1978, more than 700 policemen stormed the house. During their action, one policeman was hit in the crossfire of his colleagues. Nine MOVE members who were arrested in the house were later charged and convicted of having jointly killed this one cop. They were all sentenced to 30-100 years in prison, despite the fact that the judge admitted that he didn't know who had shot the cop.

Coming from the quasi-socialist, and in some respects paramilitary, background of the Party, my first impressions of MOVE were extraordinarily negative. I could not perceive them as revolutionary, because they didn't wear uniforms like the Panthers did. They weren't talking about Marxism, Leninism, Mao Tse-Tung thought, as the Panthers were doing. They weren't talking about building a socialist society as a solution to the economic, political and social problems in the US. So, therefore, in the same way that the Philadelphia Police Department beat me into the BPP, the Philadelphia Police Department's repression of MOVE attracted me to MOVE. Because, even though the repression was extraordinarily severe, brutal and devastating, MOVE continued to rebel and resist, and, as MOVE founder John Africa would say: 'Strength and commitment is attractive.'

HK: Can you say how it happened that you stood trial for allegedly having killed a cop? Do you feel that the Philadelphia police set you up on the night when you got shot and this cop got killed? I remember reading that the then mayor, Frank Rizzo, once said about you that your 'breed of journalism' needed to be stopped by any means.

MAJ: I think it is undeniable that elements of a set-up existed and that my background as a Panther and as what some people called a 'MOVE journalist' or a MOVE supporter were elements in that. There was never any time, before or after, when the police acted as if they didn't know who I was. For several months – the better part of a year – I worked at a public radio station, actually right next door to the Philadelphia Police Department's headquarters. So that every day, several times a day, I had to go that route to work. And I think that the work I did – because it was not done by other reporters in Philadelphia – put me down as a target to be neutralised. One must look back at the coverage of MOVE around the time of the police siege of their house in 1978 to see how demonised, how inhumane, how animalistic the portrayal of MOVE was. When interviews were done with them that showed that they were good, decent and committed people, it challenged the public perception of who they were. I

did these interviews because I thought they needed to be done; I did them because I thought it was the right thing to do; and I did them because I thought that any journalist should have been doing them. If someone else had done it, I would have had no need.

I remember going to MOVE headquarters and making some phone calls, and going back to the job and being criticised by my boss for that. When I asked him why, he said that phone taps on the MOVE headquarters phone revealed that I had made several calls from there. I said: 'So what? I can call from wherever I want to call.' And he said: 'Well, it damages your objectivity. Other reporters are calling you Mumia Africa.' He meant that as a slur. So it is very clear that not only police intelligence but also intra-station intelligence had me marked as a MOVE operative, when it simply wasn't true. I was just a reporter who worked closely with my subjects.

HK: Do you believe that racism played a role in the fact that you were sentenced to death?

MAJ: What I believe is really immaterial. I think that the facts speak for themselves. The fact is that the state, by intent and design, selected a predominantly white jury, predominantly older, middle-aged jurors who, for the most part, hailed from north-east Philadelphia, which is a very white part of the town. Some jurors were related to cops, some jurors were actually friends of cops. When one takes that into account, as well as the intentional removal from the jury of African-Americans from the central city, I don't think any other result can come to mind.

HK: Do you see racism in general being reflected in the death penalty? How does it play out?

MAJ: Let's look at it this way: of around 2,800 people who are on death rows across the US, an estimated 40 per cent are African-Americans – for the most part men. Of the, say, 2,800 people on death row in the US, only 28 are women. So, that 40 per cent are Black men. The percentage of African-Americans in society is roughly 12 per cent, but when you slice it into half, by male and female, you are talking about 6 per cent. So, 6 per cent of the population become an estimated 40 per cent of people on death row. I don't think that those results can be obtained in any way without racism being a factor.

At all levels of the criminal justice system, whether in charging, the prosecution, the judging and the defence – not to mention the whole level of appeal – it is mostly white individuals in positions of power (magistrates, district attorneys, judges and appellate judges and defence lawyers, etc.) who make independent determinations about the worth of a person, the worth of their life and whether they should be exposed to the most extreme penalty. More often than not, when an African-American is placed in that position, all bets are off.

HK: Following on from that, and in regard to racism, I'd like to know what your impression is of the rebellion in LA. Is this just one 'spark', which was quietened down, or do you feel that there is potential for the African-American community to start organising around police brutality again?

MAJ: In some respects, some level of organising has already begun as a response to LA. But the LA rebellions reflect, more than anything else, hopelessness. When people riot, they riot because they feel they have nothing to lose. Riot is an act of desperation, not of intent, not of planning. I just think that the forces that converge on African-American life from all levels of American society were symbolised in that case, where Rodney King was beaten and his tormentors and beaters were acquitted [first time round] by – people say a predominantly white jury – it was an all-white jury. People responded viscerally, in their guts, to what they knew was an injustice, a slap in the face of African-American people. Did it move people to organise? I think in some respects, yes. It showed that this system is not our system. It showed that when one is an employee or an agent of the system like a cop, that system will bend over backwards to protect those who are charged with assaulting, or even killing, someone, if that person is poor, African-American, without power, without influence or the like. It shows also how arrogant the system is. One might think they would bend over backwards the other way, given that there is an actual videotape of the crime, but the video meant absolutely nothing. It was as if it had happened in the dead of the night, as if there was no videotape capturing it all. Some people tended to take heart because the federal government stepped in after the rebellions to say, now we are going to start a federal prosecution. But when you look at it, this is the same federal government that, years before, promised to investigate that kind of behaviour across the nation. And, for years, there was silence. This is the same government that pulls its hair out and shrieks about how the federal judiciary, the federal courts, should not be allowed to hear people's appeals from death row. Well, it seems to me that if the federal courts can prosecute someone who was acquitted in a state court, then certainly they should have the authority, unabridged, to review people who were convicted in state courts. It seems only logical.

HK: For a number of years, African-Americans have often held power as heads of police departments, or the mayors of New York or LA. Do you think that the majority of the African-American community feels that here are members of their own community in positions of power, yet they obviously don't change the methods very much?

MAJ: I think that most folks in the African-American community know in their hearts and in their minds that there is a difference between the appearance of power and true power; that African-American political

leaders can be mayors, police commissioners, governors, prison superintendents – it doesn't matter what the actual job is – they know they can have a position of power and lack real power. Power is the ability to enforce your will. When one looks at what happened in Philadelphia in 1985 under Mayor Goode and in New York in September of this year under Mayor Dinkins, one cannot come away from these situations without feeling that, in some respects, they were absolutely powerless. In the Goode situation, I refer to the May 13th, 1985, bombing of MOVE, when police bombed and burned eleven MOVE people to death and burned a whole neighbourhood. Mayor Goode accepted all the responsibility, but none of the blame. What he said lately in his recently published autobiography, *In Good Faith*, was that the reason why he was not on the scene in Osage Avenue when police bombed and then incinerated and shot down MOVE people was that he had received intelligence that the Philadelphia Police Department had him marked for death. I believe him, especially when you look at what happened recently, when 10,000 policemen rioted in New York City and hurled racial slurs at their commander-in-chief, at the mayor of the city. Well, I don't care what your title is – if 10,000 people can come up to your office and call you everything but a child of god, or a bathroom attendant, then you have no power. It is unthinkable that any other white or European-American mayor or chief executive in a political system could be threatened with death by people who are his subordinates and that that white political figure would not have the skills or the contacts or the executive powers to isolate that threat and take care of it. None of these skills were demonstrated by Goode or Dinkins, who are, for all intents and purposes, fairly good politicians. But they happen to be African-American politicians, who have the appearance of power, but no real power.

HK: But, twenty years ago, African-Americans struggled to be represented in the political arena and demanded control over their communities and, on the surface, this demand seems to have been met.

MAJ: Well, twenty years ago, one of the goals of the Black Panther Party was the achievement of Black revolutionary political power. What the Party tried to do was make a distinction between Black revolutionary political power and Black political power; that putting a Black face in a high place was not a solution. In a very real sense, when an African-American person is placed in a position of power, he or she doesn't represent the interests of the poor, of the powerless; he or she represents the interests of the system and not the people. If you look back twenty years ago, the prospect of a Black mayor of New York or a Black mayor of Philadelphia, for that matter, or even of a Black police commissioner, was almost unthinkable. Now it is thinkable, but, in a very real sense, for people in the real world on the streets, life has not changed for the better. In fact, in some respects, it has probably changed for the worse.

HK: Can you describe what your legal situation is right now?

MAJ: We are preparing for a post-conviction relief petition. I am working with my attorneys on that. One of my attorneys, Leonard Weinglass from New York, has said – very accurately in my estimation – that, for all intents and purposes, I have never had any true representation. When you have a lawyer who is appointed, who doesn't want to be there or is denied the most fundamental tools of defence, then you have a lawyer in name, but in name only.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia's biggest mainstream newspaper, recently did a report, two pages, that dealt with the representation of people who are charged with capital offences in Philadelphia. What was revealed was that Philadelphia was at the bottom of the league; that in, let's say, Cleveland, Ohio, or San Francisco, as a matter of course, one would be supplied with two attorneys – one for the penalty phase and one for the guilt phase – jury selection specialists, a staff psychiatrist, a ballistics expert and an investigator. This is a matter of course, it goes with the programme. Lawyers from those cities who are defending capital cases get \$10,000 at the very bottom to begin; lawyers from Philadelphia – at least in the early '80s – got \$2,500 tops. Now, I hear, it has improved somewhat. The lawyer of someone who is charged with a capital offence in Philadelphia might get \$4,500, but that is the highest. They are also appointed by the judge, so that, just as a matter of simple psychology or even politics, if I am the judge and I appoint you to the case, and I also determine how much you get paid, when you get paid or even if you get paid, then you had better not make me too angry. You'd better not challenge my rulings too strenuously and you'd better not do anything that will make me look questionable or bad.

HK: As I understand it, right now you are being held in disciplinary custody, because you refuse to cut your hair, which would be against your religious principles. Now the Commissioner of Corrections of Pennsylvania, Joseph Lehmman, has issued two new directives in regard to prison conditions for death row prisoners and prisoners in disciplinary custody. Could you describe how your already extremely harsh prison conditions are going to be restricted even further by those new directives?

MAJ: In a nutshell, the worst conditions on death row in America are just about to get worse. There are two new directives coming out of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania's capital, Directive 801 and 802, which further restrict visitation, correspondence, letters, magazines, newspapers. To those who write directives in Harrisburg, apparently if one is locked up twenty-two hours a day, that is one hour too many out of your cell, so they are cutting it down to twenty-three hours a day, and one hour outside of the cell in a steel cage. For those on disciplinary custody, like myself, it will be one non-contact visit a month, no phone calls at all, one newspaper – a legal

newspaper only, and one must give an old newspaper to get the next one. The only commissary available is two packs of cigarettes a month.

One of the things that this brought to my mind was to look at African-American history, especially the case of El Haji Malik El-Shabbaz, known popularly as Malcolm X. When he was imprisoned, his behaviour was so negative that people called him 'Satan'. It was only through his ability to study the teachings of the Honourable Elijah Muhammad and his ability to study a dictionary that he was able to pull himself out of that dark well of negativity and began to build a positive core of self-being. That he did so is a tribute to his teachings as well as to his internal spirit, himself, his determination to come out of that well and to become something other than what society told him he was. Under these new directives, he would not be able to receive those teachings. He would not be able to have a dictionary. So that one who was called 'Satan' would never have been able to develop and metamorphose into a Malcolm X and later on El Haji Malik El-Shabbaz, because he would not be able to have the tools to develop, to grow, to read, to stretch, to learn. If one looks at how the state is developing its new Marionisation programme,* it looks as if one of its intents is to stop that kind of growth and development and, indeed, to create, if not 'Satans', then certainly beasts, bitter, angry, burnt-up people – as opposed to people who are growing, sensitive, insightful, better people. It seems to me that a system that dares call itself the Department of Corrections has a job to make people better as opposed to bitter.

HK: A lot of people seem to think that, under Clinton, everything will be better. From your perspective, is that true?

MAJ: Well, my perspective is a little biased. As an African-American on death row, I am not of that opinion. I would suspect that for most Blacks, and perhaps some white people on death row in Arkansas, they don't feel very heartened by that prospect. Clinton is a staunch supporter of the death penalty and has been responsible for at least four executions in Arkansas. Clinton also calls for more police and the building of new jails, despite the fact that there are already one million people in prisons throughout the US, which makes the US the country with the highest incarceration rate worldwide in regard to its overall population.

HK: Why did you think it was that, for many years, people even on the Left or in the African-American community never heard about political prisoners, and, in particular, about Black Panther and BLA political prisoners like you or Bashir Hameed or Nuh Washington from the BLA?

MAJ: I guess the reason is simple. In American consciousness, as well as in African-American consciousness, something is not real unless it's on

* Marion is a federal super-maximum security prison for men in Illinois, which is internationally known for its isolation programme.

TV. If it didn't happen on NBC, CBS or CNN, it didn't happen. Marshall McLuhan said that the medium is the message, and it is; that which the ruling class's communication network wishes to present and promote is what is carried over into popular consciousness. That which it does not wish to promote, it either ignores or slanders. People like myself, like Bashir Hameed, like Andul Majid, like Geronimo ji-jaga Pratt, like Chuckie Africa and Delbert Africa from MOVE, like all these political prisoners, are invisible to millions of Americans.

HK: At this point, do you see any force out there that has a revolutionary strategy, or that has the power to move people into action?

MAJ: There are several organisations in the US of varying ideological persuasions who have revolutionary theories that they believe will transform America's present social, political and economic reality. Do they have the power to enforce them and change the reality now? No. What it's going to take, more than anything, is the cohesion of many forces, the building of mass power to change those realities. In the sense that no *one* organisation has the power to transform it themselves. This is a huge, vast country with 260 million people and to suppose that an organisation of 200, 300 people is going to effect the deep degrees of transformation that need to take place is pretentious. Look at the fact that, at its height, the BPP had 15,000-16,000 members and was cooperating with other revolutionary organisations as well.

Unless and until a political gathering and grouping is able to galvanise the power of the masses of the people, then no immediate change is imminent – that is, positive change. There is a whole lot of negative change to come. One element of that is what we talked about earlier as 'Marionisation'. We are not just talking about the Marionisation of this prison here in Huntingdon or in Pennsylvania, but the Marionisation and the prisonisation of America. You have over one million people locked up in prisons and jails in the US right now. Indeed, if we break that down into percentages, over 38 per cent of that million are African-American men. So that, unless and until a popular force is built and welded that coheres something from here and something from there, a popular force that develops a counterforce to the 'mainstream' for real, then there will be no change. What you are looking at in the US when I say prisonisation is not just the million of people who are locked down. Increasingly, as industries flee this country, people find that their only option in terms of personal survival is to become a part of what has been called a 'fortress economy'. More and more, when people look for jobs, they find them in the security field, as prison guards, as cops, etc. So that, from the outside and the inside, America is becoming the prison house of nations.

IVOR MILLER

Guerrilla artists of New York City

In the early 1970s, the New York City subways burgeoned with a new art form. While Norman Mailer and a handful of writers and photographers celebrated the phenomenon, others saw it as an attack on society. By the mid-1980s, NY City's young guerrilla artists had developed their craft to produce full car murals that became a tourist attraction for visitors from around the world. To regain control over the subways, New York mayors Lindsay and, later, Koch initiated and sustained a multi-million dollar campaign to erase the paintings and arrest the painters. While the passionate and bold murals have vanished for ever from New York's subways, the art form has become a worldwide phenomenon with adherents in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and all major US cities. In New York, the original painters still call themselves 'painters', 'aerosol artists', graffiti artists' or 'writers', and the most dedicated of them continue to create their work in public spaces and for art galleries.

Since the beginning of their movement in 1971, New York City subway painters have used diverse cultural ideas in their creative processes. Most of the great painters were young (between 12 and 15) when they began. At that age, they were especially conscious of and open to cultural motifs from the world around them: their families taught them movement and language from their particular heritage; TV taught them advertising techniques; currents running within their communities taught them something about politics and the history of

Ivor Miller is in the Department of Performance Studies, Northwestern University, and is currently researching the existence of Afro-Cuban religion in contemporary Cuban society.

Race & Class, 35, 1 (1993)

their oppression. Contemporary phenomena like advertising and popular culture, and social movements like Black, Latin and Red power, resonate in the work and attitudes of subway painters. This blending I define as 'creolisation', and several innovators among this group of rebellious artists creolised images and ideas from the society around them to create their work.

Writers grew up within the kaleidoscope of cultures of which Chinatown, Little Italy, Spanish Harlem, Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side are a part. Their familiarity with cultural diversity helped them transform their segregated society into a city-wide community that included hundreds of creative youth. Initially, they communicated their awareness of each other by painting signatures on the trains. From the South Bronx, Phase 2 says:

We communicated when we were just doing signatures. Back when Stay High 149 was painting, everybody used to like his signature, so we used to write it on the trains. We would write his name, say '149', write our name next to his and point to his name. Then later we would see he wrote our name, and then write something next to it.¹

Originally, groups of writers met at certain train stations to watch the latest style innovations and to form painting crews. Many passionately recall the individual creativity that was encouraged within a unified group of writers. From Upper Manhattan, Co-Co 144 affirms that aerosol culture was a spontaneous response to a need for multicultural unity:

The movement broke barriers. We were at a point where, after the 50s and 60s, there were the gangs, and you couldn't go into a neighbourhood, neighbourhoods were put into pockets like Black Harlem, Spanish Harlem, and the Upper West Bronx. This movement is something that broke negative barriers and created unity. It did so many things at one time. It was totally pure [positive]... Our intentions weren't to deface property. It was a call for unity – even amongst people who weren't writers. A lot of people that I met would be surprised to meet me. 'You're Co-Co 144?', and there you'd strike up a conversation, and they would look up to you and say how great you are, and where they'd seen your name and how many times. It wasn't to fluff yourself up like a rooster and be egotistical, it was something real nice, very positive and constructive.

Perhaps the most dramatic aspect of the aerosol movement was its creation of an inter-racial youth culture at a grassroots level. As writing groups formed, each painter brought his or her own cultural style and perspective to the art. When a new piece rode by on the rails, other writers would study it, incorporating the styles or images they liked the best into their own work, and a fresh style would be born later that night in the train yard.

Comradeship between writers formed because they needed mobility to get their names up around the city, and there was safety in numbers. Thus, to move through the grid of neighbourhoods divided by rival gangs, writers formed 'crews' that could move together, and could watch out for each other while painting in the train yards. The communication that existed through the call and response of train paintings and within the groups who made them helped create an integrated culture not reflected in adult society. The powerful self-identity 'All City'* writers created through painting gained such momentum that it literally dissolved the rigid segregation enforced by gang structures in many barrios. From the South Bronx, AMRL/BAMA speaks:

A lot of what happened back then cannot be explained easily because it was like a coming together of minds. To me, I always look back and think how amazing it was, because you had a bunch of guys with the same kind of mental attitude going out to do something. When it was really rolling, two years after it began, we're talking about three or four thousand writers that could communicate peacefully all over the city, and shared ideas. And that kind of activity was not happening during that time, there were too many gangs out there and all that madness, and yet these cats came out of nowhere, didn't even realise what they were doing, and created a major network in the city, communication from Brooklyn to Manhattan in a day, without the use of a phone, it was really tight.

It is not clear whether this integration was an influence of the consciousness created by the Civil Rights movement with integrationist ideals, the spontaneous result of youth needing to express a shared inner-city, multicultural experience, or whether it was found through a common desire to rebel against an uncaring system. Urban youth, growing up in segregated neighbourhoods, acted upon their visions of an integrated society, and many had to struggle against the long-standing prejudices of their families and neighbourhoods to do so. Phase 2 speaks:

We're not living in an atmosphere that tells us to love your brother, and harmonise with everybody, or teaches us how to deal with somebody that speaks Spanish, or Arabic or something or another. Because where I come from, you judge people's personalities depending on where they come from. You don't judge them as people. You say, 'Well, what do you expect from a [so and so], he's this colour, or from that part of town...' Yet this art brings all of the cultures here together as one. Maybe if this art was not from a

* A term writers use for those whose names are up in all areas of the city.

'ghetto',* there would be a different approach to the art from our society. If it wasn't just a bunch of kids who weren't expected to make anything with their lives anyway. All this art came up from the gutter. This art brings the masses together.

At a time of life when youth need to explore the world, ask questions and express their new thoughts and perceptions, a lot of their energy was spent struggling with poverty, fighting the boredom of unchallenging school classes and defending gang territory. From the Lower East Side, Lee reflects:

A lot of people don't realise the impact the writing movement had in the neighbourhoods, because the gangs were still around. The gangs kept neighbourhoods apart, the city was a jigsaw puzzle of gangs keeping turf and territorial rights. So this movement brought people together: Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Whites, Orientals, Polish, from the richest to the poorest, we were equals. We took the same energy that was there to stand by your block with bats or guns and flying colours all night long, and used it to go painting, to create.

What counted among writers was how innovative and powerful one's style was, not what one looked like. From Queens, Lady Pink says:

Writers came from all ethnic backgrounds, all classes, and the police knew to look out for a group of kids who were racially diverse – those were the writers. If a gang was all black or white the police wouldn't bother them. In the early 70s race wasn't an obstacle for writers to join a crew, gender wasn't either. That set in later. Barriers break down quickly when you go down into the subways. It's like being in Vietnam. After you come out, you have a link, a comradeship. Once you were a writer, you were respected, you could go anywhere in the city. You were known, you had friends and connections, even if you had never set eyes on them before. It was a family.

Aerosol art was born from similar creolising processes that gave the world Afro-Catholic religions like Haitian Vodun, Cuban Santería, and Brazilian Candomblé; Southern creole and Cajun cooking, and urban musical forms like Salsa, Latin Jazz, Be-Bop and Hip-Hop music. Unlike post-modernist strategies, which emphasise the dismantling and breaking up of traditions, creolisation tends to synthesise existing fragments together into a seamless whole. It often requires that the cultural producers be receptive and spontaneous in grappling with new ideas. Phase 2 believes some creole forms are created by the ingenuity of people who need constantly to create food, language and lifestyles from the meagre materials available to them:

* Phase doesn't like the term 'ghetto', because he feels it is pejorative. For people who live in poor barrios and projects, this is their home and their community.

We live here in Babylon and we learn what we learn from here. But a lot of us take what we learn and become inventive with it. When we came over here from Africa, we took what we were given and did what we could with it. We were never given so much anyway. They gave us the guts of the pig, and we made it into some type of southern gourmet dinner. It's always been that way, we get seconds all the time. Even with the second-hand education we receive, we have created a new form of painting.

Vulcan agrees with Phase 2 that sophisticated cultural achievements can be created with minimal resources and determination. His description demonstrates the parallels between the creation of Southern cuisine and Northern aerosol art:

Everything that we did with the spray can was done by trial and error. There were no teachers. There were no books, no schools. I grew up reading comic books. I was never taught to draw. The only thing I wanted to draw was pieces, letters, and draw them wilder and wilder. We evolved from spray painting one simple letter into these complicated styles.

Trains, spray cans and pop culture are all products of industrial societies that coerce people to work, or get them to buy products. Writers took these industrial artifacts, designed to be passively consumed by them, and actively reshaped them to create their own culture. In fact, they literally reshaped the spray-can nozzles in original ways in order to meet their creative needs; they infused the trains with their spirits by painting their signatures on them; and they created personal statements using advanced advertising techniques from the ads imposed upon them by Madison Avenue. Phase 2 describes how the images that influenced writers were transformed on the trains:

They try to make you think that everybody's influenced so much by these Pop artists, Futurists, Surrealists and Vaun Bodé,* but the creative guys are going to *feed off* of Bodé, they're not going to copy his art to the letter. It's good to be able to copy something, but it's even better when you can take something and make it your own. That's basically what I think has been done with writing at this point, it's *our* writing now, you see what I'm saying? Whereas when we were babies growing up, learning the ABCs, now people have to learn *our* ABCs.

Aerosol art springs from an attitude of constant rebellion against the assimilation demanded by mass marketed culture. Seeking to advertise the uniqueness of their identities, writers developed an inclusive culture

* Vaun Bodé was an underground comics artist whose colourful, bold and sexual characters inspired many writers.

based on creative principles. Spar reflects:

We were kids faced with a world that said 'It's got to be done our way. You've got to live with it.' So we as kids just wanted to change that.

* * *

Many New Yorkers saw the writers' work as a plague menacing the quality of life in the city. Subway paintings were to them a symbol of the lack of control New York's government had over its population. Of course, most people were upset that writers disregarded the 'sanctity' of private property. Yet part of this reaction was because writers confronted New Yorkers with their brutal experience by painting it on the trains. Sharp speaks:

Egotistical and violent emotions come from living in a lower-income area in NYC, and interacting with people there. I've seen my friends get shot, I've seen people die around me from overdosing, I've seen people jump off of buildings. For me to survive within my community, I have to be removed emotionally from these goings on. I need something of my own, an escape or radical refuge, and writing has always been it. Me being a writer during my teen years was a way to vent all that anger and all that frustration in a positive way.

If the experience that the black English vernacular relates is unacceptable to the institutions of the United States, then of course the painted scripts that are visual counterparts to that vernacular are rejected also – especially when they command a landscape where millions of New Yorkers see them daily. Vulcan, a writer from Harlem, explains:

The whole meaning behind the art is that it's a communication language... My main thing is taking letters and distorting them, changing them, mutating them. It's about evolving the alphabet. Just because somebody said this is the way it's supposed to be, it doesn't mean it has to be; you can individualise the alphabet. You can make it your own.

Many writers recall the long hours in public school, being taught to write 'correctly' by copying line after line of academic script. Out of boredom, out of a need to create, writers rebelled against this type of rote 'learning' which is designed to train students for subservient jobs, where following a dull routine is required. Phase 2 recalls:

I was totally bored with what I was being taught in school. To me it was tired. Even in elementary school it was tired. Ages ago I abandoned what they taught us in text books. I always found a need

to do something different. I used to be able to print so perfectly that the script was just retarded. Even writing with the left hand looked better than printing the way that they taught us.

Sharp recalls how writers abstracted the alphabet to redefine it:

We have for years been doing variations of the alphabet that we were taught in school, and elaborated on that to be Wild Style, and other things we were painting on the trains. They became more and more illegible, so that it is an 'attack' or a 'redefinition'.

Writers' redefinition of the alphabet was simultaneous with their creation of a written language that is the basis of their own culture. Vulcan says:

When the trains were running with paintings, kids would stand out there all day, and they could read everything that went by, even the complicated Wild Style. Yet people that ride the trains every day didn't have a clue to what it was, they just see the colours and the design. They don't realise that right there is communication going on. The writers and aficionados can see it, every car, every name, they can read. So it is a language in that respect. An underground language, not one that you would study in school, but a language none the less.

Living in the inner city, the majority of writers have little knowledge about their cultural heritage, where their ancestors came from and how they lived. Yet it is clear that an African-American cultural heritage provides a base from which many writers construct and improvise their pieces. In Spar's words:

The media makes a form like this seem totally new, yet it is connected to our history. You listen to Cab Calloway, if that's not Hip Hop, then ... what is? It's not like somebody saw some Africans dance and then created burning (an early form of break dancing). It just developed. It was not self-conscious. It's related to the group effort. It's related to ancient days, the dancers, the people scratching records like the old drummers, and the artists, who decorated houses and made costumes.

Whether consciously partaking in African-American traditions or not, many writers work within cultural sensibilities that have been passed down for generations in the Caribbean and the United States.

By creating a visual art form using the interaction of motion, word and rhythm, writers have transformed the dance, voice and drum rhythms Spar speaks of into visual elements. Some writers describe the stylised letters as human forms in motion, an image heightened by the movement of the trains. The human voice becomes visual in the 'shout' of the name riding across the city-scape on elevated trains, and the

musical metre becomes the rhythmic patterns used to structure aerosol paintings.

Visual rhythm shapes the letters writers use to spell their names and statements. Re-inventing the Roman alphabet to project African-American ideas of rhythmic style, some master painters have developed scripts with dancing characters, rhythmically pulsing and coming to life with the movement of the trains. Listen to Lee:

Have you ever seen Wild Style? The letters are movements. They are actually images of people. The way some Rs are styled, they look like they're dancing. Some of the letters look like they're hitting each other, and the Fs, they look like they're trotting along. And the movement of the trains brings them to life. It's an instantaneous communication. It's not only that you're saying 'Yah, I'm Bad because I did some Wild Style'; some of the writers were expressing their spirit ... in the 70s you were considered nasty if you could make Wild Style lettering that was unreadable to even writers. But I think writers didn't look and see what kind of figure was being created from the painting. Because it wasn't letters any more, there's something else in there. It's not words, it's not a name any more, it's more of a living thing that you have created, because every letter has a character to itself, and the writing on the subways definitely showed that. The way some of the letters were trucking, and some of them looked like they were dancing across the cars. And that's why the paintings did come to life when the cars moved, and the movement was a big part of it. Art in motion. It brought a whole spectrum of colour and meaning to it. But it's done unconsciously.

Phase 2 creates complex structural designs, like visualisations of jazz improvisations. He does this by building off the lines created by letters, making visual rhythms. In this way, his letters are no longer phonetic symbols but have been expanded into abstract ideas. He says:

Language to me is infinite. If somebody created it, you can create yours. English is just semi-relevant. Words have just been made up [and applied arbitrarily]. If there is a god, he didn't make these words, and say this is officially this, and this is all it can be. Twenty-six letters aren't enough for me. To me, letters are nothing but tools to go beyond to something else.

Letters are structures that you can build off of. Do you look at a building and say, 'What does this building mean?' – or do you say, 'That's a beautiful building'? Do you have to be able to read hieroglyphics to be able to appreciate them? I can relate to hieroglyphics as a form, and the form relates back to me in terms of my African (Alkebu-lan)* roots. I don't sit there trying to figure out what it

* 'Land of the Blacks', according to Phase 2.

says. It has poetry of motion just being there.

Many of my letters tell a story, they are always moving forward. They almost represent motion, and almost represent individuals. It's not even a theory: I look at them and that's what I see.

In his raps, recording artist Kool Moe Dee displays a parallel attitude of building rhythmic images with language, of using letters and words as structures. His attitude towards language reveals a close relationship of rhythmic rapping to aerosol rhythmic lettering, of individual style in spoken language to innovation in complex Wild Style signatures:

I don't write I build a rhyme
I draw plans draft the diagrams
An architect in effect.²

* * *

The injection of rhythm into the Roman alphabet is one facet of the creole process developed by subway painters. The way writers creolise images of super heroes and self-created characters into their signatures is yet another. According to Lee:

Many paintings with characters were like self-portraits of the writers. A painting was more than just a name, writers probably wanted to take a look at themselves when the train rolled by, they wanted to get as close to looking at themselves as they could. It was a mirror in a way.

One of the original pop culture symbols used on the trains was 'the Saint' icon from the TV show of the same name. Used by Stay High 149, aka Voice of the Ghetto, it suggested the sleekness, intelligence and secretive powers of a world-class undercover agent. Some writers gained fame by associating their names with popular icons. Others visualised their self-images and sources of personal power by depicting original symbols related to their ethnic heritages. Phase 2 has incorporated ancient Egyptian symbols into his work:

I paint profiles in some of my work. Some people might say they're Egyptian, but they're not really, yet they go back to my roots. It's instinctive. In fact, since I was a kid, the relationship with Egypt and Africa, subconsciously, was right there. I remember a cartoon with Bugs Bunny, and my man Bugs had an Egyptian head-dress on, and he's doing the King Tut [dance]. It blew my mind. I've always said that I'll go to Egypt and there's going to be some ancient statue that will resemble me. I know this. People can believe what they want, but the spirit never dies.

Co-Co 144, of Puerto Rican descent, has integrated Taino ritual images into his signature.

I have incorporated many meanings into my name, and the way I incorporated the Taino petroglyphs into my signature is one of them. The continued use of writing my name in my paintings is important to me. Although the letters are now an abstract form, the name is still there. It's in the face of the embryo I painted in some of the Taino paintings I did.

When I was painting the Taino works, I was feeling that I wanted to express myself and my culture in a certain way. Since I was in Puerto Rico, where these petroglyphs were created, it was a way for me to introduce my work. And it was a new experience for Puerto Ricans to see urban, aerosol art. At the time, I didn't make a conscious connection between the Taino paintings and aerosol as underground work, but it's funny that my work evolved from the underground subways, and then here I'm combining it with something that was done 700 years ago that was also done underground. It's like history repeating itself.

Writers testify to the reality of their lives through their art. Ezo, one of the few aerosol painters to write a manifesto outlining the underlying political concerns of many inner-city painters, states that:

Phase 2, Sharp, Lady Pink, Futura 2000 and others are some of the few artists who share a common idea: to use their anger to chip away at the misconceptions that are woven in our daily lives to entrap and confuse. What are these misconceptions? To begin with, the idea that our society has the ability to repair itself in its present condition; that our situation is tolerable and will continue to be so if it's left alone.

Protest and self-affirmation are inherent in both the music and visual art of this inner-city renaissance. Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five came out with 'The Message', 'Survival' and 'New York, New York'. Melle Mel rapped the apocalyptic 'World War III', with lines like 'War is a game of business', and 'Nobody hears what the people say'. Writers painted names like 'Cries of the Ghetto', 'Slave' and 'Spartacus', and eventually dominated the subway system with whole car paintings depicting the violence of their lives: images of guns, gangsters, and political statements like 'Hang Nixon!' abounded. Subconscious though it may sometimes have been, the large-scale, collective motivations of writing culture reflected some of the important issues of the day. Jon-One says:

Aerosol is definitely something from the era of the sixties and seventies. It was a very rebellious time in history. The first generation of writers, Miko's generation, they were going outside and tagging on ice cream trucks when everybody else was rebelling against riding on the back of the buses. They had the Vietnam war protests, JFK was president. From those times until now, aerosol has become an established art form.

The anger and frustration youth felt around them from their parents and communities, the resilience and hope for new possibilities that came with the emergence of new Black, Latin and native American consciousness, were translated into a green light for artists without tools, without canvas, to paint it loud, to create their art, by any means necessary. The 'subterranean guerrilla artists', as Lee calls them, invaded the city's nerve centre, the subways. Painter and gallery curator Renny Molenaar reflects:

Graffiti is the one way, the only way that we have made our presence felt. Whether it's the art or the tagging. The government has always acted as if we don't exist here. Millions and millions of us [Latinos] have migrated here, and the black people who have been here for centuries. They make believe that we don't exist. Third World people. You walk into the trains and wham!, you know our presence is here. We are not present in business, the government, in the movies. We were no where, with some exceptions. This is one of the few ways to make our presence known.

Co-Co 144 gives us his perspective:

I knew all those [political movements] were going on. Although I didn't understand why Puerto Ricans were living in exile and marginalised, I could feel the pressures of the environment. Society started conditioning people to believe the stigma that a Puerto Rican is a dishwasher, or a Black is a shoe-shiner. Unconsciously that is one of the reasons that we wrote. You go downtown today and you see that most of the doormen are Puerto Ricans or Dominican. I think that growing up and seeing these things, we wanted to express ourselves and say hey, 'This is Co-Co and this is what I'm about, and I'm not going to be another waiter or a dishwasher.' Unconsciously it was a way of screaming out and saying, 'This is me, and I'm not your household door man!'

Lee saw his paintings as an avenue to awaken the deadened spirits and the repressed sensibilities of New Yorkers. He saw himself as a Pied Piper in an anti-imperial struggle:

I call writing 'Silent Thunder', because it is something that lays dormant in everyone. Everyone has an expression to let out, and some people know how to vent it. It's like a thunder, that wants to just pound, 'Boom!', but it's quiet.

Writing is very spiritual to me. I look on the subway cars themselves, literally, as a part of my message. They are the central nervous system of the city, you know, I'm able to contact a lot of people through those subways. Just looking at those monsters, made of steel, they are like slaves. They are just sitting – waiting, for the imperialistic country to bring its clones to its factories to pump out more bombs.

In retrospect, Lee regards his paintings as an attempt at readjusting the distorted values of its downtown corporate workers:

You know what it was? We infiltrated a system that was so sick of itself, a system that festered on itself, that is destroying itself ... in other words, we threw colour into a grey wall, we took a brick, cracked it in half, threw paint at it, and put it back together again. That's what happened. We broke a mould. We literally cut into a fixed society, a fixed way of living – people take the train, go to work, go to the movies, go to bed – day in and day out – then whole car murals came in front of you, and they're not normal. They make you start to think, well, who *is* normal? Is it the ones that are painting the trains, who are really expressing themselves and able to be free to do something like that in such a moulded system?

Several writers recall the joy they found in painting, simply because it was done for free. Many subway paintings were created as a public gift, a rare thing in a society where even the earth, the water and time itself are bought and sold. From the Upper West Side, Jon-One says:

It kept me going every single week, wanting to paint another train, wanting to make people happy to ride the train. You walk around the city and everything costs money, everything is expensive, and here you ride the train, somebody's painting on it for free. It's bugged out!

To this day, many resist categorisation by the art dealers and gallery owners, refusing to gear their work to a consumer market. Co-Co 144 speaks about United Graffiti Artists (now United Urban Artists), the first organised group of writers, and how they resisted cooptation:

When we got organised at UGA, this awareness developed about who we were, what we were about, and how to value ourselves. Because to a certain extent we were labelled as 'those ghetto kids'. When you value yourself you begin to value the things you do.

We did have offers from certain companies, and we felt at that time, of not selling out, of not becoming another Peter Max. We didn't want to get involved in one commercial product and then in all kinds of products and commercial companies that want to play you out and then – there goes your art.

For example, we were offered something by a carpeting mill. They wanted to do carpets with names on it. We wondered: where they would put a carpet with a name on it? It would be a fad, with matching curtains – 'Make your house look like a subway station'. Why do that? What's more important – money, or the integrity of your art? We wanted to be fine artists. We wanted to keep the content of our art.

* * *

Through the organisation of art dealers in the early 1980s, many subway painters became famous as 'graffiti' artists in New York City and, eventually, in Europe. Here the work was captured on canvas; the motion of the train paintings was halted. The art became 'westernised', and acceptable to the upper strata of society. Lady Pink writes:

There seems to be considerable contradiction between the nature of what was produced by the 70s graffiti writers and what is now being created by the 80s artists.

Painting on canvas or a gallery's walls removes the element of risk, of getting one's name around, of interaction with one's peers and one's potential younger rivals. The pieces in galleries cease to be graffiti because they have been removed from the cultural context that gives graffiti the reason for being, a voice of the ghetto.

Authentic graffiti cannot exist in the sanctuary provided by the galleries and museums.³

Some collectors had tags painted on their living room walls; others hung canvases in their homes depicting painted subway cars. Some artists who had little or no connection with writers and their culture became famous as 'graffiti' painters. Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Sharf and Keith Haring became known to international audiences as representatives of the culture. Yet the more they painted, the less the public knew anything at all about subway painting culture. Jon-One says:

Look at the whole hypocrite scene, you don't have to be blind. Who made the whole spray can movement? Yet in the multi-million dollar business, who is recognised as aerosol writers? Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, and they never even painted trains. And you talk about graffiti to anybody, and they go, 'Oh ya, I know Keith Haring, he does really nice graffiti.' He never even painted a train, you know?

But Phase 2, a working-class person who cares for the integrity of his art more than for money, rejected many gallery offers. He reflects:

We created an art form that came from the letter. The medium that it belongs on is the subway. There is nothing that can compare to it being on the trains. What's so crazy is that these guys deny their history to jump into something that's easier, for the dollars. They deny their birthright. It didn't come from outer space or the galleries. It can be shown in galleries, but that's for the advancement of art, to educate. It belongs on the trains.

Writers like Phase 2 were also culturally unprepared to deal with the gallery business world. They couldn't just paint one hundred pieces for a certain date to fill an order. They were young, capricious and rebellious, not ready to fit their work 'into' a market. Haring, on the other hand, was middle class, and culturally prepared to pick up on

what galleries wanted. For him, aerosol painting was one style among many, that he could accept or reject in his work as gallery demands changed. Writers like Phase have no choice about accepting or rejecting their culture because it's an integral part of their identity.

Disregarded by, disillusioned about, or simply uninterested in the galleries, many artists continue to this day to develop and paint new styles in their barrios. Says Kase Two:

There's always going to be plenty of more styles to come. I've got Futuristic Style already in my mind. Just by looking out my window [from the tenth floor of a project building in the South Bronx] and seeing all that stuff out there, that gives me ideas. Seeing everything, the bridge, the buildings, the trees, the antennas, the pipes and the poles on the roofs. Everything I look at gives me an idea, but I keep it as an abstract ... I can get an idea for a signature from looking out at the city.

After a ten-year campaign to erase all train paintings, in 1988 the MTA succeeded. Using razor-tipped fences, guard dogs and a police force, the Transit Authority kept writers from the trains. Thus, writers began to paint walls and canvases to keep their form alive. Meanwhile, through picture books and video tapes made about original subway painters, young artists from Europe, Australia and New Zealand now take inspiration from New York masterpieces. Says Vulcan:

While the trains are now clean here in New York, all over the world there are thousands of kids who do this art, and they get attention and shows, and are being hailed as artists in their own countries. This is in Australia, England, Norway, Denmark, California, New Zealand. I get letters from all over the world. Sometimes I just look at my mail and don't believe it. A few years ago, nobody in Australia had ever heard about subway paintings in New York, and now I'm getting letters and phone calls from there! It's a worldwide thing. We, the writers from New York City, gave other writers from around the world a programme to follow.

References

- 1 This article is based on taped interviews with aerosol painters in New York City from 1987 to 1992. The author wishes to thank Jill Cutler for her generosity and help.
- 2 Kool Moe Dee, 'I go to work' from the album *Knowledge is King* (Zomba Recording Corp., 1989).
- 3 Catalogue for 'Stoopid Fresh: Queens & Hip Hop Culture' (New York, Jamaica Arts Center, 1989-90).

CLARENCE LUSANE

Rap, race and politics

'Whatever may be the conditions of a people's political and social factors ... it is generally within the culture that we find the seed of opposition, which leads to the structuring and development of the liberation movement.' – *Amilcar Cabral*¹

For many black youths in the United States, in the words of the classic song by War, the world is a ghetto. Trapped in and witness to cycles of violence, destitution and lives of desperation, their aspirations and views find expression in political behaviour, social practice, economic activities and cultural outlets. These streams came together and informed a culture of resistance that has been termed Hip Hop whose most dynamic expression is in the form of rap music. On the one hand, rap is the voice of alienated, frustrated and rebellious black youth who recognise their vulnerability and marginality in post-industrial America. On the other hand, rap is the packaging and marketing of social discontent by some of the most skilled ad agencies and largest record producers in the world. It's this duality that has made rap and rappers an explosive issue in the politics of power that shaped the 1992 US elections and beyond. It's also this duality that has given rap its many dimensions and flavours; its spiralling matrix of empowerment and reaction.

Influenced by a tradition of oral leaders and artists, from Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Nikki Giovanni to Gil Scott Heron and the Last Poets, young black cultural activists evolved from the urban

Clarence Lusane is a free-lance journalist, activist and lecturer, living in Washington DC, and author of *Pipe Dream Blues: racism and the war on drugs* (Boston, South End Press, 1991).

Race & Class, 35, 1 (1993)

cosmos of the early 1980s ready for rap. Denied opportunity for more formal music training and access to instruments due to Reagan-era budget cuts in education and school music programmes, turntables became instruments and lyrical acrobatics became a cultural outlet. Initially underground, by the late 1980s, rap and the broad spectrum of Hip Hop had become the dominant cultural environment of young African-Americans, particularly males.

Following the historic example of the cultural modes of the civil rights and Black Power movements, rap has had an international impact. Just as the Vietnamese sang civil rights freedom songs, so have the political imperatives of rap traversed the globe and found expression in venues from Mexico to India. In Czechoslovakia, local rappers rap about the struggle of being young and penniless. Wearing baseball caps and half-laced sneakers, youth in the Ivory Coast have found a bond in the music. Australian rappers kick it about the mistreatment of the Aborigine people. Tributes to the victims of US atomic bombs form the substance of local rappers in Japan.²

The cultural power of rap as global protest music is undeniable. To understand the genesis of this power, however, requires a return to the source. It is rap's impact on the economics, politics and gender issues in the African-American community that must be examined, if only briefly, to sense its significance, possibilities and contradictions. The enemies of rap, as one observer noted, have gone after 'the message, the messenger and the medium'.³ And it is not just whites who have dismissed and criticised rap. As Salim Muwakkil wrote in *In These Times*, 'for many middle-class black Americans, rap is ... a soundtrack for sociopaths'.⁴

Hip Hop capitalism

From slave town to Motown, from Bebop to Hip Hop, black music has been shaped by the material conditions of black life. Contextually, today's black youth culture flows out of the changes that affected the political economy of US capitalism over the last two decades. Incremental economic and social gains made in the late 1960s and the 1970s were destroyed with a vengeance in the Reagan and Bush years. Many observers of black politics saw the handwriting on the wall when Reagan came into power. In 1982, political writer Manning Marable prophesied:

The acceleration of black unemployment and underemployment, the capitulation of many civil rights and Black Power leaders to the Right, the demise of militant black working-class institutions and caucuses, and the growing dependency of broad segments of the black community upon public assistance programmes and transfer

payments of various kinds; these interdependent realities within the contemporary black political economy are the beginning of a new and profound crisis for black labor in America.⁵

Thus, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the material basis for the production and reproduction of black youth alienation is the growing immiseration of millions of African-American working-class families. Between 1986 and 1992, according to the Census Bureau, an additional 1.2 million African-Americans fell below the poverty line.⁶ As stunning as that may be, the Bush administration achieved the same result in half the time. A report issued by the Children's Defense Fund documents that 841,000 youth fell into poverty in the first two years of the Bush administration, affecting, in some cities, as many as two-thirds of minority children.⁷ The official poverty rate for blacks is 32.7 per cent, 10.2 million people, which is higher than for Hispanics (28.7 per cent), Asians (13.8 per cent), or whites (11.3 per cent).⁸

Most critical, however, has been the unemployment situation of African-American youth and what has happened to black youth economically over the last three decades. Since 1960, black youth suffered the largest decline in employment of all component groups of all races. In 1986, in the middle of the Republican years, black teenage unemployment was officially as high as 43.7 per cent. In October 1992, six years later, the numbers remained virtually unchanged, with black youth unemployment officially at 42.5 per cent.⁹ One does not have to agree with the rantings and rage of Ice T, Sister Souljah or other rappers to unite with their sense of isolation, anger and refusal to go down quietly. Ignored and 'dissed' by both major political parties and much of what passes for national black leadership, is it any wonder that Ice Cube reflects the views of so many youth when he sings:

Do I have to sell me a whole lot of crack
For decent shelter and clothes on my back?
Or should I just wait for President Bush
Or Jesse Jackson and Operation PUSH?¹⁰

It was, then, perfectly logical that Hip Hop culture should initially emerge most strongly in those cities hardest hit by Reaganomics with large minority youth populations – New York, Los Angeles, Houston and Oakland. For many of these youth, rap became not only an outlet for social and political discourse, but also an economic opportunity that required little investment other than boldness and a competitive edge. In a period when black labour was in low demand, if one could not shoot a basketball like Michael Jordan, then the entertainment industry was one of the few legal avenues available for the get-rich consciousness that dominated the social ethos of the 1980s.

Rap music is big business. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, in

1990 rap brought in \$600 million;* in 1991, sales rose to about \$700 million.¹¹ 2 Live Crew's *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, the subject of law suits and arrests, sold more than two million copies. In their debut album, *Straight Outta Compton*, NWA sold over a million copies and followed that up in 1992 by breaking all sales records with their *Efil4zaggin* (Niggaz 4 life spelled backwards) album. The album sold an unprecedented 900,000 copies in its first week of release and later went on to sell millions.¹²

Rap is attractive because it requires generally low-investment costs for the corporations. According to one producer, a rap album can be produced for less than \$50,000, while an equivalent album for an established rock group or popular R&B group can cost \$100,000-300,000. And while rap artists are signed with a bewildering frenzy, they are also dropped more rapidly than musicians from other music forms. If an artist or group doesn't do well within the first six to eight weeks of their release, they are often sent packing.

Annually, young black consumers, aged 15-24, spend about \$23 billion a year in the United States, of which about \$100 million is spent on records and tapes.¹³ African-Americans, however, are not the main purchasers of rap as, increasingly, rap is being bought by non-blacks. A survey taken in mid-1992 found that 74 per cent of rap sold in the first six months of that year was bought by whites.¹⁴ This is one reason why every major record company and communications conglomerate, from Sony to Atlantic, has made significant investments in rap music.

For many rappers, Hip Hop capitalism promises both riches and racial integrity. Rappers found that they could yell at the system and be paid (highly) by it at the same time. A legitimate desire and need for economic empowerment could be turned into profit with only minor ideological adjustments and rationalisations about 'free speech' by capital. Some of those who have been the target of censorship, such as rapper Ice T, would argue that free enterprise will only let free speech go so far. As he says in his song 'Freedom of Speech':

Freedom of Speech

That's some mutherfuckin' bullshit

You say the wrong thing

They'll lock your ass up quick

In the laissez-faire capitalist atmosphere that dominated the early years of modern rap, a number of black entrepreneurs were able to enter the business and become highly successful. Queen Latifah's

* In that year, two rap albums alone – admittedly from the 'soft' end of the spectrum – Hammer's *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em* and the white group, Vanilla Ice's, *To the Extreme* sold 14 million copies just in the United States, while the hard-hitting Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet* and Digital Underground's *Sex Packets* also sold over a million each.

Flavor Unit Management and Records is home to popular groups such as Nikki D, Black Sheep, D Nice, Pete Rock & CL Smooth and Naughty By Nature.

No one better symbolises the contradictory aspirations of the rappers than Russell Simmons and his phenomenal achievements with Rush Communications and its rap label, Def Jam. By any estimation, Rush Communications is huge. Home to top rap groups such as Public Enemy, Run DMC and Big Daddy Kane and producer of the highly-rated, hip hopish cable comedy series Def Comedy Jam, Simmons has transformed what was essentially a small basement operation into a \$34 million conglomerate. Rap artists at Rush have earned ten gold records, six platinum records, and two multiplatinum records. Plans are afoot to expand the conglomerate into film production and even sell public stock. Rush Communications is the thirty-second largest black-owned business in the United States and the second largest black-owned entertainment company.¹⁵

As CEO, Simmons earns an estimated \$5 million annually. Usually attired in sneakers, sweatsuits and baseball caps, Simmons is a major driving force behind the music and in attacking the racist structures of the popular music business that have historically reduced the role of African-American to that of powerless entertainer.

Simmons' success and efforts are as laudable as they are remarkable. They do not represent, however, a break from the economic system that is responsible for the misery that forms the substance of the music that Rush produces. The commodification of black resistance is not the same as resistance to a society built upon commodification. Rap artists, even those who obtained some level of economic power and independence, are still slaves to a market system that requires an economic elite and mass deprivation.

It's critical to note that it has been more than just the multinational recording industry that has benefited from the reduction of black culture to the circumscribed limits of Hip Hop. The alcohol, tennis shoe, clothing, hat and film industries have boomed as a result of the new markets that have opened up or expanded, based on the spread of Hip Hop and the often exploitative use of rap artists in advertising.

Alcohol companies, already complicit in the disproportionate targeting of the black community for liquor sales, were quick to front rap stars to sell their product. * Ice Cube, Eric B. & Rakim, EPMD, the Geto Boys, Compton's Most Wanted, Yo! MTV Rap's Fab Freddie and Yo-Yo – who was not even drinking age at the time – were all used

* One group that did not buy into the hype was Public Enemy. After McKenzie River Corp illegally used PE's Chuck D's voice in one of their commercials, PE went on the offensive and denounced malt liquor sales, sued the company for \$5 million and recorded a song, 'One Million Bottlebags', criticising the practice of selling the brew mainly in the black community.¹⁶

to sell highly potent malt liquor. Sexually-suggestive scripts also attempted to convince consumers that malt liquors are aphrodisiacs. Yo-Yo would moan that St Ides Malt Liquor 'puts you in the mood [and] makes you wanna go oooh'. Ice Cube claimed that with St Ides you could 'get your girl in the mood quicker' and that the beverage would make your 'jimmy thicker'. The alcohol content of St Ides, Elephant, Magnum, Crazy Horse, Olde English 800, Red Bull Malt Liquor, PowerMaster and other malt beers is greater than regular beer – nearly twice as great in some cases. Malt beer accounts for only about 3 per cent of all beer sold, yet more than 30 per cent of its sales are in the black community.

This exploitation of these rappers' popularity was denounced by community activists and black health advocates around the country. Makani Themba of the Marin Institute in California pointed out astutely that the beer companies were 'appropriating a very important part of our culture to sell what is a dangerous product for many of these kids'.¹⁷

Rap's impact on the Hollywood film industry has also been significant. Across the spectrum, rap has found its way into the soundtrack and themes of movies both big and small. Black films, in particular, have been built around the symbols of Hip Hop and black resistance, even as the substance of most of the films has retained a profound commitment and defence of middle-class, bourgeois culture and values.

Official Hollywood has produced an avalanche of films targeted at the black community in the last few years that have run the gamut from gratuitously violent action dramas, such as 'New Jack City' and 'Trespass', to absurdly embarrassing comedies, such as 'True Identity' and 'Sister Act'. Spike Lee, who embodies much of Hip Hop's contradictory strengths and weaknesses, along with other black directors, actors and producers, has challenged the standard fare and attempted to create a new generation of black films that honestly reflect black youth culture.

Hollywood has been willing to produce both these types of films for a very simple reason: with a relatively small investment there is the potential for large returns. While African-Americans constitute only about 12 per cent of the US population, they make up about 25 per cent of the movie-going audience.¹⁸ John Singleton's 'Boyz n' the Hood', for example, which starred rapper Ice Cube, cost about \$6 million to produce and raised at least \$57 million. This translates into a profit of roughly \$51 million. 'House Party (I)', by the Hudlin Brothers, starring rappers Kid 'N Play, cost a paltry, by Hollywood standards, \$2.5 million and brought in \$26 million in revenue for a cool \$23.5 million in profits. Spike Lee's 'Jungle Fever' cost about \$13 million and raised \$31 million in sales. The dirt cheap 'Straight Outta Brooklyn' cost \$327,000 and brought back \$2,173,000.¹⁹

In all of these films and many more, the background music is rap and Hip Hop is the atmosphere in which mainly moral tales are told and the politics of liberalism are preached. From Public Enemy to Digital Underground to Arrested Development, every genre of rap is represented. Many rappers are finding it a smooth move from rapping to acting. The Ices, T and Cube, are the most active of the rapper-actor set, but are being followed closely by Queen Latifah, the Fresh Prince, Kid 'N Play, 2Pac and LL Cool J, all of whom have made movies and television appearances.

The political economy of Hip Hop, i.e., its capacity to open markets, maximise profits and commodify legitimate grief and unrest, is the material basis that drives it forward. However, the nature of Hip Hop, its political soul, is to provoke and agitate.

Fear of a black planet: the politics of provocation

Nightmare. That's what I am
America's nightmare
I am what you made me
The hate and evil that you gave me...
America, reap what you sow.

– 2Pac

The dominant ideological trend of the rappers is black nationalism. Universally wedded to the notion that black leadership, for the most part, has sold out, the black nationalist rhetoric of Hip Hop becomes a challenging and liberating political paradigm in the face of surrender on the part of many political forces in the black community. While there are leftist rappers, such as the Disposal Heroes of Hiphoprisy and KRS-One, who to some extent embody Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition notion of politics, most range from the soft-core nationalism of Arrested Development to the hard-core nationalist influenced raps of the political and gangsta rappers.

In particular, minister Louis Farrakhan and his Nation of Islam have had tremendous influence on the political views of black youth, in general, and of rappers, more specifically. Ice Cube, for example, joined the organisation, stating that, 'To me, the best organisation around for black people is the Nation of Islam'.²⁰ And a whole set of Muslim rappers has come on the scene. This includes groups such as Brand Nubian, Poor Righteous Teachers, King Sun, Movement Ex and Paris, who created his own mini-controversy when he wrote the song 'Bush Killer' – the title of which should be explanation enough.

Other nationalist groups and movements have also emerged, such as the hard-core cultural nationalist Blackwatch movement, centred in New York, which sees itself as building a national black youth

movement. It is spearheaded by the group X-Clan and includes other rappers such as Isis, Professor X and Queen Mother Rage.

In modern rap, Public Enemy (PE) is the leading, though by no means only, force espousing a black nationalist ideology. Public Enemy's Chuck D, recognised by many as the leader of radical rap, calls Hip Hop music 'black folks' CNN'.²¹ Although many newer and more provocative rappers have come on the scene, PE can still be controversial with the best of them and maintains its reputation as the 'Black Panthers' of rap²² – for example, with the release in 1992 of its 'By the Time I Get to Arizona' rap and video. In Arizona, the reactionary former Republican governor, Evan Mecham, had rescinded the state holiday celebrating the birthday of Revd Martin Luther King Jr. This made it virtually the only state in the nation that did not officially honour King. Indeed, Mecham went as far as to state that 'King didn't deserve a holiday and that blacks needed jobs more than another day off'. Boycotts and protests over the issue cost the state an estimated \$360 million.

In Public Enemy's video, a white governor is blown to bits by a car bomb, a white state senator is poisoned and members of the state legislature are gunned down. Chuck D's song leaves no mistaking his intent: 'I'm on the one mission to get a politician', he says, and 'until we get some land, call me the trigger man'. Coretta Scott King denounced both PE and the video: 'We do not subscribe to violence as a way to achieve any social or economic ends.' PE was also soundly condemned by other civil rights leaders both inside and outside Arizona.

In interviews, Chuck D stated that he viewed King as far more militant by the time of his death than he is generally portrayed as being, both by the media and by civil rights leaders. Chuck D claimed that if King were alive today, he would probably be referred to as 'Martin Luther King Farrakhan'.²³

Rap's rage interjected itself into the world of black politics in 1992 in other ways. Its most celebrated entrance into black political life occurred when the then presidential candidate, Bill Clinton, shot a stinging criticism at rapper Sister Souljah for provocative remarks attributed to her following the Los Angeles uprising. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Souljah is reported to have said, 'I mean if black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people.'²⁴ Although she said that the statement had been taken out of context, and subsequent examination of the full text of her interview seems to support her contention, her remarks set off a firestorm of white protest and a wave of black defensiveness. Both Clinton and Souljah had been invited to speak (a day apart) at a meeting of Jesse Jackson's National Rainbow Coalition. Jackson was taken to task by Clinton for inviting Souljah to speak – he went as far as to equate her with the racist demagogue, David Duke.

Most black observers asserted that Clinton bludgeoned Jackson with Souljah in order to win back to the Democrats white support that had fled to the Republicans over the last several elections. Although Reagan and Bush had played the race card effectively in their previous campaigns, Clinton's move appeared to be a preemptive strike. As one reporter noted, 'Move over Willie Horton. Sister Souljah has arrived.'²⁵ While it may be some exaggeration to say that Clinton owed his triumph to Souljah, he received more media attention for his willingness to make a calculated attack on her and Jackson than he did for his pleas for racial harmony. His rise in the polls, particularly and almost exclusively among whites, in June and July of 1992, was due in no small part to this tactical hit. While blacks responded negatively to the attack by three to one, whites, by three to one, showed a favourable response.²⁶

But while many in the Hip Hop and black communities denounced Clinton, at least one rapper found some common ground with the new president. Clinton (and his vice president Al Gore) could be seen during the inaugural festivities rocking to the rhymes of long-time, popular rapper LL Cool J. Illustrating the way in which form can be divorced from content, Cool J delivered the following conciliatory rap:

'93 unity, you and me
time to party with Big Bil and Hillary...
We're making history, a landslide victory
Raise the flag, blast the mag, let the plane fly
Pack the bags and tell George and Barbara Bush bye.²⁷

Gangsta rap

Much of rap's political pedagogy comes from the so-called gangsta rappers. Dismissed by many as vulgar, profane, misogynist, racist, anti-Semitic and juvenile – accusations that carry a great deal of validity – gangsta rap, at the same time, reflects and projects what scholar Robin D.G. Kelley calls 'the lessons of lived experiences'.²⁸ In a sense, Cube, NWA, Too Short, the Geto Boys and others are the 'organic intellectuals' of the inner-city black poor, documenting as they do their generally hidden conditions and life-style choices. Naughty by Nature's 'Ghetto Bastard' is a captivating and engrossing piece of verbal literature and sociology. This autobiographical tale of a black male teenager's urban experience is a brilliant exposition of what Foucault has termed the 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges'. The song is rich in a wide array of themes – absent ghetto fathers, the attractiveness of lumpen activities, the racist assumptions of the education system, the vicissitudes of consumer culture, dilapidated housing and the ever-present threat of violence – that reflect an experience that is collectively endured, daily, by millions of African-

Americans. It's social anthropology with rhythm. Naughty by Nature's Treach projects the anger and frustration of many when he raps,

Say somethin' positive, well positive ain't where I live
I live right around the corner from West Hell
Two blocks from South Shit and once in a jail cell²⁹

An examination of today's rap songs quickly demonstrates that the principal topic of the music is the social crisis engulfing working-class black America. Unlike the moralistic preaching, escapism or sentimentality that defines most popular music, including the moderated rap of Hammer, hard-core rappers detail the unemployment, mis-education, discrimination, homicides, gang life, class oppression, police brutality and regressive gender politics that dominate the lives of many black youth. The macho boasting, misogyny, violent fantasies and false consciousness exist side by side with an immature, but clear, critique of authority, a loathing of the oppressive character of wage labour, a hatred of racism and an exposé of Reaganism.

Many rappers, for example, address the racist character of the nation's war on drugs. Although blacks make up only about 15 per cent of the nation's drug users, they are close to 50 per cent of those arrested on drug charges, mainly for possession. The drug war's collateral damage continues to grow in what one senate committee calls a '\$32 billion failure'.³⁰ Raps like NWA's 'Dope Man', Ice T's 'New Jack Hustler', Ice Cube's 'The Product' and CPO's 'The Wall' all expose the bankruptcy of the war on drugs and its deadly impact on the black community. And Houston's Geto Boys, notorious for their brutal depictions of women, address the contradictions of drug dealing in their hit 'Mind Playing Tricks on Me'. Pinpointing the anxiety and frustration of a young drug dealer, the song struggles to find a human character in what has become a media stereotype. They state in one passage:

Can't keep a steady hand
Because I'm nervous
Every Sunday morning, I'm in service
Praying for forgiveness
And trying to find an exit out the business³¹

Debates over police brutality were also forced into the public arena as a result of rap songs. While the video of the Rodney King beating introduced many in the United States to the reality of police brutality in the black, the rap community noted that it had been discoursing about the issue for years. In his 1987 'Squeeze the Trigger', Ice T links the police attitude with police murders:

Cops hate kids, kids hate cops.
Cops kill kids with warnin' shots.³²

In a similar vein, NWA also addresses the issue of police brutality as well as the issues of racial oppression, violence, black-on-black crime, self-hatred, unemployment and human rights – often all in the same song. Their signature song, ‘F*** Tha Police’, embodies a street-felt rage that resonates through the entire national black community:

Fuck the police coming straight from the underground
A young nigger got it bad ’cause I’m brown
I’m not the other color
Some people think
They have the authority to kill a minority
Fuck that shit, ’cause I ain’t the one
For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun
to be beaten on, and thrown in jail³³

Other rappers also address what has become a virtually black-only experience: police shootings. In their ‘Behind Closed Doors’, W.C. and the MAAD Circle rhyme:

I’m being charged for resisting arrest
But it was either catch a bullet or be beaten to death³⁴

Or, in Ice Cube’s ‘Endangered Species’:

Every cop killer goes ignored
They just send another nigger to the morgue³⁵

Los Angeles, in particular, has been notorious for its police killings and for the way the police view the black community as a war zone. Under the leadership of the (now departed) police chief Daryl Gates, the LAPD viewed young blacks as unredeemable urban terrorists who were best kept locked up, contained or eliminated.*

In 1992, Ice T returned to this theme with his song ‘Cop Killer’, which generated a massive counter-reaction from conservative luminaries, such as George Bush, Dan Quayle, Oliver North and the National Rifle Association. His flight of fantasy this time, however, advocated a pro-active preventative measure:

I got my 12-gauge sawed off
I got my headlights turned off
I’m ’bout to bust some shot off
I’m ’bout to dust some cops off.
Cop killer, better you than me.
Cop killer, fuck police brutality.³⁷

* Under the cover of fighting the drug war, for example, LAPD initiated Operation Hammer which, time and time again, invaded the black community and, on 9 April 1988, arrested 1,453 young blacks.³⁶

Not surprisingly, there have been moves to censor rap. One organisation active in this is the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) founded by Tipper Gore (wife of vice-president Al Gore) and Susan Baker (wife of Bush's campaign manager, James Baker). In 1985, PMRC led the movement that forced congressional hearings on record labelling. Record companies succumbed to the pressure and began to put warning labels on rap and rock music felt to be obscene and too explicit. The first album to have a warning label placed on it was Ice T's *Rhyme Pays*. Evidence indicates that most of the groups targeted for labelling are black. In a 1989 newsletter put out by PMRC, every song listed as having warning labels was done by a black artist. Other groups calling for censorship of rap records have been more explicitly racist. Missouri Project Rock passed out information packets that criticised 'race-mixing' and called Martin Luther King 'Martin Lucifer King'.³⁸

Tipper Gore battled Ice T on the Oprah Winfrey show and wrote about it in the *Washington Post*. In an article titled 'Hate, rape and rap', she justifiably criticised some of the vile sexist statements made by rappers, particularly Ice T. In words that specifically seem to be addressed to Ice T, she said, 'We must raise our voices in protest and put pressure on those who not only reflect this hatred but also package, polish, promote and market it; those who would make words like "nigger" acceptable.'³⁹ In highly moral tones, she then unconvincingly attempted to make a link between rap music and rape.

One of Ice T's responses was to write a song, 'Freedom of Speech'. In the song, he attacks Gore personally. He says:

Think I give a fuck about a silly bitch named Gore?
Yo, PMRC, here we go, war!⁴⁰

The evil that men do: rap's phallo-centric musings

Gender issues in rap remain controversial. From its earliest days to the present, women and more than a few men have rightfully condemned much of rap music as misogynist and degrading to women. National Council of Negro Women president Dorothy Height states: 'This music is damaging because it is degrading to women to have it suggested in our popular music that [women] are to be abused.'⁴¹ Former head of the NAACP, Benjamin Hooks, echoes that sentiment. He says, in reference to the music, 'our [black] cultural experience does not include debasing women'.⁴²

Scholar Marilyn Lashley is uncompromising in her denunciation of the portrayal of women in rap music. It is 'explicitly and gratuitously sexual, occasionally bestial and frequently violent. These images, in the guise of "art and music", exploit, degrade and denigrate African-American women as well as the race. They encourage sexual harass-

ment, exploitation and misogyny at their best and sexual abuse at their worst', she states.⁴³

Others, mainly men, have defended these projections as part of a continuity in black culture that is not as harmful as it appears. No less than Harvard scholar and cultural critic Henry Louis Gates walks softly on this turf. He pooh-poohs the uproar by stating that the male rappers are playing out the old black tradition of 'signifying',⁴⁴ a practice that is relatively harmless and culturally important. Some have attempted to justify the degradation of women by arguing for the singular uplifting of black males. Ice Cube, for example, argued in an interview with Angela Davis that black women have to wait for black men to be uplifted first.⁴⁵

Rap has become a forum for debating the nature of gender relations among black youth. The name-calling, descriptions of graphic rapes and other negative encounters between young black women and men dominate the music's gender politics. For many of the rap groups, their songs are one long extended sex party. This aspect of the music has also drawn fire, though many of the male rappers have argued that they are engaging in meaningless fantasies. However, as one feminist correctly pointed out, it's 'not so much the issue of sex as an obsession, but that of sex as a violent weapon against women'. She goes on to say that songs like 'Treat Her Like a Prostitute', 'One Less Bitch', 'Pop that Coochie', 'Baby Got Back', 'Me So Horny', 'That Bitch Betta Have My Money' and 'She Swallowed It' 'not only desensitise their audiences to violence against women, they also help rationalise and reinforce a nihilistic mentality among those who already suffer from the effects of ghetto reality'.⁴⁶ The escalating incidence of rape and sexual harassment against women in general, and black women in particular, underscores her concerns.

A number of positive female rappers have emerged to challenge the musical and ideological dominance of the male rappers. Strong women, such as Queen Latifah, Monie Love, Queen Mother Rage, Isis and MC Lyte, have produced popular songs that have advocated positive relations among men and women, called for sisterhood and projected what scholar Patricia Hill Collins calls an 'Afrocentric feminist epistemology'.⁴⁷

In one of her first songs, 'Latifah's Law', Queen Latifah, who has also managed rap groups, makes it clear that she sees herself, and demands to be seen, as an equal to the male rappers:

The ladies will kick it, the rhyme is wicked
Those who don't know how to be pros get evicted
A woman can bear you, break you, take you
Now its time to rhyme. Can you relate to
A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream?⁴⁸

In addition, some rap male and gender-mixed groups, such as the Disposal Heroes of Hiphoprisy and Arrested Development, have shown that a positive perspective on black female and male relations is possible.

But, for every (social) action, there is an opposite and equal (social) reaction. Hard-core female rappers, such as Bytches With Problems, Nikki D, Hoes With an Attitude and LA Starr, have come on the scene and demonstrated that they can be as vulgar, blasphemous and homicidal as the men. BWP's Lyndah and Tanisha, whose records are distributed by mega-corp Columbia Records, have been called the 'Thelma and Louise' of rap.⁴⁹ In song after song, they gun down men, cops and anyone else who crosses or is perceived to have crossed their path. When they are not committing homicide, they are busy either screwing men to death or ripping them off. All the while, they hold high the banner of women's liberation.

In their song 'Shit Popper', they denounce women-beating by advising sisters to:

Wait until he goes to bed,
then give him three to the head,
leave his motherfucking ass for dead.⁵⁰

While addressing important themes, such as date rape and adultery, their solutions, more often than not, are to just blow the suckers away.

It is ironic that BWP, like many of the hard-core women's groups, are produced by men who also write many of the lyrics. That women producers and managers are far and few between is one of the main reasons why the music remains so misogynist. Progressive women rappers complain incessantly about how difficult it is for their music to be produced. Even some of the songs produced by the political, usually black nationalist, rappers run counter to women's liberation. While eschewing the violence and sexual exploitation of the hard-core gangsta rappers, groups such as Public Enemy and X-Clan will often project a romanticised notion of black womanhood that does not fundamentally challenge male domination. More critically, they will also use language that fundamentally reinforces the power relations of gender oppression.

* * *

As one scholar noted, for many, the rappers are 'urban griots dispensing social and cultural critiques'.⁵¹ While this may be true, the nature of those critiques is simultaneously both painfully naive and incredibly insightful; abjectly dehumanising and rich in human spirit. Rap's pedagogy, like the initial stages of all pedagogies of oppressed people, emerges incomplete, contradictory and struggling for coherence. If we

look closely, the birth and evolution of rap tell us as much about the current state of black America as rap's content and form.

At the same time, we must be careful not to reduce African-American culture to the commodities and political ambiguities of Hip Hop. Music forms, including jazz and blues and other non-Hip Hop cultural expression deserve criticism, reaffirmation and validation. In the end, Hip Hop is neither the cultural beast that will destroy black America nor the political panacea that will save it, but is a part of the ongoing African-American struggle constantly reaching for higher and higher modes of liberation.

References

- 1 Amilcar Cabral, 'National liberation and culture', in *Return to the Source* (New York, Africa Information Service, 1973), p.43.
- 2 See articles on rap worldwide by B. Bollag, K. Noble, J. Bernard and S. Weisman in *New York Times* (23 August 1992).
- 3 Robin Givhan, 'Of rap, racism and fear: why does this message music seem so menacing?', *San Francisco Chronicle* (6 August 1992).
- 4 Quoted in Kathleen M. Sullivan, '2 Live Crew and the cultural contradictions of Miller', *Reconstruction* (Vol.1, no.2, 1990), p.23.
- 5 Manning Marable, 'The crisis of the black working-class: an economic and historical analysis', *Science & Society* (Summer 1982), p.156.
- 6 National Urban League, *The State of Black America 1993* (New York, National Urban League, 1993), p.168.
- 7 Barbara Vobejda, 'Children's poverty rose in '80s; suburbs, rural areas also show increase', *Washington Post* (12 August 1992).
- 8 Press release, US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 3 September 1992.
- 9 See *The State of Black America*, op.cit. and K. Jennings, 'Understanding the persisting crisis of black youth unemployment' in J. Jennings (ed.), *Race, Politics and Economic Development* (New York, 1992).
- 10 Ice Cube, 'A bird in the hand', *Death Certificate* (Priority Records, 1991).
- 11 Paul Grein, 'It was feast or famine in '90 certs; platinum ranks thin, but smashes soar', *Billboard* (12 January 1991), p.9.
- 12 See John Leland, 'Rap and race', *Newsweek* (29 June 1992), p.49, and James T. Jones IV, 'NWA's career gets a jolt from lyric's shock value', *USA Today* (21 June 1991).
- 13 Bruce Horowitz, 'Quincy Jones, Time Warner launch rap lovers magazine', *Los Angeles Times* (15 September 1992).
- 14 Chuck Philips, 'The uncivil war: the battle between the establishment and the supporters of rap opens old wounds of race and class', *Los Angeles Times* (19 July 1992).
- 15 Christopher Vaughn, 'Simmons' rush for profits', *Black Enterprise* (December 1992), p.67.
- 16 D. Hickley, 'Rapper in brew-haha over rights to his voice', *New York Daily News* (26 August 1991).
- 17 Media Action Alert issued by the Marin Institute, 23 July 1991.
- 18 See Karen Grigsby Bates, 'They've gotta have us', *New York Times Magazine* (14 July 1991), p.18, and Lewis Beale, "'Boyz" in your hood?', *Washington Post* (3 March 1992).
- 19 'Black video distribution', *Washington Post* (8 March 1992), and Carla Hall, 'Breaking down the color barrier', *Washington Post* (24 September 1991).
- 20 Ice Cube and Angela Davis, 'Nappy happy', *Transition* (no.58, 1992), p.191.

- 21 Leland, op.cit.
- 22 K. Carroll, 'One black nation under a groove', *Black Arts Bulletin* (October 1992).
- 23 See R. Harrington, 'Public Enemy's twisted tribute', *Washington Post* (19 January 1992).
- 24 David Mills, 'Sister Souljah's call to arms', *Washington Post* (13 May 1992).
- 25 Juan Gonzalez, 'Bill hits low note in rap of Souljah', *New York Daily News* (17 June 1992).
- 26 Thomas B. Edsall, 'Black leaders view Clinton strategy with mix of pragmatism, optimism', *Washington Post* (28 October 1992).
- 27 Richard Harrington, 'At the memorial, songs in the key of hope', *Washington Post* (18 January 1993).
- 28 Robin D.G. Kelley, 'Straight from underground', *The Nation*, p.796.
- 29 Naughty by Nature, 'Ghetto Bastard', *Naughty by Nature* (Tommy Boy Records).
- 30 *The President's Drug Strategy: has it worked*, Majority Staff of the Senate Judiciary Committee and the International Narcotics Control Caucus, September 1992.
- 31 D. Mills, 'The Geto Boys, beating the murder rap', *Washington Post* (15 December 1991).
- 32 Ice T, 'Squeeze the trigger', *Rhyme Pays* (Sire Records, 1987).
- 33 NWA, 'F*** tha Police', *Straight Outta Compton* (Ruthless Records, 1988).
- 34 W.C. and the MAAD Circle, 'Behind Closed Doors', *Ain't a Damn Thing Changed* (Priority Records, 1991).
- 35 Ice Cube, 'Endangered Species (Tales from the Darkside)', *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted* (Priority Records, 1990).
- 36 Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York, 1990), p.268.
- 37 Ice T, 'Cop Killer', *Body Count* (Time-Warner, 1991).
- 38 Sullivan, op.cit.
- 39 Tipper Gore, 'Hate, rape and rap', *Washington Post* (8 January 1990).
- 40 Ice T, 'Freedom of Speech', (Rhyme Syndicate, 1990).
- 41 'Other rappers accused of "nasty" influence', *Washington Times* (16 June 1992).
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Marilyn Lashley, 'Bad rap', *Washington Post* (25 September 1992).
- 44 'Other rappers accused of "nasty" influence', op.cit.
- 45 Cube and Davis, op.cit., p.186.
- 46 Sonja Peterson-Lewis, 'A feminist analysis of the defenses of obscene rap lyrics', *Black Sacred Music* (Summer 1991), p.78.
- 47 P.H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (Boston, 1990).
- 48 J.D. Eure and J.G. Spady, *Nation Conscious Rap* (New York, 1991), p.148.
- 49 K. Carroll, 'Word on Bytches with problems', *Black Arts Bulletin* (Vol.1, no.8), p.1.
- 50 Ibid.; Bytches With Problems, 'Shit Popper', *The Bytches* (RAL Records, 1991).
- 51 M.E. Dyson, 'Performance, protest and prophecy in the culture of Hip Hop', *Black Sacred Music* (Summer 1991), p.22.

BARBARA RANSBY and TRACYE MATTHEWS

Black popular culture and the transcendence of patriarchal illusions

Over the past decade in African-American communities throughout the United States, there has been a visible resurgence of various forms of Black cultural nationalism. This has partly occurred in response to some of the crises currently facing African Americans, and partly reflects the sense of frustration and desperation many people, especially Black youth, feel about the prospects for our collective future, and their hunger for some hopeful alternative.

There are three major components of this resurgence which have triggered heated debates within the halls of academia and on the streets of Black America. They are: first, the cultural and intellectual movement known as Afrocentrism; second, a growing interest in and commercialisation of the memory of Malcolm X; and third, the provocative and popular lyrics of certain sub-genres of rap music which have emerged within the larger context of what is termed Hip Hop culture. All three of these trends share two characteristics: they all contain an oppositional edge which offers respite from the oppressive realities of daily life in a hostile dominant culture. At the same time, however, each trend represents a very male-centred definition of the problems confronting the Black community and proposes pseudo-solutions which further marginalise and denigrate Black women. A masculinised vision of Black empowerment and liberation resonates through the literature on Afrocentrism, the lyrics of male rappers, and the symbolic

Barbara Ransby, community organiser and co-founder of the Ella Baker-Nelson Mandela Center, Ann Arbor, teaches history at De Paul University, Chicago.

Tracye Matthews, a former director of the Ella Baker-Nelson Mandela Center, is currently researching the role of women in the Black Panther Party, at the University of Michigan.

Race & Class, 35, 1 (1993)

characterisation of Malcolm as the redemptive Black patriarch.

Before we discuss the specific contours of Black popular cultural trends and the gender politics they represent, it is useful to contextualise them historically. Obviously, the nationalist movement of the 1960s, or at least the ways it has been processed in historical memory, serve as a source of inspiration for today's Black youth. At the same time, however, this wave of cultural nationalism has its own historical impulses. This current generation of Black youth came of age politically in the reactionary and cynical era of Reagan and Bush, an era in which there appeared to be no basis for making any inroads in the existing political system and where non-Black allies were few and far between. The national political discourse with regard to African Americans for the past thirteen years or so has consisted of unabated racist and victim-blaming attacks from the Right, and defensive and apologetic responses from mainstream Black leaders. It is in this barren and politically hostile landscape that we witness the resurgence of a very narrowly defined cultural nationalism, the popular version of which manifests itself in some sectors of the Hip Hop community and in nostalgic hero-worship, and the academic wing of which comes under the banner of Afrocentrism.

Afrocentrism

As a general approach, Afrocentrism represents a methodology for scholarship and political practice which puts people of African descent at the centre, rather than in the margins; sees Black people as subjects, rather than objects, in history; and attempts to speak to, and not simply about, African, African-American and Black communities worldwide. As an ideology or 'dogma', however, Afrocentrism has come to mean something quite specific as defined by Asante et al. It is an ideology shrouded in mysticism and mythology which romanticises the past without giving any real strategies for the future. Moreover, its proponents advertise it as a virtual litmus test for the measure of real blackness. Blackness itself is, of course, ill-defined as some essential, innate quality or as a general ancestral connection to the African continent. Afrocentrism, the ideology, is most often represented as a reconnection to Africa, a reclamation of authentic African traditions and, according to Asante, a response to the 'rhythms of the universe and the same cosmological sensibilities'.¹

Asante's vision is also a very male-centred one. For example, in the opening chapter of his book, *Afrocentricity*, Asante surveys a pantheon of Black activist-intellectuals and does not find a single African-American woman's contribution compelling enough to discuss in any detail. Moreover, he concludes in a section on male-female relations, and after a scorching condemnation of homosexuality, that 'the time

has come to redeem *our* Black manhood through Afrocentric action' (emphasis added).² The main solution offered by Afrocentrism, the ideology, is a backward-looking romantic view of the past in search of what Asante terms 'primordial truths'.

What paradigm and inspiration for political empowerment do we find in this homogenised, mythical, utopian African past? Do we see, and can we learn lessons from, the political struggle between Mobutu and Lumumba over the future of the former Belgian Congo? Do we hear the voice of Cabral calling for the petit bourgeoisie, with whom most of our current crop of cultural nationalists would be quite at home, to commit class suicide? Do we hear the words of African womanists like Buchi Emecheta and others calling for the fair and equal treatment of African women?

The classless African past we are told to revere and recreate is one in which there is little conflict, less struggle and no diversity. It is not a dynamic past, but a static one which belies the vast, rich and deeply contested political and cultural terrain of the African continent. It is not insignificant that the great African past which we are told we need to recreate is also a patriarchal past in which men were men and women knew their respective place. These unequal gender roles are then redefined euphemistically as 'complementary' rather than relationships of subordination and domination. Drawing on a slightly modified language of biological determinism and essentialism, many Afrocentrists prescribe 'traditional' roles for Black men and women as natural. Thus, male-headed nuclear families are synonymous with strong functional families. Those who reject or challenge the prescribed gender roles are dismissed as inauthentic and/or Eurocentric.

In terms of solutions, the Afrocentric prescription for progress is predicated upon the notion that the main problems confronting the African-American community and diaspora at this historical juncture are internal to the Black community itself. The problems are defined as cultural, behavioural and psychological, not as political, economic or structural. In other words – our problem is us. The suggestion is that our behaviour has to change in order for our condition to change, as opposed to the rather far-fetched notion that if people have jobs, decent housing, decent schools and adequate health care, these necessities would offer a material, rather than metaphysical, impetus for lifting self-esteem and stabilising social relations.

In the realm of public policy discourse, as highlighted in the mainstream media, Black communities are diagnosed as suffering from an acute 'breakdown of the black family structure', which is related to the 'crisis of the black male' and the decline of 'morals and values'. This diagnosis is very class-specific. It labels African Americans at the bottom of the social and economic pyramid as an underclass rife with internal pathologies. That is, despite the rhetorical facade of a singular

imagined homogeneous Black community, the class biases in the rhetoric of the Afrocentric behaviourists is obvious. This racialised class discourse is painfully similar to the racist and sexist theory of the Black matriarchy promoted by Daniel P. Moynihan in the 1960s to explain the reputed cultural inferiority, that is pathology, of 'the matriarchal Negro family'. The solution, of course, is to celebrate and recreate artificially the 'greatness' and 'authenticity' of a mythical and generic ancient African family.

An important corollary to discussions of the breakdown of the Black family is the cry for Black male role models. The underlying assumption here is that we need strong Black patriarchs to give moral direction to the floundering female-headed households which have destabilised the Black community. This dialogue has been framed even more specifically within a discussion of the crisis of the Black male. Clearly, there is a legitimate cause for concern and action to address the specific ways in which Black men are victimised in our society. The statistics on Black male incarceration, homicide and unemployment are both frightening and familiar. Yet, aside from some weak and ineffectual calls for an end to racism and creation of jobs for black youth, many cultural nationalists emphasise the recognition and visibility of more Black male role models, whether historical or contemporary, as the key to Black community empowerment. The struggle is defined as one to reclaim and redefine Black manhood. Ironically, this is also the point at which the politics and positions of some cultural nationalists, liberals and right-wing conservatives seem to converge. Consistent with the view that the problem with Black people is culturally based, and centred around an alleged crisis in Black manhood, their arguments are again framed by the use of certain race, class and gender coded terms which blame poor people for their own oppression. Personal characteristics such as low self-esteem, lack of self-awareness and pride and, most of all, lack of discipline are cited as the sources of many of the larger social problems confronting the Black community from drugs and gangs to teenage pregnancy.

In addition, the gendered nature of this discussion of the 'problem with black people' becomes very obvious when one examines who is generally targeted, implicitly or explicitly, as its root cause. African-American women, especially single mothers, are routinely vilified as the culprit. For example, regular attacks on poor Black women in the media, most often disguised as an attack on the admittedly inadequate welfare system, portray them as lazy, unfit mothers, members of a morally bankrupt underclass, who should be punished for their inability to sustain a middle-class family lifestyle on a sub-poverty income. Programmes are proposed and implemented that penalise Black women and their children for the crime of being poor – for example, actions are being taken, at the local and national level, to

make the surgical implant of the Norplant five-year contraceptive mandatory for women who receive welfare. In several states, funding restrictions have been imposed which will further impoverish women receiving public assistance by not affording women who have additional children to claim any additional welfare benefits with which to feed and clothe the child. These women will have to stretch their meagre allocations to accommodate the new family member or be forced to not have children. This type of anti-Black woman victim-blaming is echoed in the popular media – Black and white – in some of the new Black films being produced, such as on Malcolm X, in music lyrics and in the theoretical debates about poverty.

Malcolm X and popular culture

Rap music and Malcolm X are two mainstays of popular Black youth culture in the 1990s. Images of Malcolm are ubiquitous in African-American communities from Harlem to South-Central Los Angeles, and virtually every major city in between. In fact, the extensive commodification of Malcolm's profile and his quotes in the form of T-shirts, tennis shoes, posters, back packs, baseball caps, and even underwear, is testimony to the ability of capitalism to exploit just about anything, including dead Black revolutionaries. Similarly, the rap music industry, including rappers with explicitly political messages, has enjoyed considerable commercial success. But a careful scrutiny suggests that the more commercially successful artists are the ones whose music – like the pervasive images of Malcolm – has been sanitised and diluted, or at least sufficiently jumbled, as to be safe for mass consumption. (Even lyrical brews concocted with a distinctly militant flavour are frequently laced with enough counter-productive and counter-revolutionary messages, especially with regard to gender and the status of women, to dull their potentially radical edge.)

Just as rap artists have been labelled the 'new Black prophets', Malcolm has been crowned our 'shining Black prince', because both symbolise an uncompromising opposition to racism and cultural imperialism. Unfortunately, however, few critics have seriously interrogated the masculine imagery associated with these personas or the gender politics they represent. At a time when single Black mothers are being ruthlessly maligned for contributing to the alleged moral decay of the larger Black community, enter two types of Black saviours, personified by Malcolm X, on the one hand, and rapper Ice Cube, on the other. Malcolm is the strong, powerful, dignified Black patriarch standing at the head of his family, acting as protector and provider. Ice Cube, conversely, is, as he proudly proclaims in his recent album, 'the pimp'; an angry, macho, over-sexed character, who, above all, is not soft. He doesn't take insults from his enemies or back talk from his women. Thus, Malcolm is the

redemptive Black patriarch, and Ice Cube is the warrior Black pimp. In all cultures, the authority of patriarchs and the power of pimps rests squarely on the backs of the women whom they control or exploit.

Discussions about the alleged breakdown of the Black family and the need for strong African-American male role models serve as an important backdrop to the resurgent interest in and celebration of Malcolm X. Spike Lee's 'X' film, which has, unfortunately, become the final word on Malcolm X for millions of Americans, is but an expensive Hollywood ending to a much longer period of reconstructing his memory. One of the many distortions and omissions surrounding the retrospective of Malcolm's life and times has been the conspicuous inattention to gender politics. Malcolm's own view of women, as well as the implications of a largely masculinised version of the Black Freedom Movement, is uncritically accepted by many who invoke his memory.

In this revisionist reconstruction of the past, and especially in Lee's film, Malcolm has been amputated from the larger social and political context of the 1960s to stand on his own as representative of an entire movement and era. We rarely see the problematic dichotomy of Malcolm versus Martin any more – even that has been glossed over in an attempt to give an essentialist veneer of 'race' as thicker than 'politics'. What we are also left with is an erasure of the grassroots component of the Black Power and civil rights movements, especially the role of grassroots women organisers, who were the very backbone of groups like SNCC (the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), MFDP (Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party) and, in a different way, the Black Panther Party. Organisers like Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker have been literally 'X'd' out of the popular – and, unfortunately, most academic – histories. African-American youth and others are left with the disempowering misperception that only larger than life great men can make or change history, and that this process is an individual rather than a collective venture. The struggle for Black liberation is thus equated solely with the struggle to redeem Black manhood, and with individual triumph over adversities and indignities. Moreover, Black manhood is redeemed by militant posturing heroes, not by the arduous and often unrewarding task of daily organising and struggle. The deified persona of Malcolm X, a strong black male who overcame a life of poverty, immorality and crime to become a critic of American injustice, a steadfast and manly defender of Black people and a paragon of puritanical morality, fits neatly into this scenario. Thus, the prescription for solving the problems and dilemmas facing the African-American community today is – add strong Black man and stir.

This Hollywood image of Malcolm X readily lends itself to the current political agendas of the various and disparate groups who seek opportunistically to lay claim to his legacy – from Nation of Islam

leader and former Malcolm adversary, Louis Farrakhan, to ultra-conservative Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. What has been created in popular culture, according to historian Robin D.G. Kelley, is a 'Malcolm safe for democracy'. While most portrayals of Malcolm, even 20-second sound bites, display his incisive critique of racism, they systematically exclude any reference to his positions on other crucial issues such as imperialism, colonialism, capitalism and, of course, gender. In one of the rare published critiques of Malcolm's gender politics, Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins argues that 'masculinist assumptions pervade Malcolm X's thinking, and these beliefs, in turn, impoverished his version of Black nationalism ... [his] views on women reflected dominant views of white manhood and womanhood applied uncritically to the situation of African Americans'.³ In most accounts, however, Malcolm's patriarchal and sexist ideas, which regrettably remained static through most of his life, are either ignored, downplayed or reinforced. For example, in the movie 'X', Betty Shabazz is portrayed uncritically as 'the strong woman behind the great man'. No mention is made of the fact that she left Malcolm after the birth of each of their five children, or of her subordinate status within the context of their male-headed family. Furthermore, no mention is made of Malcolm's own effort to grapple with and challenge the sexism that characterised most of his adult life. In a correspondence to his cousin-in-law, Hakim Jamal, in January 1965, Malcolm himself confronts this issue:

I taught brothers not only to deal unintelligently with the devil or the white woman, but I also taught many brothers to spit acid at the sisters. They were kept in their places – you probably didn't notice this in action, but it is a fact. I taught these brothers to spit acid at the sisters. If the sisters decided a thing was wrong, they had to suffer it out. If the sister wanted to have her husband at home with her for the evening, I taught the brothers that the sisters were standing in their way; in the way of the Messenger, in the way of progress, in the way of God Himself. I did these things brother. I must undo them.⁴

Although Paul Lee, one of the few researchers who has attempted to address Malcolm's gender politics, was a consultant to Spike Lee (no relation) during the making of the movie, Spike opted to ignore this aspect of Paul Lee's insightful work. It did not fit apparently with the type of Malcolm the film-maker was attempting to fabricate. The hero worship of Malcolm as great Black father and the uncritical acceptance of his retrograde views on gender, a weakness that he himself recognised, is quite consistent with the new culture of poverty theorists, who blame African-American people – women, in particular – for perpetuating our own oppression, and who propose strong male-dominated families as the solution.

Rap music and hip hop culture

While the celebration of Malcolm as a cult hero offers us a stifled and restricted ideal of Black womanhood safely relegated to the footnotes of a self-consciously masculine text, many male rappers project a different, although equally problematic, set of gender roles. The Nation of Islam's position on male-female relationships, and one that Malcolm endorsed most of his life, suggests that Black women should be 'respected and protected', confined to a domestic sphere and serve a subordinate role relative to their husbands. In contrast, a significant amount of the gender imagery in rap, especially in the subgenre of gangsta rap, simultaneously celebrates and condemns the kind of Black woman who is presumably undeserving of either respect or protection, the bad girl, Jezebel, whore, bitch. The oversexed Black woman who is only relevant to the extent that she serves as a source of male entertainment and pleasure. This prototype is described as a possession, a thing, like a car, jewellery and clothes. And if she dares to overstep her bounds, assert her humanity and demand something in return, she is characterised as a deserving recipient of violence. The imagery is graphically reinforced in the music videos and on stage, where back-up dancers gyrate, almost naked, and in some cases simulate sex acts. At the same time, they are taunted with insults and derogatory names by the male rappers. The women are usually smiling with welcoming approval at this abusive and degrading treatment. This is certainly not a liberatory vision, but one, sadly, quite consistent with the racist and sexist stereotypes we have endured for centuries. Moreover, it feeds directly into a public discourse in which the criminalisation of poor Black women is linked to their sexuality. For example, in the current debate about welfare reform, African-American women have been scapegoated as the undeserving recipients of public aid because of their alleged sexual irresponsibility and immoral behaviour.

The cultural and ideological assault upon Black women not only helps to justify reactionary public policies that compromise the lives of poor Black women and their children, it also helps to justify direct acts of physical violence. The real life case of Dee Barnes – the New York talk show host who was publicly beaten into submission by rapper Dr Dre in a Manhattan nightclub for allegedly making critical comments about him on the air – is one clear example of the relationship between art and real life. This incident illustrates the extent to which some male rappers actually believe and internalise the misogynist messages they put forth in song. The believability of Dr Dre's recent public service announcement against battering is undermined by the lyrics of his new single, 'Nothin But a Thang', in which he once again advocates 'puttin' the slap down' on a hoe that doesn't know her place.

At the same time, co-existing alongside these sexist lyrics are some

which are very positive and progressive. Groups like Public Enemy and Arrested Development call for 'revolution' and for 'poor Whites and Blacks [to] bum rush the system'. Furthermore, an alternative to the anti-woman messages of other artists is offered by rap groups like Digable Planets, Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy and Arrested Development. A few songs actually identify fighting sexism as a priority for the Black Freedom Movement. Still, while some of these groups consciously reject the verbal slander and sexual objectification of Black women, most do not advocate total gender equality or feminist/womanist empowerment. Rather, a number of these artists idealise traditional nuclear families with strong patriarchal father figures as the ultimate salvation of the race. But, in addition, female rappers from Queen Latifah to M.C. Lyte and Salt and Pepa also speak in a different and distinct voice with regard to gender politics. Although these women rappers have been reluctant to criticise fellow rappers in public for fear that such criticism might fuel racist biases against the genre as a whole, they have created a counter-discourse through their own music. For example, in her song, 'The Evil that Men Do', Queen Latifah challenges white male patriarchal power and outlines the ways in which it targets poor Black women, especially those trapped by the welfare system. This type of lyrical content not only offers an alternative to the sexism of many male rappers, but is an indirect challenge to their authority to articulate the Black experience in exclusive male terms.

Many critics have had a difficult time reconciling the positive and progressive messages of rap with the often sexist and misogynist references to African-American women. For example, how do we reconcile the call for reparations, the freeing of political prisoners and self-defence against police brutality with slanderous references to Black women as bitches, hoes, freaks and sack chasers? On one level, the ability of some (not all) rap artists to merge the call for Black empowerment with the call for Black female subjugation seems like a glaring inconsistency, yet, on another level, it is not incongruous at all. In fact, this issue reflects the ongoing and long-standing contradictions of cultural nationalism with regard to gender and, by extension, the gender-dilemma that the African-American freedom movement has yet fully to address or resolve. As E. Frances White points out in her brilliant article on nationalism and gender, there is a precedent, in the cultural nationalist movements of the 1960s, for 'an oppositional strategy that both counters racism and constructs conservative utopian images of African American life ... [especially] utopian and repressive gender roles'.⁵ The reconciliation of sexism and anti-racism is typical of a particular strain of cultural Black nationalism. This vision of Black struggle and empowerment equates Black liberation with Black male liberation only; uncritically accepts the dominant society's patriarchal

model of gender and family relations; sees the sexual objectification and sexual manipulation of Black women as a male prerogative; and defines political militancy as a part of some exclusive male domain.

These flawed and erroneous assumptions about gender and liberation provide a perfect rationale for the continued subjugation of Black women, almost as a matter of principle. That is, if Black Power is defined as redeeming Black manhood; and Black manhood is defined uncritically as the right to be the patriarchal heads of Black families, and the exclusive defenders of the Black community, Black women are, by definition, relegated to a marginal status. The point here is to suggest that the type of political radicalism defined by some male rap artists is not antithetical to their promotion of anti-womanist messages, but, rather, is quite consistent, and goes to the core of the contradictions and limitations of the political framework itself.

To paraphrase the radical intellectual and activist, Ella Baker, even dissidents are products of the societies we seek to transform. That is, it is part of the dialectical nature of popular protest that groups and individuals can and do oppose certain modes of oppression, while they simultaneously reinforce others. Therefore, while rap artists express a just and righteous rage against the myriad of forces poised to undermine the survival of Black men, it is often an undirected rage and one in which Black women get caught in the crossfire of a war to defend Black manhood. In essence, some rappers embrace a political vision which uncritically accepts and internalises the dominant society's narrow and patriarchal definition of manhood, and then defines liberation as the extent to which Black men meet those criteria: the acquisition of money, violent military conquest and the successful subjugation of women as domestic and sexual servants. This is, ultimately, not a revolutionary praxis, but an assimilationist one dressed up in Black face.

Criticism of the negative, particularly sexist, tendencies within rap has often met with a defensive response. While, on the one hand, some observers have romanticised rap music as the authentic and uncensored voice of Black protest, other scholars and activists have been reluctant to criticise certain rap artists for fear of being perceived as divisive, or of 'airing the dirty laundry' of the Black community to a mixed audience. These reservations are not without merit. It is true that part of the attack on Black musicians by censors of various brands reflects a racial double standard which exempts racist rock groups and sexually explicit performers like Madonna. Nevertheless, this fact alone does not explain away or excuse the negative and abusive verbal assaults made upon Black women.

By and large, critics have either tried to dismiss or ignore the sexual politics of rap music, or, in a few cases, attempted to legitimise the macho and misogynist stance of Black male rappers as an affirmation

of their manhood: on occasion, this has even been elevated to the level of a distinct mode of resistance. For example, without mentioning Black women, critic Jon Michael Spencer describes the sexism of male rappers as an 'insurrection of subjugated sexualities', citing Foucault, Fanon and white fears of Black male sexuality to underscore his point. He writes: 'Male rappers, flaunting exaggerated perceptions of their sexual capacities, tease white fears of alleged black illicit sexualities ... rap's insurgence of subjugated sexualities is radical because there is no secret, no confession, no self-interrogation.'⁶ What this critic fails to recognise is that the aggressive assertion of male sexuality does not get expressed in a social vacuum, but that the aggression has a target, and that target is Black women. And since when has Black male hypersexuality been insurrectionary relative to racist stereotypes of Black sexuality? And since when has sexual violence against and manipulation of Black women been of any concern to the dominant society? Rappers who promote misogynist images of women are aiming those attacks point blank at Black women.* This is not a militant assertion of Black manhood, it is a militant debasement of Black womanhood and, by extension, Black personhood. Moreover, the Black community has a right, and should expect, something from its native sons that it does not expect – and certainly has never gotten – from white entertainers: a recognition of the humanity of all Black people, men and women.

* * *

The popularity of rap music, commercialised Afrocentrism and what David Maurrasse has termed Malcolmania are all testimony to the legitimate rage and disaffection from American society that millions of Black youth feel. These trends also evidence the inability of traditional, or even ostensibly radical or revolutionary, Black leaders to offer a serious political programme which channels that rage into constructive political strategies. Political weaknesses notwithstanding, the appeal of Malcolm X and the popularity of militant rappers do represent a limited form of resistance to racial oppression. Wearing the symbolic 'X' or blasting the lyrics to 'fight the power', while not the most effective political strategy and not without contradictions, do represent defiant statements of opposition against a system which has deemed them powerless, sub-human and expendable. The obvious problem, of course, is that such a male-centred definition of oppression and liberation leaves out more than half of the African-American

* The whole argument is painfully reminiscent of Eldridge Cleaver's misogynist assertion, twenty years ago, that rape is a political act, and Norman Mailer's contention that Black men were more in touch with their sexuality than whites.

population. The representation of those symbols in exclusively male form, the class bias and essentialism of Afrocentricity and, in the case of rap, the accompanying denigration of Black women, dull the radical edge that these modes of cultural expression might otherwise represent. African-American youth, male and female, are clearly searching for viable outlets for their pent-up, and potentially political, energy, anger and creativity. This is, if nothing else, a hopeful sign and cause for optimism. Possibly the most profound political impact of both the celebration of Malcolm and the popularity of political rap has been to give legitimacy and international visibility to the rage and the humanity of a whole generation of disenfranchised Black urban youth. Perhaps these searching young minds will find answers and political solutions, not on MTV or BET, or in the speeches of immortal prophets, but within themselves. It is a complex journey from consciousness to the concrete politics of empowerment, and one which is, by definition, full of contradictions and detours. It is perhaps most important, individually and collectively, simply to stay on the right road, and to resist the temptation to gloss over and silence our contradictions. The words of the radical Trinidadian intellectual, C.L.R. James, are inspiring in this regard. He writes:

A revolution is first and foremost a movement from the old to the new, and needs, above all, new words, new verses, new passwords – all the symbols in which ideas and feelings are made tangible. The mass creation and appropriation of what is needed is a revealing picture of a whole people on their journey into the modern world, sometimes pathetic, sometimes vastly comic, ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous, but always vibrant with the life that only a mass of ordinary people can give.⁷

References

We would like to thank Rohanna Williams, Felecia Gates, Bourgone Chalmers, Mana Kasongo and Peter Sporn for their insights and input.

- 1 M. Asante, *Afrocentricity* (New York, 1980), p.2.
- 2 Ibid, pp.7-21.
- 3 Patricia Hill Collins, 'Learning to think for ourselves' in J. Wood (ed.), *Malcolm X: in Our Image* (New York, 1991), p.74.
- 4 Paul Lee, 'Malcolm X's evolved views on the role of women in society', unpublished manuscript, 1991.
- 5 E. Frances White, 'Africa on my mind: gender counter discourse and African American nationalism' in *Journal of Women's History* (Spring 1990), p.73.
- 6 Jon Michael Spencer, 'Rhapsody in Black: utopian aspirations' in *Theology Today* (Vol. XLVIII, no.4, 1992).
- 7 C.L.R. James, in *Race Today* (Vol.6, no.5, 1974), p.144.

RUTH WILSON GILMORE

Public enemies and private intellectuals: Apartheid USA

'But the Harlem intellectuals were so overwhelmed at being "discovered" and courted that they allowed a bona fide cultural movement which issued from the social system as naturally as a gushing spring, to degenerate into a pampered and paternalized vogue.'

– Harold Cruse¹

'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.'

– Audre Lorde²

I'm not of the Frankfurt School.³ One must live a life of relative privilege these days to be so dour about domination, so suspicious of resistance, so enchained by commodification, so helpless before the ideological state apparatuses to conclude there's no conceivable end to late capitalism's daily sacrifice of human life to the singular freedom of the market. Yet, in the context of an avalanche of words on contemporary 'bona fide cultural movement' – especially movement by the young, formerly enslaved or colonised; urban, every day, popular – Cruse's assessment of the political failure of the Harlem Renaissance rings truthfully.

We are in an epoch of social revolution – capitalism hasn't won, but not for lack of trying. It is both possible and necessary to pass the word, that these times too might pass, but not inevitably towards a more secure fascism. At the same time, (passive) counter revolutionary forces are pampering into being an intellectual comprador class comprised of some of the very people who have been engaged in the post-1945 freedom work to decolonise our minds.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a graduate student in geography at Rutgers-New Brunswick, taught most recently in the Center for Afro-American Studies, UCLA.

Race & Class, 35, 1 (1993)

The late poet-warrior, Audre Lorde, warned that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. As with any theoretical premise, Lorde's caveat is useful only if the elements – whose paring away enables its elegance and urgency – are added back, so that the general truth of the abstraction has concrete meaning for day-to-day life. The issue is not whether the master uses, or endorses the use of, some tool or another. Rather, who controls the conditions and the ends to which any tools are wielded? Control is not easy. In the culture of opposition, control, tentative at best, results from risky forays rather than documentable ownership through capital accumulation. Lorde proposes a decisive seizure whose strategy works towards multiple ends. First, Lorde's focus on tools requires us to concentrate on fundamental orderings in political economy. If the master loses control of the means of production, he is no longer the master. Thus, relations of production are transformed in the process. Second, her focus on the master's house guides our attention towards institutions and luxury. The house must be dismantled so that we can recycle the materials to institutions of our own design, usable by all to produce new and liberating work. Thus, the luxurious is transformed to the productive. Without both parts of the strategy at work, nothing much is different at the end of the day.

In the past decade or so, an astonishing number of people housed in and about the relatively secure luxury of institutions of higher education have picked up the work a few politically committed souls began in the earlier post-war decades. The purpose of the work – called variously cultural studies, black studies, etc. – had been to try to understand the means through which ordinary people do or might organise, promote ideas and bargain in the political arena. Such understanding might be achieved through figuring out how people make sense in and of their lives. Activist/scholars pursued their inquiries by studying cultures and 'subcultures' as politically vital forces in the anatomy of society. Today's plethora of intellectuals who think about marginal, or oppositional, or simply non-Arnoldian, cultural practice are often in, or influenced by, literary theory. Sensibly enough, the realm of literary criticism 'from the margins', as bell hooks might say, has focused on a formidable assemblage of neglected letters – both art and polemic – snatched from the dustbins of history by the diligent graduate-student labourers of such black studies stars as Henry Louis Gates Jr. These texts occasion many reflections: what was said, in forays into the printed page during the last and current centuries, that will tell us what happened and what might happen? How is literary production a political act? What theoretical work might be hidden in a story, a character type, a way of telling? How can the interpretive skills refined through these processes of thought be turned towards understanding cultural expressions that are not bound to the page, such as the various arenas of popular culture – music, dance, movies, costume, language? What are the processes of creating audiences? And, most of all,

why bother? Intellectuals studying these questions lay consistent claim to politics as both cause and effect of their work, harking back to the practitioners (themselves mostly still at work) who shook higher education to free up some intellectual and material resources on behalf of the always already excluded.

The need for oppositional work is unquestioned. But what is oppositional work? As the old folks say, if you're going to talk that talk you've got to walk that walk. Oppositional work is talk-plus-walk: it is organisation and promotion of ideas and bargaining in the political arena. Oppositional studies programmes originated in and through struggle, and their contemporary quality is various – dependent in large measure on the strict or lax attention paid to the questions of dialectics and contradictions with which Audre Lorde demands that intellectuals engage. Of course, the originary communities that occasioned oppositional studies haven't remained suspended outside of history awaiting the return of the native intellectuals. Quite the contrary. The tumultuous upheavals of systemic crisis throughout the overdeveloped world have reached into every corner of society, transforming both the streets and the campuses. When, as is the case in the US, the fastest growing group of unemployed consists of white, male, white-collar workers, no institution is unaffected: laws, the church, the military, elected and appointed officials, education – all bow beneath the yoke of austerity, as though such penance, rather than control of profits, will banish generally felt want.

The daily management of capitalism's reorganisation demands the doctrine of austerity, which is carried out according to time-honoured dogmas of the US: blame the poor, reward the rich, and talk fast to the middle (the economically broad and racially and culturally confusing category to which most people in the US assign themselves). On the campuses, the 'poor' are not necessarily those completely devoid of resources, but they are the johnnies-come-lately, the black studies and other oppositional studies units which are, like Rodney King, at risk – as stand-ins for the great masses of superfluous human beings whom the state must control, or discard, to organise reliably new relations of production in the New World Order. In response to this threat, a move towards connection outside the campus makes sense. After all, who but those who, in the first instance, let us scale the walls from their shoulders will stand ready to catch us should we be knocked back out? (But here begin strange meanderings which more often than not lead into culs-de-sac in the shadow of the master's house, which is still standing!)

There are four broad, overlapping tendencies in contemporary oppositional studies which weave through the literary theory world, but not there alone: individualistic careerism, romantic particularism, luxury production (insider trading) and organic praxis. Briefly, these trends are as follows. The first, individualistic careerism, is the competition to know the most about some aspect of the politically and oppositionally 'new' –

the new text, performance, tune, theory. This competition, driven as it is by the market anarchy of late capitalism, is characterised by a lack of connections. As Margaret Prescod puts it, careerism promotes one particular aspect of social change without integrating that struggle into the larger struggle for social change. In academic work, 'careerism' assigns primary importance to the fact – and survival – of oppositional studies within the intellectual and social structure of the university, the master's house. In this regard, 'individualistic' refers both to the practitioners of such cloistered studies and to the studies themselves. Their disarticulation from the larger struggle for social change enables the system to reproduce itself through a multiculturalised professional managerial class. The class is disinclined to or incapable of bringing about realignment of what Stuart Hall has called 'the fatal coupling of power and difference'.

Romantic particularism purports to reclaim an oppositional epistemology and aesthetic that had been obscured by the historical forces of Europe let loose in the world. In fact, it fails to escape the universalism elaborated by the modern university insofar as it reproduces, in form and function, idealist philosophical assumptions about who and what works, for whom and to what end. Romantic particularism has great appeal outside the university through its identification of an 'authenticity' in cultural practice which needs recognition, though hardly revision. Henry Louis Gates Jr's 1990 Florida courtroom defence of the ultra-machismo rap group 2 Live Crew as 'literary geniuses' was a strategically wily move on his part.* After all, he helped save some black men from punishment for 'crimes' few white men are charged with committing. However, the result of his approach is to maintain the struggle against racism at a level of abstraction (i.e., unacknowledged maleness) that refuses to engage the complexities of power within the ranks of the disfranchised. He reads nauseating lyrics as unassailably valid African-American cultural practice ('It's a black thing; you wouldn't understand'), in spite of many, many black women's daily struggles to get out from under the crap of that rap.

The third, and most distressing, category is that of luxury production – what Canadian intellectual Melissa Freedman calls insider trading for the advantaged elites of theory high or low. There is certain usefulness in figuring out just how an expressive cultural form does its work. However, in the rush to understand, a theoretical eclecticism, mingled with an institutionally encouraged tendency to substitute adequate abstraction for adequate theory, produces work which readers become servants of rather than work which serves readers. The point is not that reading must always seem transparent and require neither dictionary nor sustained contemplation. Nor is it that complexity is itself bad, non-productive, co-opted by definition. Nothing could be further from the truth. But what

* 2 Live Crew's album, *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*, was banned by a federal judge, and members of the crew were arrested after a live performance and tried for obscenity.

has happened is that an inward-looking practice is effectively closed off, a dead end of all the labours that produced it – perhaps like a diamond forever, but so what, and at what human costs? In universities over the past generation or so, theory has assumed pride of place in most of the traditional academic disciplines – especially in the humanities – and, by extension, in the oppositional studies corners as well. In fact, it is quite possible the theoretical urgency running through oppositional studies has been sluiced back to the mainstream, refreshing stagnant waters there. In any event, in the US, ‘theory’, its own discipline and end, pays. Somewhere along the way, intellectuals are so overwhelmed by discovering the production of knowledge that they have forgotten about, as Barbara Harlow puts it, ‘just knowing something’.

And yet, in all this, there is also organic praxis, the recognition that the street has always run into the campus, and the majority of campus employees are not paid to think but rather to clean, to type, to file, to shelve, to guard. What is the relation among us all? In different ways, concentrating on various kinds of cultural production, bell hooks, Edward Said, Barbara Harlow, Hazel Carby, Rosaura Sanchez and Richard Yarborough are several examples among those who, having come up through the discipline of literary study, turn their political and hermeneutic attention to making connections that are profound, not facile, meticulous, not contrived. Houston Baker Jr makes a passionate but curiously abstract plea for such connection in his new book, *Black Studies, Rap and the Academy*.⁴ While he points towards many of the issues addressed in this essay, especially the critique of Gates’s Florida testimony and questions of careerism, he does not, alas, couple his rhetorical urgency with equally urgent analysis of the rapidly changing material conditions of everyday life. He shows us the police and the military but not the war, employs the liberally-sanctioned metaphor of immigration to describe a historical storming of the university’s gates, and invokes some places called ‘positive sites of rap’ as the (again, metaphorical) spaces where something ideal – ‘redemption’ – might take place.

The careerist, particularist and luxe modes waste precious intellectual resources and displace needed energy from where it is most needed. As such, they are to the current era what many institutional ‘reforms’ such as assistant deans for race/gender relations, daycare centres and ethnic/women’s studies programmes were to colleges and universities in the late 1960s and early 1970s: cheap insurance against more expensively redressed claims that the urban university in the US has, historically and systematically, underdeveloped the neighbourhoods where the working poor live in the shadow of the ever-growing master’s house. In the exploitation of the culture of opposition, these modes tend to incorporate into the private sphere of intellectual property (books, conferences, centres) what Mike Davis insists should be the ‘public production of public use values’. Thus, it follows that these modes suffer, as they must,

from theoretical sloppiness and political dishonesty at the heart of the enterprise. Political dishonesty, because to call one's work oppositional is not enough. Theoretical sloppiness, because to speak in certain categories – such as 'literary geniuses' (Gates) or 'cultural capital' (Baker) – is to couple one's work with that of primary definers such as 1992 Nobel Laureate economist Gary Becker. These definers use such categories to explain away historically specific differentiation (the achievements of racism, machismo and exploitation) through an appeal to cultural difference alleged to inhere in the oppressed more naturally and less alienably than, say, freedom.

Why all this anger? Well, there is a war on.

It makes sense to pause a moment to consider the conditions under which the culture of opposition both produces and works the local crisis. Los Angeles is a formerly industrial city, exemplary for how the contradictions of the New World Order are so clearly manifest, so unveiled since the Rebellion of 1992. As must be apparent to all who followed the Rodney King case, Los Angeles streets are effectively closed, though they seem open to the inexperienced eye. Any apparent exceptions are bold reinforcements of the rule. For example, every Sunday afternoon the boardwalk at Venice Beach is an intensively policed street scene where crowds of young flaneurs, clad in the latest styles, stroll slowly and boisterously. As often as not they are pushing along snazzy little kids in prams that cost less than the high-top leather sneakers on their stubby little feet. Cheap food. Shiny trinkets. Body builders. Sidewalk artists. Con artists. Escape artists. Singers. A child born nearly armless and legless dances and waves his stumps for dollars while his posse snaps and nods with the beat. The police allow the Sunday Venice Beach exhibitionists to hang out, but constantly remind them, through high profile presence, busts, arrests 'under suspicion of', random identification checks, and general harassment, that licence to pass can be revoked at any time. The officers, eyeless in mirrored shades, scan waves and waves of black, brown, yellow, red, white young people. The westerly rays of the sun setting across the vast Pacific burnish the crowd whose skin-colour spectrum eloquently summarises 500 years of historical capitalism: the combined effects of predatory territoriality and the international labour market, forever commingled through terror and love.

In some extreme cases, physical barriers control the movement of Angelenos. There are sturdy metal gates sunk in concrete that lock in (and out) the residents of Central American neighbourhoods as well as African-American and Chicano (Mexican-American) public housing projects. The generally high degree of neighbourhood segregation furthers easy control of the streets. Capital-intensive police forces (mainly the notorious Los Angeles Police Department, the less well-known but even more murderous Los Angeles County Sheriffs, and, of course, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service officers – *La Migra*) can 'see'

who belongs where and who is out of place. The US internal wars nominally waged against gangs, drugs, crime, dependency, gain general endorsement from the citizenry. Today's supporters of more police or longer prison sentences are tomorrow's targets of state terror, beatings, imprisonment, sterilisation, murder.

The fifty-year reich of California's economic miracle is fast going the way of all of historical capitalism's economic miracles, and the resulting unemployment towards the top has a multiplier effect that pushes people out of all job levels – even minimum-wage positions in the service industry. Blue-collar African-Americans, Chicanos and Anglos have been out of work the longest as the deindustrialisation of southern California steamrolls into its second decade, with permanent lay-offs of workers by such transnationals as General Motors Corporation (which is about to open a US\$700-million plant in Germany), Firestone Rubber and Tire, along with single-mission military-industrialists such as General Dynamics and Hughes Aircraft (both partly or wholly-owned divisions of GMC). At the same time that the economy is bust, the population is growing younger and poorer; Los Angeles County no longer has a racial/ethnic majority, and the younger the resident, the browner her skin.

The crisis is of enormous proportions, and its outcome is thoroughly unpredictable save for two things. First, the social formation cannot reproduce itself according to existing relations. And second, the state is equipped, with both weaponry and consent, brutally to police the crisis at every step of the way. Herein lies the groundwork for a more secure fascism, through american apartheid's geographical enclavism and separate-but-unequal institutions – most notably education and the legal system. In the 1970s, Stuart Hall and colleagues wrote extensively on the methods and outcomes of this sort of policing in the UK. Their book, *Policing the Crisis*, is helpful for understanding many of the dimensions of the US crisis-management programme, even given the substantial differences and specificities of conditions in the US. An appeal to an originary nativism (not aboriginal, but rather founding – as in the Founding Fathers) has the warfare state armed and active 'against all enemies foreign and domestic' (as the US loyalty oath reads). Such are the master's tools.

On the streets, the crisis has produced a complicated wealth of analysis and resistance, for everywhere racism and machismo and exploitation are determined economically they are also defined culturally. The work ranges across the endlessly discussed rap music, MOTHERS ROC (Mothers Reclaiming Our Children), to the Coalition Against Police Abuse, to the cherished truce between the two major post-1965 African-American 'gangs' (the Crips and the Bloods), to Justice for Janitors and so forth. From the grassroots to the most expensively-accessed radio/TV airwaves alike, word is circulating about these bad times and what to do about them. The notorious rap group, Public Enemy, describes

commonsense understanding of the situation particularly well in the title to their best-selling 1990 album (bought by white suburban youth no less than black urban kids): *Fear of a Black Planet*.

Fear of a Black Planet.

When contradictions come to the surface in an eruption of confusing meanings and possibilities, people must struggle to resolve (or to displace) the truths produced by the crisis. MOTHERS ROC is a grassroots organisation engaged in such struggle. The urgency is the unveiling of the actual meanings and dimensions of the New World Order, as understood and lived here in the US where the working poor (especially the youth) are increasingly the wageless poor. How do fundamental social units (households, families, friends, neighbourhoods) reconcile the fear of actual drug dealers encountering the children, on the one hand, with the state's new laws that enable local law enforcement to criminalise those same children, on the other hand? The process of criminalisation, of creating public enemies, is sneaky and, as it seems to the less powerful, inexorable. For example, in some areas of greater Los Angeles, it is now illegal for young people who fit the 'gang profile' (age, gender, race, style of clothing) to walk the streets in possession of a flashlight. As Gerri Silva of the Equal Rights Congress said, 'If that isn't fascism, then I don't know what is.'

MOTHERS ROC consists of women and men, young and old, fighting for the kids who have been snatched into the system, made public enemies under a series of laws enacted since the late 1970s. Those laws have produced today's chilling statistics: one in four African-American men between the ages of 15 and 29 is in prison, on parole or under indictment; 60 per cent of prisoners are non-white; there are more Native American men on California's Death Row than in California's graduate schools; the US imprisons a greater percentage of its population than any other industrialised state; most jurisdictions in the US have doubled their prison capacities since the Reagan regime began in 1981.

For MOTHERS ROC, knowledge is the path to power. The organisation works along the lines of liberation theology's organic praxis: to see, to judge, to act. In the world-system division of labour, women do two-thirds of the work for 5 per cent of the income. Women own 1 per cent of the world's assets; their unpaid-for-work becomes someone's private property. Since we know the poorest of the planet's 5 billion inhabitants are people of colour, these data quantify racism, machismo and exploitation on a global scale. Like the mothers' movements in El Salvador, Argentina, Palestine and elsewhere, MOTHERS ROC has virtually no material resources; its principal work is to witness and to tell. In the courtrooms where MOTHERS ROC recruits members from the visitors gallery, kids are railroaded into plea-bargaining (admitting guilt for a shorter sentence) over crimes they did not commit. The state says: 'Plead guilty and we'll give you nineteen years; go to an expensive trial and we'll ask the court to sentence you to ninety-nine years with no possibility for

parole.' ROC also passes out flyers near jails where mothers, lovers and friends perform the unpaid ('women's') work of holding the accused's life together from the outside.

The MOTHERS of ROC are lonely, they are tired, they need help. College students can help, if they have some complex idea of what's up. Insofar as the students who wander into oppositional studies classrooms don't walk out knowing something, the forces of displacement will have won out over the forces of change. Everywhere I turn in Los Angeles today, Salvadorean garment workers, African-American and Chicana MOTHERS, ex-gangsters trying to maintain the truce against the unwavering interests of the police for it to fail, all turn to students for help. How have we been teaching the people among us entrusted with the responsibility to do 'intellectual work'? How can they do what is required of them in the twenty-first century? Are we ready?

The formation of private intellectuals is taking place as apartheid, the political logic of late capitalism, arranges our future through control of our space. Apartheid privatises and individualises what should be collective and public, and explains away collective differences through group individualism (Black people don't work hard; Anglos are thrifty). A major success of the passive revolution to date is its deflection of public work to the private sphere, where it then can be exploited for personal gain. Universities, both those supported by tax monies and those supported by private donations, are all in fact publicly subsidised through the combinations of state-funded research and development grants and contracts, student financial assistance and the tax-exemption of charitable gifts. Yet access to the resources within their walls is limited – from jobs to the gym to the library to the thinkers.

Both the political economy and the culture of the campus serve to legitimate the movement of what should be public to exclusive and increasingly private spheres. Such movement runs in direct opposition to oppositional culture, which is, originally and finally, public. The privatisation of intellectual work, of course, reveals the class interests of the professional intellectual elites, no matter the beleaguered oppositional programmes, or positions in programmes, they inhabit. The reduction of public spaces, the disappearance of parks, public housing, public hospitals, public schools, the right to pass freely, all point towards their racially differentiated opposite: the privatisation of everything. Even prisons are becoming privately managed.

Through production of public enemies, the state safeguards the unequal distribution of resources and reinforces the logic of scarcity by deflecting attention from the real thieves and criminals – e.g., the transnationals that are making off with profits which even the state can no longer lay significant partial claim to through tax-tribute. Further, the transnationals' way is made easier through the relentless establishment of regional and global capitalist governments: Maastricht, NAFTA, GATT,

the IMF. These governments supersede the state's economic 'self-determination' while maintaining its role of domination and regulation with respect to the relations of production. Private intellectuals are both cheap insurance for these arrangements and, 'pampered and paternalised', a costly drain on the communities of resistance who require their labours. Clearly, the systemic enhancements of late capitalism require revelation, analysis and enormous public oppositional action. The privatisation of intellectual work undermines the project at every turn. 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.' Who will?

References

- 1 Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, 1967), p.51.
- 2 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, Ca., 1984).
- 3 German marxist theoreticians who, in the early 1970s, concentrated on analysing the ways in which the capitalist state coopts and subverts popular protest.
- 4 H. Baker, *Black Studies, Rap and the Academy* (Chicago, 1993).

Vera Publications

For all the essential books, past and present, on Black history and the Black diaspora.

Titles include:

Pan-Africanism or Communism? by George Padmore
(Foreword by Richard Wright). ISBN 1 85465 043 2

Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race by Edward W. Blyden (the first full reprint). ISBN 1 85465 049 1

We Slaves of Suriname by Anton de Kom.
ISBN 1 85465 025 4

Journey to an Illusion: the West Indian in Britain by Donald Hinds. ISBN 1 85465 052 1

Vera Publications, 628 High Road, London N17 9TP, UK.
Tel: 081-885 3182.

CEDRIC ROBINSON

The appropriation of Frantz Fanon

Frantz Fanon died on, reportedly, 6 December 1961.¹ His death has inspired claims and counter-claims to his legacy. Some detractors, indeed, in the name of dogma or even less attractive causes, have sought substantially to diminish his political history and contributions,² while, more recently, literary theorists like Edward Said, Henry Louis Gates Jr, Homi Bhabha, Abdul JanMohamed, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Benita Parry have implicated an imagined Fanon in their self-referential debates on colonial discourse.³ Fanon's erasure in this deliberately exclusive academic terrain was inadvertently and succinctly conceded by Gates in an essay entitled 'Critical Fanonism': 'The course we've been plotting leads us, then, to what is, in part, Spivak's critique of Parry's critique of JanMohamed's critique of Bhabha's critique of Said's critique of colonial discourse.'⁴ Though, I am certain, there is much to challenge in Fanon's work, it is an ungracious conceit to employ him as merely a background device. This essay seeks to re-centre Fanon in the current fashion of Fanon studies.

Fanon, the psychiatrist, revolutionary and theorist, died of leukaemia at the age of 36. In his short time, he had authored some of the most path-breaking liberationist social theory and penetrating analyses of the psycho-existential contradictions of colonialism. Drawing on his training and clinical practice as a psychiatrist, on his exposures to colonialism in the West Indies and Africa, a conflicted interval in metropolitan France and, finally, on his familiarity with liberationist literatures and the

Cedric Robinson is Professor of Political Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and author of *Black Marxism: the making of the black radical tradition* (London, Zed, 1983).

Race & Class, 35, 1 (1993)

Algerian revolutionary struggle, Fanon pioneered the psychological, social and political investigation of anti-colonialism and what he took to be the 'Negro'. In this essay, I will attempt to explore two points: first, that Fanon in his revolutionary work mistook a racial subject for his own class – those he termed the 'nationalist bourgeoisie'; and, secondly, of late, other representatives of that class have sought selectively to re-appropriate and apportion Fanon for a post- or anti-revolutionary class-specific initiative.

The Negro

A persuasive demonstration can be made that the political attributes and psychosexual characteristics which Fanon excavated and first attached to the colonised Negro were, in the light of the Algerian Revolution, eventually assigned by him to the nationalist bourgeoisie.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*,⁵ written at the conclusion of his medical studies in France, Fanon dedicated himself to the 'disalienation' of the Black man. More particularly, though many of his examples were Black Antilleans, Fanon was certain that his true subject (or patient) was the 'colonised man', an essentially pathological personality.

White civilisation and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro. I shall demonstrate elsewhere that what is often called the black soul is a white man's artifact.

The educated Negro, slave of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro myth, feels at a given stage that his race no longer understands him ...

... rarely he wants to belong to his people. And it is with rage in his mouth and abandon in his heart that he buries himself in the vast black abyss ... [and] renounces the present and the future in the name of a mystical past.

Here we first encounter Fanon's antipathy to *négritude*, and are distressed by his drawing us somewhat furtively into an essentially petit-bourgeois discourse, but our more immediate concern is with his conflation of race, class, gender and colonialism. Employing the rhetorical devices of a race discourse (e.g., 'white civilisation', 'white man's artifact'), Fanon has for the moment abandoned his own project: 'it is apparent to me that the effective disalienation of the black man entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities. If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: – primarily economic; – subsequently, internalisation...' In his introduction, Fanon had insisted with unflinchingly male arrogance that 'the black man must wage his war on both levels', but his subtextual opposition to *négritude* has drawn him, just three pages later, into prioritising the derivative and psychological.

Furthermore, it too frequently seems of little importance to Fanon that the historical and psychological entity he sought to address slipped easily

in his imagination from 'the Negro' to the 'Black man' to the 'colonised man' to the 'woman of colour'. At this moment of his development, however, his casualness concealed from him the specific class identity and desires of his informants.

Imitating the interior voices of his subject, Fanon recites that 'the colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards.' He then proceeds to discuss the pathetic importance attached to speaking French 'correctly' ('In France one says, "He talks like a book". In Martinique, "He talks like a white man"'). But, notwithstanding his observation that the colonial models which occupy the imaginations of his subjects are 'his physicians, his department heads, his innumerable little functionaries', and that he is drawing on informants like M. Achille, a teacher at the Lycée du Parc in Lyon, and Aimé Césaire, the poet, playwright and politician, Fanon appears oblivious to the petit-bourgeois fountain of these ambitions.

In his unsparing criticism of mulatto women, Fanon is similarly dazzled by colour and his own weakness for the cultural discourses originating with his class. Though at times there is a suggestion of sympathy for his subjects – for example, when he writes that 'all these frantic women of colour in quest of white men are waiting' – more often he seems outraged. For these women of colour, Fanon reports:

It is always essential to avoid falling back into the pit of niggerhood, and every woman in the Antilles, whether in a casual flirtation or in a serious affair, is determined to select the least black of the men ... I know a great number of girls from Martinique, students in France, who admitted to me with complete candour – completely white candour – that they would find it impossible to marry Black men.

And in this chapter, he enlarges on the affidavits of these informants ('students in France') with the testimonies of a Black medical student, a customs inspector, of Mayotte Capecia, the self-consciously mulatto authoress of *Je suis Martiniquaise* and *La negresse blanche*, and Abdoulaye Sadj, an African novelist (*Nini*) and teacher. Fanon describes their behaviour as 'a kind of lactification' which inspires him to clinical invention. This particular Black neurosis, this 'constellation of delirium', Fanon chooses to term 'affective erethism'. Jock McCulloch, in his study of Fanon's clinical and social theories, provides us with some sense of the seductiveness of Fanon's error:

Affective erethism is the term Fanon coins to describe the massive sensitivity of the Negro. It is in response to this sensitivity that the Black man is drawn towards the white woman and the Black woman to the white man in a neurotic search for redemption. The gradation of Martiniquan society according to the varying tones of skin colour is the social corollary of this neurotic preoccupation with race.⁶

Once again, a class germinated and succoured in a colonial web of power relations is concealed by a psychologistic discourse. Fanon even laments the absence of dream materials which prevents him from further individuating the unconscious!

Fanon had no such problem with the diseased libido of the Black male or 'man of colour'. More certainly, he never complains of a dearth of materials. He begins his exposition with a confidently crafted interior monologue: 'I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilisation and dignity and make them mine.' And though his collection of informants is familiarly *classé* – Rene Maran's autobiographical novel, *Un homme pareil aux autres*, of an 'extremely brown' but not Negro man ('You merely look like one'), 'civilised students' – Fanon is ultimately displeased. Indeed, his displeasure is so acute that he moves to denounce himself:

Just as there was a touch of fraud in trying to deduce from the behaviour of Nini and Mayotte Capecia a general law of the behaviour of the Black woman with the white man, there would be a similar lack of objectivity, I believe, in trying to extend the attitude of Veneuse [Maran's fictional alter-ego] to the man of colour as such.

It is at this juncture that Fanon confronts colonialism and his entire analysis ascends to a mytho-historical plane:

In other words, I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonised native, robs me of all worth, all individuality, tells me that I am a parasite on the world, that I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with the white world ... Then I will quite simply try to make myself white; that is, I will compel the white man to acknowledge that I am human.

And with the appearance of this heretofore hidden reality, *Black Skin, White Masks* sloughs off its petit-bourgeois stink: 'the discoveries of Freud are of no use to us here ... the only masters are lies and demagoguery'. Fanon appeals to Pierre Naville's assertion that 'it is the economic and social conditions of class conflicts that explain and determine the real conditions in which individual sexuality expresses itself'.⁷

Lamentably, this was but an interlude. Without the experience or a consciousness of the history of liberation struggles, Fanon relapsed into the dependent discursive prism of his class: 'Two centuries ago I was lost to humanity, I was a slave for ever. And then came men who said that it all had gone on far too long.' This passive, grateful narrative of generous strangers is in stark contrast to the stance Fanon would assume just a few years later in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Following his immersion in the revolutionary consciousness of the Algerian peasantry, Fanon recited:

At twelve or thirteen years of age the village children know the names of the old men who were in the last rising, and the dreams they dream ... are not those of money or of getting through their exams ... but dreams of identification with some rebel or another, the story of whose heroic death still today moves them to tears.⁸

In France, Fanon had rejected *négritude* as a fruitless nostalgia for a Black past. Enveloped in an intellectual mist manufactured by Black *évolués*, Fanon found their evocation of the past suffocating, and the quest for Black civilisations and cultures indulgent misdirection: 'The discovery of the existence of a Negro civilisation in the fifteenth century confers no patent of humanity on me. Like it or not, the past can in no way guide me in the present situation.'⁹ And sympathetic as he was to the Vietnamese struggle for liberation, he appropriated it narcissistically and re-imagined it for his own purposes: 'It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his own that he is in revolt. It is because "quite simply" it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him to breathe.' How terribly precious!

In Algeria, Fanon observed a differently constructed relationship to the past, and this new historical complex seems to have permitted him to submerge 'the colonised Negro' of his French years into the cauldron of colonial political culture. The alienation, the racial envy, the compulsive acculturation, the moronic imitation, the self-disgust which he had assigned to the colonised subject were really the characteristic apparel of a national bourgeoisie – 'a bourgeoisie which is stupidly, contemptibly, cynically bourgeois', a bourgeoisie which 'has totally assimilated colonialist thought in its most corrupt form'.¹⁰ Concealed during the pre-independence era, the national bourgeoisie's imaginary is unveiled once it acquires political power:

By its laziness and will to imitation, it promotes the ingrafting and stiffening of racism which was characteristic of the colonial era. Thus it is by no means astonishing to hear in a country that calls itself African remarks which are neither more nor less than racist, and to observe the existence of paternalist behaviour which gives you the bitter impression that you are in Paris, Brussels, or London.

In certain regions of Africa, drivelling paternalism with regard to the blacks and the loathsome idea derived from Western culture that the Black man is impervious to logic and the sciences reign in all their nakedness.¹¹

It appears that Fanon has finally realised that the erethism, the lactification, the caressing of white breasts, the neurotic fears of niggerhood and the jungle were all merely circumstantial, occasioned by the racial artifice of the cautious master-exploiters of colonialism. The national bourgeoisie is not psychologically pathological, it is merely a class

whose vocations are ambition, power and greed.

And since, as a creature of colonialism, it has no prior existence, the national bourgeoisie, in its characteristically racial discursive practices, appropriates the histories of others: ordinarily its intelligentsia thinks in binaries of white civilisation/Black primitivism, or, in rebellion, of Black civilisation/white claimants. As creatures of what Fanon termed 'the organisation of the domination',¹² they imitate the manichaeism of the hegemon's dominant culture, and rehearse the metropole's antecedent promenades of assimilation.¹³

Recolonising Fanon

Little if any of this Fanon, however, resurfaces in the present interrogations of colonial discourse. Small wonder, when we recall that Fanon's final prescription for the national bourgeoisie is 'to repudiate its own nature'. And he was quite specific:

In an underdeveloped country an authentic national middle class ought to consider as its bounden duty to betray the calling fate has marked out for it, and to put itself to school with the people: in other words to put at the people's disposal the intellectual and technical capital that it has snatched when going through the colonial universities.¹⁴

While remaining alert to the snare inherent in the project, for the balance of this exercise, allow me to presume a parallel between Fanon's 'underdeveloped country' and Blacks in America, between his 'colonial universities' and those American institutions where the elite and their intermediaries have trained.

In his own recent ruminations on Fanon, the award-winning Black scholar, Henry Louis Gates Jr, uses his subject to question the need and the utility of a 'grand, unified theory of oppression'. Indeed, Gates concludes: 'It's no longer any scandal that our own theoretical reflections must be as provisional, reactive, and local as the texts we reflect upon ... it requires a recognition that we, too, just as much as Fanon, may be fated to rehearse the agonisms of a culture that may never earn the title of *postcolonial*.'¹⁵ Just how has Gates arrived at the certainty that Fanon has little to offer *all* victims of oppression? that theory is inevitably local? that, like Fanon's world, ours, too, is fated for permanent rupture and conflict?

At the outset (more accurately in the last note at the very end of the essay), Gates concedes a profoundly consequential flaw in his methodology: his comments refer only to *Black Skin, White Masks* since the paper was originally prepared for a Modern Language Association panel on 'Race and psychoanalysis'. That was disarming since, by the time I had come across this admission, I was already long prepared to make it central to a critical reading of the essay. This delayed admission then scrolls backwards through the essay, insisting from the reader concession after

concession. Does Gates really mean Fanon₂, whose last works may be 'his most valuable contributions' or Fanon₁, the author of *Black Skin*? To which is Gates referring when he maintains that to 'rehistoricise' Fanon 'means not to elevate him above his localities of discourse as a transcultural, transhistorical Global Theorist, nor simply to cast him into battle, but recognise him as a battlefield in himself'?¹⁶ It makes quite a difference since, if Gates is referring to Fanon₂, he is suggesting that we can dismiss Fanon's cruel critique of, and radical prescription for, the national bourgeoisie.

Again, if the mature Fanon is authentically local and provisional, then Fanon is no authority upon which to base an unease with national bourgeois intellectuals who engage in esoteric flights like Homi Bhabha's insistence that:

The place of the Other must not be imaged as Fanon sometimes suggests as a fixed phenomenological point, opposed to the self, that represents a culturally alien consciousness. The Other must be seen as the necessary negation of a primordial identity – cultural or psychic – that introduces the system of differentiation which enables the 'cultural' to be signified as a linguistic, symbolic, historic reality.¹⁷

Put simply, Bhabha is arguing that the Black (or Arab, Hindu, Oriental, native pre-American, etc.) imagined by whites is imaginary. They are merely useful devices for establishing European civilisation as *the* civilisation, European history as *universal* history. In not putting it simply, Bhabha has obscured Fanon's prior discovery of these truths (Fanon's critique of Freud, Marx, the psychological violence of colonialism, the cultural resources of anti-colonialism, etc.).¹⁸ And, by employing a language game entirely inaccessible to most of us, he has blatantly violated Fanon's advice to the national bourgeoisie that it place its academic and technical skills at the people's disposal. Worse yet, as Abdul JanMohamed maintains, Bhabha has erased the violence, the exploitiveness, the reality of colonialism.¹⁹ Of Bhabha's interpretation of Fanon, Benita Parry insists it 'obscures Fanon's paradigm of the colonial condition as one of implacable enmity between native and invader, making armed opposition both a cathartic and a pragmatic necessity'.²⁰

As Gates acknowledges, Parry's Fanon is closer to the original. But he no sooner concedes this authenticity to Parry than he takes off towards its rhetorical and spiritual negation. Like John F. Kennedy, Gates seems too frequently persuaded by the most recent adviser through the door. At this juncture in the essay, it is Gayatri Spivak. And Gates' concession to Spivak reveals his most serious conceit.

Spivak resents Parry's retrieval of what Spivak terms 'the native informant syndrome'.

When Benita Parry takes us – and by this I mean Homi Bhabha, Abdul

JanMohamed, Gayatri Spivak – to task for not being able to listen to the natives or to let the native speak, she forgets that we are natives, too. We talk like Defoe's Friday, only much better.²¹

Gates is thrilled with Spivak's rejection of the 'transparent "real" voice of the native' which Spivak attributes to Parry. He enthuses: 'I think this is an elegant reminder and safeguard against the sentimental romance of alterity. On the other hand, it still leaves space for some versions of Parry's critique ... There may well be something familiar about Spivak's insistence on the totalising embrace of colonial discourse, and Parry's unease with the insistence.'²²

And, having accomplished this miracle of reconciliation of contradictions, Gates is emboldened to conflate Fanon and Freud:

When Fanon asserted that 'only a psychoanalytical interpretation of the Black problem' could explain 'the structure of the complex', he was perhaps only extending a line of Freud's ... [that] 'Civilisation behaves toward sexuality as a people or a stratum of its population does which has subjected another one to its exploitation.' Freud's pessimistic vision of 'analysis interminable' would then refer us to a process of decolonisation interminable. I spoke of this double session of paradigms, in which the Freudian mechanisms of psychic repression are set in relation to those of colonial repression; but it's still unclear whether we are to speak of convergence or mere parallelism.²³

Here Gates compounds his negligence of Fanon₂, erases the contradictions and radical anticipations in Fanon₁, and, substituting Freud for Fanon, proceeds, through a metaphorical displacement of colonialist oppression by a therapeutic paradigm, to raise issue with the origins and purposes of the anti-colonial struggles.

The mature Fanon turned away from psychoanalysis and its preoccupation with sexuality as the explanatory paradigm for the 'Black problem'. Even the young Fanon, in *Black Skin*, displayed some deeper understanding of sexual repression and the rebounding dynamics of colonialism, implying neither convergence nor parallelism. Quoting a long passage from Aimé Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* in *Black Skin*, Fanon recognised that eventually political and cultural repression (i.e., fascism) is transferred to the metropole because of its organisation of colonial domination. Césaire's contempt for the metropole was palpable:

And then, one lovely day, the middle class is brought up short by a staggering blow: The Gestapo are busy again ...

... It is savagery, the supreme savagery, it crowns, it epitomises the day-to-day savageries; yes, it is Nazism, but before they became its victims, they were its accomplices; that Nazism they tolerated before they succumbed to it, they exonerated it, they closed their eyes to it, they legitimated it because until then it had been employed only against

non-European peoples ... it drips, it seeps, it wells from every crack in western Christian civilisation until it engulfs that civilisation in a bloody sea.²⁴

Freud's myopia and Gates' confusions as to the origins of repression are their own. The mature Fanon was unambiguous: 'when the native hears a speech about Western culture he pulls out his knife – or at least he makes sure it is within reach'.²⁵ And the mature Fanon was equally clear about the dialectic of colonialism and liberation:

The settler's work is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the native. The native's work is to imagine all possible methods for destroying the settler ... for the colonised people this violence, because it constitutes their only work, invests their characters with positive and creative qualities.²⁶

But in the academic terrain occupied by Gates and Spivak, the text is everything: 'The Derridian *mot*, that there is nothing outside the text, is reprised as the argument that there is nothing outside (the discourse of) colonialism.'²⁷ This is precisely the conceit to which I referred earlier. Thus, the search for the *real* Fanon takes Gates from interpretive text to the next text, from one clever exposition to its more clever critique.* Fanon is what occurs at whatever moment one intercepts the daisy-chain:

If Said made of Fanon an advocate of post-postmodern counter-narratives of liberation; if JanMohamed made of Fanon a Manichean theorist of colonialism as absolute negation; and if Bhabha cloned from Fanon's *theoria*, another Third World post-structuralist, Parry's Fanon (which I generally find persuasive) turns out to confirm her own rather optimistic vision of literature and social action.²⁸

And since, for Gates, all these constructions of Fanon achieve an elegance of their own, 'it may be a matter of judgment whether his writings are rife with contradiction or richly dialectical, polyvalent, and multivalent'.²⁹ But on Gates' own claims of provisionality, from where would such a judgment originate? On what rules or laws, or accumulated experience, would it be based and evaluated? There is only the fascination of exposition. Though Fanon can never have the gravity due to the real, his reward is to become another of those intriguing texts. There is only the clever, the performative, the elegant.

But let us be frank. Though Fanon is the signifier, the immediate objects of Gates and his fellow anti-Fanonists (Bhabha and Spivak) are Edward Said, Abdul JanMohamed and Benita Parry. After all, Fanon is dead. But what threat, what offence are attached to Said, Parry and

* The worship of the text produces some bizarre moments. Recall that it was Spivak who, in her own defence, asserted her superiority as a native spokesperson over 'Defoe's Friday', a fictional character!

JanMohamed by the anti-Fanonists? What links Said, JanMohamed and Parry, if not Fanon, or merely Fanon? If, as Madhava Prasad claims, their texts help constitute some 'Fanonian tradition', the handling of that tradition makes it appear woefully mistaken if not harmless.³⁰ After all, how telling can a tradition be which cannot account for such things as the 'incorporation of indigenous elites into the ruling consensus of the colonial state' or 'the "education" of the indigenous ruling groups in the working of the capitalist economy'?³¹ Since Fanon did these things, indeed initiated his interrogation of colonialism at precisely the relationship between the apparatus of colonial racism and the native *petit-bourgeoisie*, there may be some question as to why Prasad assigns to him those who do not.

We can only speculate on the sources of the misdirection and concealment. Remember Said and Parry both are aggressive advocates of global theory and liberation. The one Palestinian and the other South African, they have each spent much of their lives involved in liberation movements, and not merely those which are their 'own'. With his study of the western 'orientalist' discourses on Arab eroticism and Islamic inferiorisation, Said forced this reality of bloody antagonism through the walls of the academy, and Parry has joined in the more recent inspection of academic radicalism. Prasad acknowledges that:

Parry reads the poststructuralist privileging of 'agonism and uncertainty' as a selective reading of the text that emphasises the 'contemplative' mode while ignoring the uncompromising call to arms against colonial exploitation.³²

Thus, in their attacks on the citadel we occupy and the costs our habitation sometimes incurred, they do sound like the Fanon whose attitude towards the colonised intellectual was rather extreme: 'individuals without an anchor, without a horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless – a race of angels ... [who] cannot or will not make a choice'.³³

What Said, JanMohamed and Parry now represent, and what Fanon once embodied, is the sustained attempt to locate and subsequently advertise a fixed and stable site of radical liberationist criticism and creativity.³⁴ Little of this project survives in a literature which posits a psycho-existential complicity between the colonised and the colonisers, which spatially and temporally domesticates all social theory, and whose mechanics recognise no voice more authentic than their own. Gates and his collaborators preserve and consume Fanon all in the same moment.

Sadly, for whatever reasons Gates requires an erasure of global theory, the project has the result of concealing the nature and possible destinies of the *petit-bourgeoisie* from Fanon's exposures. Fanon had made two critical correctives to class analyses of the modern world:

1. The social and cultural organisation of colonial domination occurs through a racial discourse which is eventually appropriated by a native

petit-bourgeoisie for its own purposes.

2. In the aftermath of an anti-colonial struggle, the petit-bourgeoisie, not the proletariat, is much more likely to inherit power from the metropole's bourgeoisie.³⁵

Bound initially by the prism of his own class, Fanon had begun to imagine conceptually and theoretically the modern world outside the seductive deceptions appropriated and enforced by his class. In light of the ferocious socialist orthodoxies of his day and place, Fanon (like Césaire) even had the temerity to suggest that material society (capitalism) could be profoundly (i.e., permanently) altered by ideas (racism). Analogous to Marx's proposition that, in the proletariat, the bourgeoisie had invented the instrument of its own destruction, Fanon and Césaire maintained that colonialist racialism, at the onset inspired by the material needs of capitalism, had disrupted bourgeois ideology and the modern world's social order. Still inhibited by the embedding of the European Enlightenment into their consciousness, they needed only to realise further that they were not faced with a rational order gone awry, but the exhaustion of a rationalist adventure in the wilderness of an irrational (i.e., racial) civilisation. It seems more and more apparent that a metropolitan elite, whose domination and rule are increasingly disoriented by racialism, cannot hope to achieve a stable world order conspiring with a frenetic petit-bourgeois elite in the Third World. We shall have few occasions for such concerns or their implications if we are preoccupied with what he said she said.

References

- 1 Officially, Fanon died of bronchial pneumonia, but some of the circumstances of his death (e.g., the roles of the CIA and State Department) remain disputed. Cf. Irene Gendzier, *Frantz Fanon: a critical study* (New York, 1973), pp.195-6 and 231-2; and Peter Geismar, *Frantz Fanon* (New York, 1971), pp.143 and 178.
- 2 Jack Woddis parries Fanon on behalf of marxism in *New Theories of Revolution* (New York, 1972); and similarly for the inheritors of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), see Mohamed el Mili's critique of the Fanon literature, Gendzier, op.cit., pp.246-50.
- 3 Madhava Prasad, 'The "Other" worldliness of postcolonial discourse: a critique', *Critical Quarterly* (Vol.34, no.3, Autumn 1992), pp.74-89.
- 4 Henry Louis Gates Jr, 'Critical Fanonism', *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1991), p.465.
- 5 In the text, all references are to *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, 1967).
- 6 Jock McCulloch, *Black Soul, White Artifact* (London, 1983), p.66.
- 7 The excerpt is from Naville's *Psychologies, Marxisme, Materialisme* (Paris, 1948), p.151. McCulloch (op.cit., pp.213-21) appropriately criticises Fanon for failing to provide his own theory of the economic origins of colonialism in *Black Skins*, but mishandles Fanon's disagreements with Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban* (New York, 1964), insisting that Fanon has not persuasively presented his case that Mannoni had produced an apologia for colonialism: 'what evidence does Fanon produce to show the connection between economic institutions and racism?' (McCulloch, p.216). Ironically, McCulloch later concedes the very bases for Fanon's accusations: 'Fanon believes that by linking colonialism with certain qualities supposedly latent within the

psyche of the Malagasy, Mannoni had played down the role of environmental factors in the development of the colonial personality ... Mannoni implies that the French presence is essential if there were to be any prospect of the Malagasy developing either socially or psychologically' (p.220).

- 8 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, 1968), p.114.
- 9 *Black Skin*, op.cit.
- 10 *The Wretched of the Earth*, op.cit.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 'Colonialism is the organisation of the domination of a nation after military conquest.' Fanon, 'French intellectuals and democrats in the Algerian Revolution', in *Toward the African Revolution* (New York, 1967), p.83. See also Cedric J. Robinson, 'Fanon and the West: imperialism in the native imagination', *Africa and the World* (October 1987), p.34.
- 13 For American examples of the powerless appropriating white race discourse as a means of identification with power, see David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* (London, 1991) and Michael Rogin's 'Black masks, White skin: consciousness of class and American national culture', *Radical History* (No.54, 1992), for workers; and Neal Gabler's *An Empire of Their Own* (New York, 1988) and Michael Rogin's 'Making America home: racial masquerade and ethnic assimilation in the transition to talking pictures', *Journal of American History* (No.79, December 1992), for Jews.
- 14 *Wretched of the Earth*, op.cit.
- 15 Gates, op.cit., p.470.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Bhabha's introduction to the 1986 edition of *Black Skin, White Masks*, quoted by Gates, *ibid.*, p.461.
- 18 Above I have cited Fanon's dismissal of Freud. Of his many similar comments on marxism, the following is illustrative: 'In a colonial country, it used to be said, there is a community of interests between the colonised people and the working class of the colonialist country. The history of the wars of liberation waged by the colonised peoples is the history of the non-verification of this thesis.' Fanon, 'French intellectuals', op.cit., p.82.
- 19 'Bhabha's unexamined conflation ["the unity of the colonial subject (both coloniser and colonised)"] allows him to circumvent entirely the dense history of the material conflict between Europeans and natives and to focus on colonial discourse as if it existed in a vacuum.' Abdul JanMohamed, 'The economy of Manichean allegory: the function of racial difference in colonialist literature', in Henry Louis Gates (ed.), *'Race', Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1986), p.79.
- 20 Parry, 'Problems in current theories of colonial discourse', *Oxford Literary Review* (No.9, Winter 1987), p.32, quoted by Gates, op.cit., p.464.
- 21 Maria Koundoura, 'Naming Gayatri Spivak', *Stanford Humanities Review* (Spring 1989), pp.91-2, quoted by Gates, op.cit., p.465.
- 22 Gates, op.cit., p.466.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp.466-7.
- 24 Quoted in *Black Skin*, op.cit., pp.90-91.
- 25 *Wretched of the Earth*, op.cit., p.43.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p.93.
- 27 Gates, op.cit., p.466.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p.465.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p.458.
- 30 According to Prasad, the ingredients of a Fanonian tradition are the 'belief in the continued existence of the primary antagonism ... between coloniser and colonised', the 'repressive hypothesis' of culture, a diminished capacity to recognise 'the transformations in the global political economy', and an internationalist approach with a 'tendency to treat cultural entities as existing prior to their encounter in the

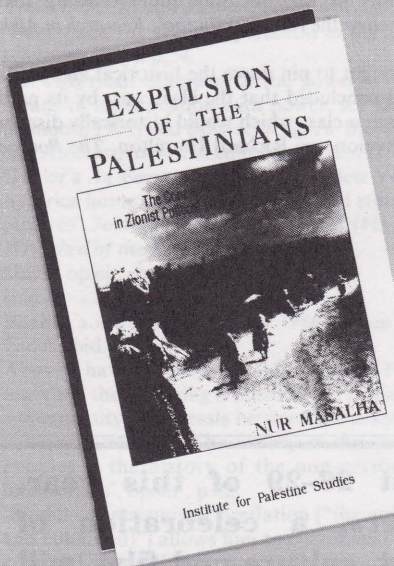
- imperialist era. Globality ... [exists] between myriad discrete entities, rather than [being] a process which produces and transforms those entities.' Prasad, op.cit., pp.87-8.
- 31 Ibid., p.88.
- 32 Ibid., p.79.
- 33 *Wretched of the Earth*, op.cit., p.218.
- 34 Roger Berger insists that 'the significant division in African literary theory ... is to be found in what I shall call the Fanonist "threshold" that divides "accommodation" with existing western textual strategies and rejection of Eurocentric methodologies in the search for an Afrocentric means of reading and understanding texts'. 'Contemporary Anglophone literary theory: the return of Fanon', *Research in African Literature* (Spring 1990), p.142.
- 35 In the 1840s, Marx and Engels first sought to pin down the historical and political character of the petit-bourgeoisie and concluded that the class was, by its nature, reactionary. They also agreed that it was a class which would historically disappear into the proletariat. For a recent discussion, see Richard Hamilton, *The Bourgeois Epoch* (Chapel Hill, 1991), pp.6-8.

DREAMSPEAKERS

From August 26-29 of this year, *Dreamspeakers*, a celebration of aboriginal art, culture and film, will be coming to Edmonton. The festival will include public performances by many renowned artists in Churchill Square, as well as films by Aboriginal filmmakers that will be shown in three separate downtown theatres. Remember to look for *Dreamspeakers* for incredible entertainment and cultural exchange this August.

Festival address: 9914-76 Avenue, Edmonton,
Alberta, Canada T6E 1K7
Phone: (403) 439-3456 Fax: (403) 439-2066

INSTITUTE FOR PALESTINE STUDIES



"The ideas and attitudes that produced [the 1948] expulsion are the subject of this impressive and timely book. Dr. Masalha's quietly devastating research is almost entirely based on declassified Israeli archival material ... a sober and carefully researched account."

- Lord Gilmour, formerly Lord Privy Seal (1979-1981), *The Guardian* (London)

"[The author] shows, using documents from the Israeli archives, that the flight of the Arab population from what became Israel in 1948 — which Israel's first president Chaim Weizmann hailed as 'a miraculous clearing of the land' — was in fact 'less of a miracle than the culmination of over a half century of effort, plans, and ... force.'"

- Edward Mortimer, *Financial Times*

Order toll free: 800-874-3614



\$24.95 hardcover + \$3 shipping/handling
(ISBN 0-88728-235-0)

Institute for Palestine Studies
P.O. Box 25301 • Georgetown Station
Washington, D.C. 20007
Tel. 202-342-3990 • FAX 202-342-3927

SIDNEY J. LEMELLE

The politics of cultural existence: Pan-Africanism, historical materialism and Afrocentricity

'Knowledge is not a goal in itself, but a path to wisdom; it bestows not privilege so much as duty, not power so much as responsibility. And it brings with it a desire to learn even as one teaches, to teach even as one learns. It is used not to compete with one's fellow beings for some unending standard of life, but to achieve for them, as for oneself, a higher quality of life.'

— A. Sivanandan¹

In the wake of Reaganomics, Thatcherism and the rise of neo-conservatism in the 1980s, Black people around the world have begun a desperate search for new avenues of counter-hegemonic discourse – often through the creation or resurrection of cultural representations and icons (e.g., Malcolm X caps, Rap music and African dress). This, in turn, has rekindled an old debate which first surfaced in 1900, again in the 1920s, '30s and '60s, and now in the 1990s. The main points of the debate can be divided into several basic questions: (1) Does the African experience contain 'universal' beliefs and institutions which facilitate resistance to oppression by diaspora Blacks (i.e., people of African descent in the 'Americas', Caribbean and Europe); (2) What, if any, are the relationships between African and Black Atlantic cultures; (3) To what degree have Eurocentric conceptualisations affected/distorted African and Black Atlantic cultures, cultural productions and image representations; (4) To what extent do the affects of Eurocentrism (white chauvinism/racism) keep Africans and Blacks from 'knowing themselves' and resisting that

Sidney J. Lemelle teaches in the Department of History, Pomona College, California, and is editor of *W.E.B. DuBois and Black Sovereignty* (London, Verso, forthcoming)

Race & Class, 35, 1 (1993)

which oppresses them?

This article is an attempt to come to terms with some of these questions, as well as the key ideas and strategies which have long been part of the debate on the 'politics of Black Nationalism' and Pan-Africanism.² I must emphasise at the outset that this is not simply an internal 'Black debate' on strategies and tactics; nor is it a part of the irrelevant right-wing 'non-debate' on Political Correctness (PC) now raging on American college campuses.³ Instead, it is an attempt to gauge the importance of Pan-Africanist and Black nationalist thought as forces for change through a historical and contemporary examination of their influence on popular consciousness and liberation struggles.

The historiography of Black nationalist and Pan-Africanist thought has undergone many changes since its nineteenth-century origins. T.T. Fortune, Martin Delany, E.W. Blyden, Alexander Crummell, J.E. Caseley-Hayford, J. Africanus Beale Horton and other early pioneers on the subject wrote extensively on the glories of African peoples and their descendants in the 'new world'. The writings of these authors were by no means all the same, yet their basic intellectual and philosophical underpinnings had a common provenance. As I will demonstrate below, the 'liberal' school of historical interpretation which dominated western education in the nineteenth century has influenced and continues to influence the basic assumptions and conclusions of nationalist writers about Pan-Africanism.

As might be expected, this liberal school brought forth a reaction from more radical theorists. In the post-second world war era, scholar-activists such as C.L.R. James, W.E.B. DuBois and Eric Williams wrote radical critiques of the earlier literature.⁴ Their interpretations were to varying degrees rooted in, or at least influenced by, Marxist-Leninist attacks on European capitalist exploitation. The aim of these radical critiques was not only to rebuke early liberal historiography of Pan-Africanism – steeped in nineteenth-century European beliefs in uplift and progress within European capitalism – but also to criticise dogmatic, reductionist and non-revolutionary 'cultural nationalist' views.

In the 1970s and '80s, books and essays on Black nationalism and Pan-Africanism by Cedric Robinson, Walter Rodney, Bernard Magubane and A. Sivanandan, to name just a few, continued the radical tradition.⁵ In particular, this group of radical diasporan authors were influenced by the writings of Antonio Gramsci on cultural hegemony and the capitalist state, and the works of Frantz Fanon on the psychology of racism.⁶ Their works grappled with the historical and philosophical contradictions within the diasporan Pan-African movement and specifically the means of achieving African and Black liberation – a debate which continues today.

My article will begin answering the questions posed above by highlighting some of the philosophical contradictions contained in the current

Pan-African debate. I will then examine the practical implications of this debate by contrasting the works of several important groups of writers and theorists. The first group is represented by Molefi Kete Asante, a well-known scholar and editor who has popularised a modern-day version of liberal cultural nationalism. The second group is represented by several radical diasporan authors including A. Sivanandan, an organic intellectual, writer and editor in Britain, as well as Cedric Robinson, Manning Marable, Bernard Magubane and George Lipsitz. All have provided a historical materialist critique of such notions for many years. While both groups have argued convincingly that an understanding of culture and politics is essential in the struggle for Black liberation in Africa and the diaspora, I maintain that the philosophical and practical implications of their arguments are quite different. Within this context, it should be borne in mind that classifying intellectual perspectives is always arbitrary and fraught with contradictions, yet it can be useful in heuristic terms – particularly when trying to gauge the philosophical ‘residue’ in more current debates and their potential for liberation.

Finally, I will analyse the implications of the works of both groups vis-à-vis Pan-Africanism and Afrocentricity – from a historical materialist perspective.⁷ I will argue that the potential of revolutionary Pan-Africanism as a counter-hegemonic discourse and tool for working-class liberation is superior to Afrocentricity, because it allows for a concrete, material analysis of society that breaks with the dominant idealistic discourse in a way that Afrocentricity can not.

Idealism, essentialism and Afrocentricity

Molefi Asante, chair of the Department of African-American Studies at Temple University, has become one of the chief spokespersons for a movement that uses scholarship ‘to forge a distinct view of the world, one in which Europeans and their white descendants no longer occupy the central and exalted position’ – i.e., Afrocentrism.⁸ In his books and articles, Asante lays out the basic justifications for, and necessity of, his ‘unique’ Afrocentric philosophy.⁹ In his book, *The Afrocentric Idea*, he begins by stating that his work is ‘a radical critique of the Eurocentric ideology that masquerades as a universal view’.¹⁰ He is providing a ‘different view ... and new perspectives’ which he calls ‘Afrocentricity’.

Asante defines his new perspective as ‘the most complete philosophical totalisation of the African being-at-the-center of his or her existence’.¹¹ The basic argument maintains that, to understand the ‘African experience’ (in either Africa or the Americas), it must be approached from the perspective of Africans themselves – not from a distorted Eurocentric view. This is a valid, yet not necessarily new, concept.¹² Asante claims to be innovative in developing an entire discourse, devoid of Eurocentric philosophy (materialism, positivism, etc.), for analysing rhetoric. Yet, in

the process of explicating his 'new methodology', Asante reverts to the most prevalent Eurocentric strain of philosophy: idealism.¹³ Thus, at the base of Asante's Afrocentric conceptualisation is the primacy of ideas over material reality. He claims that by using 'ideas' and 'words' to critique a society and its ruling ideology, his words will 'provide a radical assessment of a given reality' and thus 'create, among other things, another reality'.¹⁴ Put another way, Asante's ideas, which are reflected in the words he uses to critique, will alter, indeed create, another material reality.

Similarly, Asante's interpretation of current history locates the basic force of social evolution in the ideas and theories of Afrocentricity. In this sense, Asante stands squarely within the nineteenth-century Idealist philosophy associated with such European intellectuals as Georg Friedrich Hegel, Otto Bauer and Thomas Carlyle.¹⁵ Hegel, for example, believed that the 'absolute idea' (akin to Asante's Afrocentricity) governed the lives of people and moved society forward. Similarly, Bauer and Carlyle believed, as does Asante, that each society moves forward because of its individual (invariably male) 'personality'.

In his numerous works, Asante explains the social and cultural evolution of African-Americans in terms of individual personality and ideas, attributing to them a uniquely creative role in Black history. By concentrating on black male intellectuals like Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey and Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, Elijah Mohammed, Malcolm X and Maulana Karenga, Asante is implying that these individual 'prophets' and 'heroes' made history by themselves – standing above the Black masses. For him, these 'exceptional personalities ... stood against the storm and kept the lights burning to point the way'.¹⁶ Yet, from the perspective of a historical materialist, it is not 'heroes' that make history but vice versa. It is people – common, ordinary, everyday women and men – who select their heroes and move history onwards. This is not to say that outstanding individuals do not play an important part in the life of society; they do – but only in so far as they are capable of acting upon the social conditions and stimulating people to act to improve their condition.¹⁷

Aside from outright 'hero-worship', such masculinist discourse, E. Frances White has argued, invents a past which is subject to 'sexist pitfalls' and fosters a 'conservative agenda on gender and sexuality'.¹⁸ This feeling is also captured in Anne McClintock's haunting indictment of the type of nationalism represented by Afrocentricity: 'all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous'.¹⁹ Most Black feminist scholars agree that the Afrocentric position towards women is filled with both contradictory and condescending attitudes. Black feminist scholars, such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, have also challenged the androcentric biases of Asante's Afrocentric analysis 'by calling attention to interlocking systems of domination – sex, race, and class'.²⁰ For Asante,

race remains 'the most dominant aspect of intersocial relations', although, mindful of Black feminist criticisms, he adds, 'gender also must be seen as a substantial research area'. Yet, even in the face of his own androcentric/Afrocentric positionality, Asante can rationalise: 'Since the liberation of women is not an act of charity but a basic premise of the Afrocentric project, the researcher must be cognisant of sexist language, terminology, and perspective.'²¹ Not surprisingly, Asante has rejected the work of such Black feminists (or 'Afrofemcentrists' as he chooses to refer to them) who separate 'sex and race' in their work. Instead he praises the 'Africana Womanist project' of scholars like Vivian Gordon, Clenora Hudson Weems, Brenda Verner, Kariamuwelsh Asante and Dona Marimba Richards who 'have found their models ... in the ancient models of Auset-Ausar and Mawu-Lisa'.²²

Asante also finds himself replicating much of current Eurocentric sociology, which maintains that, in the evolution of social life, the basic factor is not the productive forces in society, but the 'unity of soul and will' among 'Africans'. Hence, the determining force in society is not a struggle of classes against sexism, nor the activity of the masses of Black people, but the strong 'cultural identity' and personalities of Black male leaders.²³ This is another way of saying ideas make history, obscuring the fact that historical development brings about the rise of new ideas and leaders.

In Asante's Afrocentric critique, he claims to incorporate an 'African perspective', which will somehow transform the 'Eurocentric reality'. In formulating this 'African perspective', he is guilty of essentialising an entire people and constructing an abstract, non-existent, 'Africa'. Indeed, he has incorporated many of the European misconceptions which V.Y. Mudimbe critiques in his book *The Invention of Africa*.²⁴ Asante's Africa is an idealised 'Africa', a 'society [which] is essentially a society of harmonies, inasmuch as the coherence or compatibility of persons, things and modalities is at the root of traditional African philosophy'.²⁵ Perhaps sensing his essentialism and the imminent critiques of his position, Asante states: 'When we speak of Africans, we are usually talking about a multitude of attitudes, people, and cosmologies; and in this circumstance, to speak of an African mind is to speak cautiously.' He then adds: 'Nevertheless, we speak broadly of traditional African society – perhaps, even African culture.'²⁶ In another article, Asante explains, 'By "African" I clearly mean a "composite African" not a specific discrete African ethnicity.'²⁷ Attempts to rationalise his essentialism aside, Asante never comes to grips with this philosophical utilitarianism.

Anyone who has studied African history and its people and cultures seriously realises that a multitude of attitudes and cosmologies brought about its many cultures – none of which were 'universal'. Africa is made up of people from different ethnic, religious and linguistic groupings. Furthermore, 'traditions' in most African societies were created and

recreated by people, often to defend against destructive assaults on their economic, political and cultural beings.²⁸ As Anne McClintock has written: 'Traditions are not the sacrosanct and timeless essences of a people; they are social inventions often of very recent origin – both the outcome and the record of political contests and power...' Thus, 'all too often,' she observes, 'the doors of tradition are slammed in women's faces.'²⁹ Asante's conception of 'tradition' implies a static and unproblematic existence which deprives Africa and its peoples and cultures of their dynamism.

Thus, what Asante and other Afrocentrists claim to be 'traditional African ways' are, in actuality, their own reconstructions of customs and mores taken from many different societies of Africa. For example, Afrocentrists have invented a 'traditional African' holiday (*Kwanza*) celebrated nowhere else in the world except the United States, a 'traditional African ideology' (*Njia*) also unknown outside the western hemisphere, and an Afrocentric study of phenomena, events, ideas and personalities related to Africa (*Africology*).³⁰ Thus, even though Asante claims 'Afrocentricity is not a black version of Eurocentricity', in developing an 'alternative view', he and other Afrocentric scholars substitute a set of culturally constructed 'African traditions' for ones that are supposedly 'European'.³¹ In the final analysis, Asante's Afrocentric vision and its philosophical contradictions have important practical implications – political and economic – for the liberation struggle of African peoples worldwide.

The liberation of the Black intellectual

Other scholars and theoreticians have taken different approaches to Black liberation, despite having gone through transformational processes similar to Asante's. Scholars like A. Sivanandan and Cedric Robinson were 'educated' within colonial/neo-colonial systems (British and American respectively). They came of age intellectually during the 1950s and 1960s – the era of African decolonisation and liberation movements in Africa and the diaspora. They searched for their cultural identity as a way of fighting oppression. Sivanandan and Robinson provide some insights into Asante's idealistic/essentialist philosophy.³²

For Asante, 'seeing' the need for change 'based on people's needs and experiences' is primarily at the existential and intellectual level. According to him, 'Invariably, rhetoric allies itself with the socio-economic ... dominant culture. Therefore, the dilemma of the scholar who would break out of these restricting chains is fundamentally *an ideological one*.' Asante also says 'liberation from the captivity of racist language is the first order of the intellectual'.³³ Unfortunately, the means by which this break is to be accomplished remain unclear.

Sivanandan, in 'The liberation of the black intellectual', describes the

transition of the 'coloured intellectual' into the 'black intellectual'. The former is a colonial construct, a product of colonial education and imbued with a Eurocentric value system. The challenge of the 'coloured intellectual' is (as Asante would agree) to overcome Eurocentric brainwashing and become united with one's people – a Black intellectual.

According to Sivanandan, for 'coloured' intellectuals, the search for identity is a complicated process: 'in coming to consciousness of the oppressed, [they] "take conscience of [themselves]"' and, at that moment of reconciliation 'between the existential and the intellectual, between the subjective and objective realities of [their] oppression ... [are] delivered from ... marginality and stand revealed as neither "coloured" nor "intellectual" – but BLACK'.³⁴ Yet, for Black intellectuals, the process does not stop there. By accepting their Blackness, they seek to define it in a world filled with Eurocentric values and must 'come to see the need for radical change in both the values and structure of that society'.³⁵

In a similar vein, Cedric Robinson in his book *Black Marxism*, discusses 'the formation of an intelligentsia' – which includes George Padmore, C.L.R. James, Eric Williams, Oliver C. Cox, Aimé Césaire, W.E.B. DuBois and Richard Wright. As 'Black petit bourgeoisie intellectuals', they all passed through 'the prepossessing claims of bourgeois ideology for Western cultural superiority with their only modestly disguised radicalism. But eventually they would emerge convinced that a larger and different achievement was required ... each in his own time, turned his face to the historical tradition of Black liberation and became Black radicals.' But Robinson also points out 'that their brilliance was also derivative. The truer genius was in the midst of the people of whom they wrote. There the struggle was more than words or ideas but life itself'.³⁶

Perhaps one of the most insightful analyses of the contradiction of the 'black intellectual' comes from George Lipsitz's biography of Ivory Perry, a worker and civil rights activist-organiser. In *A Life in the Struggle*, Lipsitz, borrowing freely from Gramsci, portrays Perry as an 'organic intellectual' of the working class.³⁷ In Gramsci's view, 'organic' intellectuals are the 'thinking and organising element of a particularly fundamental social class'; their function is in 'directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong'.³⁸ Herein lies the difference between an organic intellectual like Ivory Perry and a 'traditional' professional intellectual like Asante (both of whom have working-class origins). According to Gramsci, 'The mode of being' of the organic intellectual 'can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, "permanent persuader" and not just a simple orator'.³⁹

Sivanandan, Robinson and Lipsitz all believe that Black intellectuals (i.e., organic intellectuals) must develop a socio-political 'mode' of

opposition as a step towards breaking with the dominant discourse. They not only 'analyse and interpret the world, they originate and circulate their ideas through social contestation ... [they] learn about the world by trying to change it, and they change the world by learning about it from the perspective of the needs and aspirations of their social group'.⁴⁰ Thus, what distinguishes the transformation of Asante from that of Ivory Perry is not simply ideology, but the fact that Asante – through his reliance on Afrocentric rhetoric – is divorced from oppositional activities connected with social contestation. He has broken his 'organic' ties to the working class and thus remains constrained by the dominant bourgeois ideology. Indeed, the 'break' that Asante insists is so fundamental is not made. I will return to this point later.

Obviously, the decision to break with the dominant ideology is often difficult for the Black intellectual given the contradictions of a society where, as Sivanandan views it, 'even the revolutionary ideologies that envisage such a change are unable to take into their perspective the nature of his [or her] particular oppression and its implications for revolutionary strategies'.⁴¹ Here he is polemicising against (and unfortunately also caricaturing) white radicals (mostly marxists) who, in the 1960s and '70s, were involved in anti-war, anti-racist, labour union and coalition struggles. Sivanandan argues that many (although by no means all) misunderstood the relationship between race and class.

White radicals continue to maintain that colour oppression is no more than an aspect of class oppression, that colour discrimination is only another aspect of working-class exploitation, that the capitalist system is the common enemy of the white worker and black alike...

But what these radicals fail to realise is that the black man, by virtue of his particular oppression, is closer to his bourgeois brother (by colour) than to his white comrade. Indeed, his white comrade is party to his oppression. He too benefits from the exploitation of the black man, however indirectly.⁴²

Asante would agree with this indictment of white marxist radicals, but would go farther: 'Because it emerged from the Western consciousness, Marxism is mechanistic in its approach to social understanding and development, and it has often adopted forms of social Darwinism when explaining cultural and social phenomena ... [thus] Marxism is not helpful in developing Afrocentric concepts and methods...'⁴³ Sivanandan confirms that 'Marxism, after all, was formulated in a European context and must, on its own showing, be Eurocentric'.⁴⁴ Similarly, Robinson also notes 'in his criticisms of Marxism ... [Richard] Wright was not entirely rejecting it but was attempting to locate it, to provide a sense of the boundaries of its authority'.⁴⁵ Thus, rather than discarding the entire methodology because of its Eurocentric provenance, Wright and Sivanandan would instead reconceptualise and 'revolutionise' the marxist

methodological approach to culture as a way of breaking the alliance with dominant culture.

In their preoccupation with the economic factors of capitalist oppression, they [white marxists] have ignored the importance of its existential consequences, in effect its consequences to culture. The whole structure of white racism [Eurocentrism] is built no doubt on economic exploitation but it is cemented with white culture. *In other words, the racism inherent in white society is determined economically, but defined culturally.* And any revolutionary ideology that is relevant to the times must envisage not merely a change in the ownership of the means of production, but a definition of that ownership: who shall own, whites only or blacks as well? It must envisage, that is, a fundamental change in the concepts of man and society contained in white culture – it must envisage a revolutionary culture. For, as Gramsci has said, revolutionary theory requires a revolutionary culture (emphasis added).⁴⁶

At this point it should be noted that Sivanandan (and to a lesser extent Robinson and Lipsitz), in much the same way as Asante idealises ‘African’ culture, is guilty of essentialising ‘white’ culture – in effect creating/inventing a ‘West’ devoid of class struggle, cultural dynamism and diversity. Indeed, much of what is understood and claimed as ‘white culture’ was made possible by the labour-power of African and other peoples from the ‘Third World’. Nevertheless, these radical theorists give insight into the necessity for revolutionary theory which leads to societal change, and ultimately to revolutionary culture.

Since Asante rejects the counter-hegemonic cultural vision of historical materialists, especially the idea that any European or Eurocentric notion is capable of promoting change for Blacks, we must ask the question: can an Afrocentric view break with the dominant culture and bring forth a revolutionary culture? Let us see how Sivanandan, Robinson, Lipsitz and Marable approached this question in the 1960s by analysing a very similar debate associated with the Black Power movement.

Culture and identity

Sivanandan’s 1971 article, ‘Black Power: the politics of existence’, and Manning Marable’s chapters in *Race, Reform and Rebellion* each give critical insight into the evolution (or devolution) of Asante’s Afrocentric philosophy.⁴⁷ Each analyses the two contending forces of nationalism in the 1960s-70s: cultural nationalists and revolutionary nationalists. As Sivanandan and Marable illustrate, the Black Power movement during the period was viewed by the state as a threat to their dominance and was, therefore, targeted for elimination.⁴⁸ Due in part to real ideological difference, but also to misinformation disseminated by FBI

Counterintelligence Programs (COINTELPRO), these two camps were involved in a heated, and sometimes deadly, struggle against each other. Similarly to Marable, Sivanandan sub-divides the nationalist groups into various categories: in the first, he places the most recent generation of Asante's philosophical primogenitors, poet-activist Imamu Baraka (aka LeRoi Jones) and the founder of US (United Slaves Organization), Maulana Ron Karenga. In the second category of revolutionary nationalists, Sivanandan uses the Black Panther Party (BPP) as the prime example.⁴⁹

According to Sivanandan, the cultural nationalist 'tacitly acknowledges the conception of a pluralist society and hopes, within it, to find power that will give the Afro-American a choice of opting out of or into white society'.⁵⁰ On the other hand, revolutionary nationalists like Newton and Seale (who were influenced by Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*) realised to some degree that, in an inherently racist class society like the United States or Britain, such 'power' and 'choice' remain purely at the level of idealistic and individualistic rhetoric – still operating within the realm of dominant culture and politics. Thus, borrowing from Frantz Fanon, the revolutionary nationalist 'recognises that racism is a symptom of the malaise in capitalist society and therefore society will itself have to be restructured – and Blacks are the obvious historical agents of that process'.⁵¹ Asante, a contemporary and product of both forms of 'nationalism', appears to have conflated the two and incorporated (but not reconciled) both into his concept of Afrocentricity.

In revolutionary nationalist fashion, Asante acknowledges 'non-free people, who are exploited by ruling classes ... are challenged to struggle against structural discourse that denies their right to freedom and, indeed, their right to exist'.⁵² Yet, borrowing 'important theoretical impetus' from the cultural nationalist, Maulana Ron Karenga, Asante maintains 'freedom is a mental state'. He advocates 'the empowering of the oppressed by listening to their voices' through the use of the 'African' concepts of *nommo* (Akan) 'the generative and productive power of the spoken word', and *Njia* (Kiswahili) 'the ideology of victorious thought'.⁵³ He states confidently: 'To the degree that [Afrocentricity] is incorporated into the lives of the millions of Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora, it will become revolutionary'.⁵⁴ While it may be true that the pen (or in this case the *nommo*) is more powerful than the sword, it would appear, given the power of the capitalist state, that one must go beyond rhetoric to become 'revolutionary' and effect change in a sexist, classist and racist society.

Yet is it not possible that African identity can be a force for change among African-Americans? Asante claims that it is a false (i.e., Eurocentric) assertion that 'Africans in the Americas are not Africans connected to their *spatial origin* ... African American culture and history represent developments in African culture and history, *inseparably from*

place and time. Analysis of African American culture that is not based on Afrocentric premises is bound to lead to incorrect conclusions.⁵⁵ Asante, in groping for some timeless 'essence', sees little or no difference between a poor Zimbabwean peasant woman and a rich male Barbados banker. Likewise, for him there is a spatial and temporal connection between Menelik II struggling against Italian imperialism in the 1890s and US Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas struggling against Pro-Choice forces in the 1990s. It would seem more appropriate, however, to turn Asante's statement around and say analysis of Black culture that is based solely on Afrocentric premises will lead to incorrect political conclusions. Sivanandan argues:

A Black American is not just a displaced African. S/he cannot find him/herself by relating solely to the African ethos. Africa is no more a clue to his/her identity than America. But they are both his/her history: one tells him/her whence s/he came, and the other where s/he is at – two strands of the same consciousness. To accept the one to the exclusion of the other is to submit once again to the type of 'double consciousness' that DuBois spoke of in another context: 'a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others'. For the Black American can no more be at home in an African milieu than the American Jew in the Middle East. And the forced cultivation of a purely African persona can only damage the Black American psyche even further and lead to the type of obsessive, inward-looking nationalism which one has come to identify with the Zionists.⁵⁶

Asante has countered that 'African Americans can never achieve their full psychological potential until they find congruence between who they are and what their environment says they ought to be'.⁵⁷ To which Sivanandan replies:

Culture certainly tells us 'who we are, what we must do, and how we can do it'. But creating ourselves in terms of our culture and reshaping our society in terms of that creation are part and parcel of the same process. *Becoming and doing belong to the same continuum*. To abstract our culture from its social milieu in order to give it coherence is to lose out on its vitality. And once a culture loses its social dynamic, identity becomes an indulgence. *It becomes, that is, an end in itself and not a guide to effective action* (emphasis added).⁵⁸

But what of this 'effective action'; how does it manifest itself? Many would argue that 'freeing the mind' and 'finding a sense of self', while necessary, should not be ends in and of themselves. The all-important question is not whether revolutionary consciousness should be a one-phase or two-phase process. From the perspective of most historical materialists, the all-important question is *praxis*: the use to which one puts that consciousness and identity.

Although Asante is involved primarily in understanding rhetoric as resistance, he sees Afrocentricity as 'not merely an artistic or literary movement ... it [is] an individual or collective quest for authenticity ... [and] above all the total use of method to effect psychological, political, social, cultural and economic change. The Afrocentric idea is beyond decolonizing the mind.'⁵⁹ Thus, it is a quest for identity *and* a way of 'empowering ... the oppressed'. Yet, as Harold Cruse has asked, 'where is the practice?' 'The answer in African American Studies at Temple', Asante replies, 'is the doctoral program itself, a product of Afrocentric theory and practice.'⁶⁰ Indeed, Asante has argued, 'Afrocentric scholarship is itself *praxis*.'⁶¹ But one must question Asante's definition of praxis; surely it is different from Manning Marable's understanding?

To have any practical relevancy to the actual conditions and problems experienced by African American people, Black Studies must conceive itself as a type of *praxis*, a unity of theory and practical action. It is insufficient for black scholars to scale the pristine walls of the academic tower, looking below with calculated indifference to the ongoing struggles of black people... There are Black Studies programs at major universities... Yet, much of this work is abstract and disconnected ... it replicates the stilted, obtuse language which characterizes much of the western intellectual tradition.⁶²

Here Marable casts doubt on the unity of 'stilted, obtuse' theories like Afrocentricity and the practical struggles of black people. Black Studies programmes are without value unless they bear a message which 'nourished the hope, dignity and resistance of black people'. Thus, if real liberation and political change are to occur, we must understand how identity interacts with culture and consciousness, to inform praxis:

Identity may emanate from the consciousness of our culture, but its operational function can only be meaningful in political terms. Our culture, therefore, needs to be coherent and dynamic at the same time. A culture that takes time off to furbish itself produces a personality without a purpose. There is no point in finding out who I am if I do not know what to do with that knowledge. For knowing who I am does not by itself confer on me the ability to do what is socially necessary... Furthermore, to seek one's identity in seclusion is to become, inbreeding, self-righteous, and, to that extent, inhumane. It keeps one from finding, in Fanon's indomitable phrase, 'the universality inherent in the human condition'.⁶³

Yet, beyond psychological discourse and 'propaedeutic value', does Asante's Afrocentric 'method' or Marable's and Sivanandan's 'utilitarian/functional' analysis have anything concrete to offer to the notions of liberation and 'identity as political change'? One should keep in mind that, in the real world of working people, the process of identity

association and cultural liberation are far more dialectical. On the one hand, the struggle for an 'African' identity is always a process of re-invention and is never separated completely from struggle. Today's youth, sporting Malcolm X hats, Kente cloth and reciting raps by Ice T or Public Enemy, are recreating the Black militant message of the 1960s to fit their oppressed situation in the 1990s. This history has become part of the collective memory of Black people 'emerging from the vernacular, folk tradition of resistance, survival and struggle in our inner cities'.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the forces of the state, using racism as the key means of maintaining cultural hegemony, often penalise young Black folks for their dress, styles, attitudes – even their music. As Marable reminds us about rap music:

it [is not] accidental that rap has erupted precisely at an historical moment when African American unemployment is massive, when crack has become a crippling epidemic, and as prisons and the criminal justice system have become a means for the institutional regulation of hundreds of thousands of young black people. Rap at its best represents a critique of the system of domination and exploitation, projecting into artistic form the political economy advanced by Malcolm X. By searching the contours of culture, we illuminate the essence of our political, economic and social environment.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, the question remains, will these youths be motivated to change their objective reality simply because they have freed their mind and recreated a sense of self; or, to paraphrase the language of popular culture, 'if they free their mind, will their ass follow'?⁶⁶

What is important to recognise here is that while Afrocentricity may give insight into identity and racism as social practices with their own changing history and symbolic regularities, it cannot explain how both capital and the state – and, indeed, some members of the working class – use these social practices for their own instrumental purposes. Eurocentric racism was not invented by capitalists simply to confuse the white working class. The Afrocentric approach advocated by Asante does little to explain the specifics of economic and political exploitation. Asante's advocacy of a return to a static and idealist interpretation of an unproblematic 'African past', where oppression and exclusion did not exist, explains little – and accomplishes less. Instead, I suggest, along with Gramsci, that consciousness and culture, especially revolutionary consciousness and revolutionary culture, do not proceed in an unmediated fashion – either from the manipulations of state and capital or from the direct experience of discrimination and class struggle.

For the sake of argument, if one rejects Afrocentricity as an answer, the question arises: how can one revolutionise consciousness and culture? Marxists would suggest that Black people must first make a radical assessment of their culture. That assessment, that revolutionary

perspective, is provided by the Black man and woman by virtue of their historical situation, i.e., they contend with the cultural manifestations of racism in their daily life. They recognise that racial prejudice and discrimination are not a matter of individual attitudes, but the 'sickness' of a whole society carried in its culture. They also realise that their survival as Black men and women in 'white' society requires that they constantly question and challenge every aspect of 'white' life. In their everyday life, they must fight the particulars of 'white cultural superiority'. In the process, they may or may not engender a revolutionary culture, but certainly will engender a revolutionary practice within that culture.⁶⁷

On these points, many marxists and Afrocentrists would most likely agree; however, where they would part company would be on how to make revolutionary practice 'blossom' into a revolutionary culture. As Sivanandan sees it:

For that practice to blossom into a revolutionary culture ... requires the participation of the masses, not just the blacks... For the black man [and woman], however, the consciousness of class is instinctive to [their] consciousness of colour. Even as [they] begin to throw away the shackles of [their] particular slavery, [they] see that there are others besides [themselves] who are enslaved too. [They] see that racism is only one dimension of oppression in a whole system of exploitation and racial discrimination, the particular tool of a whole exploitative creed. [They] see also that the culture of competition, individualism and elitism that fostered their intellect and gave it a habitation and a name is an accessory to the exploitation of the masses as a whole, and not merely of the blacks.⁶⁸

Thus, revolutionary practice and revolutionary culture are intimately intertwined with class, culture, consciousness, race and sexuality, and anyone who seeks the liberation of all people – i.e., not just intellectuals in academe, but all people – must understand these interconnections. As Bernard Magubane has argued:

Important as it is to establish one's cultural roots, if no revolution takes place in the productive forces that alienate black labor power, culture will lack substance. Re-establishing Afro-America's cultural roots must not be mere 'folklore' but must be something that validates itself through revolutionary struggles to emancipate human labor from the shackles of capital. Bringing to life the culture of an oppressed people is not just a question of looking back to the past, but in understanding the past in order to transcend it.⁶⁹

Implications for Pan-African liberation

From a historical materialist perspective, Asante's conception of Afrocentric 'ideas' is both ahistorical and idealistic. Contrary to his

Afrocentric notions, ideas are a reflection of material reality in human consciousness; a link by which people relate to their surrounding world. The character of the social structure and the prevailing conditions of life heavily influence the formation of ideas. In a class society, ideas like Afrocentricity have both a social bearing and a class character. These ideas, in turn, can have either a positive or negative relationship to the interests of different classes and cultural formations. The characteristic assumption of idealistic philosophy is that an idea has an external existence, immune to change and independent of concrete reality. However, such notions (Afrocentricity included) indirectly lend support to the efforts of exploiting classes to justify the conception of a changeless and hierarchical order of society – an ‘order’ permeated by class and masculine privileges and racial/cultural oppression.

This understanding of Asante’s idealistic discourse holds important implications for Pan-Africanism as a revolutionary practice. For revolutionaries, the ‘theoretical’ significance of this question has ‘practical’ implications. As Gramsci has noted, a philosophy must ‘cease to be arbitrary and become necessary – rational – real’ if its aim is ‘to modify the world and to revolutionise praxis’.⁷⁰ One could say, therefore, that a ‘philosophy of praxis’ must become actual, not simply existing socially and historically in the ideas of individual intellectuals.

Today, we must understand that ideas like Afrocentricity and Pan-Africanism are rooted in objective class interests and reflect the contradictions inherent in the current economic, political and social crisis. The political economy of the 1990s is changing so rapidly that it is sometimes difficult to comprehend, but it must provide the context within which we view the current crises. We are witnessing the global transformation of capitalism; high technology and robotics are replacing human labour in industry after industry. The use of new methods of computerised controls of workers and materials and downsizing of the workforce is eliminating nearly 25 million jobs (or nearly 30 per cent of the existing jobs) in private enterprises.⁷¹ This will obviously have tremendous consequences on the political and social structure of the country. Industry is abandoning modern US cities (which are increasingly impoverished and offer no political power for their Black and Latino residents) and moving their plants to rural low-wage areas. Increasingly, we see industry moving out of the US altogether (Mexico, Central America, South Africa or around the world), creating what some call global apartheid. The combination of job-flight and declining social services is widening the base of the ‘new poverty’, while state and federal governments refuse to allocate their declining resources to the poor. The result is increased unemployment, cuts in social services and homelessness. Working people in America (women, men, Black, Brown, White, blue collar, white collar, gay or straight) are becoming ‘disposable’. This growing economic crisis is producing political and social crises –

complicated by factors of sexism, racism, Eurocentrism and elitism.

If we view Pan-Africanism and Afrocentricity within this overall context, as dialectical ends of a revolutionary spectrum, we can understand the contradictions inherent in the current debate – a debate about how best to resist economic regression and hegemonic social control while achieving Black empowerment. The question to be asked is simply this: which of these oppositional philosophies – Afrocentricity or Pan-Africanism – both counters racism and sexism and challenges the hierarchical order of society, instead of lending support to that hierarchy? Pan-Africanism has the *potential* to be such a revolutionary ‘philosophy of praxis’.

We must also keep in mind that nationalism is not ‘transhistorical’; as McClintock reminds us, history reveals a myriad of nationalisms, and all take very different shapes in different contexts.⁷² Today, Pan-Africanism has developed two variations similar to the two competing forms of 1960s’ nationalism, each expressing the interests of one of the two groups of classes which clash in contemporary Africa and the diaspora. Those who can transcend the idealistic limitations of Afrocentricity, and can grasp the necessity of struggle beyond rhetoric, will form a vanguard element and become revolutionary Pan-Africanist. In this context, revolutionary Pan-Africanism must be trans-racial and trans-gendered; it must be inclusive (not exclusive) and internationalist (rather than simply nationalist). It must be capable of forging transnational alliances. It must express the interests of male and female members of the Black working class and peasantry; but it must also include all those White, Brown, Red, Yellow and Black working-class ‘organic intellectuals’ and petit-bourgeois elements who are willing to commit class, gender and racial ‘suicide’ and join the struggle. There are many (including Afrocentrists) who would label such notions ‘utopian’. Yet today, as just noted above, revolution in the productive forces, and in the economy in general, is creating revolutionaries in the global society. The Black and Brown youth of Los Angeles, the West Bank and Johannesburg, rebelling against racist oppression and economic exploitation, represent encouraging examples of such revolutionary Pan-African consciousness in action.

Counterposed to revolutionary Pan-Africanists are those Afrocentric elements who cannot (or will not) make the transition to political action and who become ‘demagogic’ Pan-Africanists.⁷³ They are products of the type of existential, traditional (inorganic) ‘intellectualised’ practice advocated by Asante. Consciously or unconsciously, they express the interests of the imperialist ruling class and their African and African-American allies. Included in this group are ‘coloured intellectuals’ and ‘government officials’ who often use race/racism as a blind for their class interest. We have ample examples among the Colin Powells, Clarence Thomases and Gatsha Buthelezis of the world – i.e., apologists for local and global apartheid.

While this may appear to some as an unusually harsh criticism and total dismissal of all Afrocentric thinking, it should rather be seen as a warning sign. We would stop short of drawing a parallel between Asante and other Afrocentrists in the 1990s and those that Addison Gayle labelled 'nihilistic cultural nationalists' and 'black fascists' in the 1970s. It must be understood that Afrocentricity could potentially 'serve as a liaison between the black community uptown and the [white] Man downtown'.⁷⁴

My critique also points to the absolute necessity of making a complete break with idealistic and hegemonic rhetoric and practices. It is critical that revolutionary Pan-Africanists do not conflate or essentialise the issues of class, culture, gender and identity – an extremely difficult task when bombarded by racism and sexism in post-modern society – but instead put them into context of working-class struggles. This is best illustrated by Manning Marable's discussion of 1960s Black nationalism and Frantz Fanon.

Militant nationalists praised Fanon's advocacy of revolutionary violence, and his polemical thrusts aimed at the Negro petty bourgeoisie in colonial Africa. But what did Fanon think about the Afro-American struggle? ... For Fanon, the struggle to destroy white oppression was not in essence a racial dialectic, but an anti-racist movement that welcomed the participation of committed whites. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon's most 'nationalist-oriented' work, he explained that his ultimate vision for the US was the liberation of all exploited people: 'I can already see a white man and a black man hand in hand.' The question here is not so much that of intellectual dishonesty, but a failure of many Black Powerites [and Afrocentrists] to relate their eclectic versions of nationalism to the actual material needs and aspirations of the black working class and the poor.⁷⁵

Obviously the validity of revolutionary Pan-Africanism as a liberating 'idea' can only be borne out in 'praxis'. Yet it should be fairly obvious that an idea like Afrocentricity, which is not based on reality but on some metaphysical ideation of 'Africa', has limited practical use in a liberation struggle beyond providing 'origin stories'. Asante has accused the critics of Afrocentricity of 'not reading or quoting [his] works but of responding to a popular cachet'.⁷⁶ On the contrary, using Asante's own words, we might say of Afrocentricity that 'the invalidity of an idea arises, not from its exponents, but from its own fundamental flaws'.⁷⁷

References

I would like to thank all those who have read drafts of this work, including Craig Gilmore, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Robin Kelley, Bill Watkins, Ken Wolf, Patricia K. Telaghani and

Salima Lemelle.

- 1 A. Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger* (London, 1987), p.89.
- 2 See Kinfe Abraham, *Politics of Black Nationalism* (Trenton, 1991), and Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism* (London, 1991).
- 3 For example, see 'Taking offense: is this the new enlightenment on campus or the new McCarthyism?', *Newsweek* (24 December 1990), pp48-55; John Taylor, 'Are you politically correct?', *New York Magazine* (21 January 1991), pp33-40; Dinesh D'Souza, 'The Visigoths in tweed', *Forbes* (1 April 1991), pp81-6; Michael Berube, 'Public image limited: political correctness and the media's big lie', *Village Voice* (18 June 1991), pp31-6; 'African dreams', *Newsweek* (23 September 1991), pp42-50.
- 4 C.L.R. James, *A History of Pan-African Revolt* (Washington, DC, originally published in 1938); W.E.B. DuBois, *The World and Africa* (New York, 1946); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944).
- 5 Robinson, *Black Marxism*; Walter Rodney, 'Towards the Sixth Pan African Congress', in Horace Campbell (ed.), *Pan Africanism* (Toronto, 1976); Bernard M. Magubane, *The Ties that Bind: African-American consciousness of Africa* (Trenton, NJ, 1987). See also V.P. Thompson, *Africa and Unity: the evolution of Pan-Africanism* (Humanities Press, 1969); Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism* (New York, 1978).
- 6 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York, 1987), and Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, 1963), *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, 1954), *Towards the African Revolution* (New York, 1967).
- 7 While I hesitate to label this analysis 'marxist', it is a work heavily influenced by the theory of historical materialism as developed by Marx and Engels and utilised by marxist intellectuals. Also note that people like Diane Ravitch, William Rasberry, Henry Louis Gates Jr, Manning Marable, Michele Wallace, Orlando Patterson, Arthur Schlesinger, Glenn Loury and George Will have also critiqued Afrocentricity. Molefi K. Asante, 'African American studies: the future of the discipline', *The Black Scholar* (Vol.22, no.3, 1992), p.21.
- 8 Berube, 'African dreams', op.cit., p.42.
- 9 Asante is by no means the only academic proponent of Afrocentricity; equally well-known is Professor Leonard Jeffries, former chair of Black Studies at the City University of New York, and Professor Asa Hilliard of Georgia State University. See Berube, 'African dreams', op.cit., pp42-3 and John Taylor, op.cit., pp39-40.
- 10 Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia, 1987), p.3; while I will concentrate on this work, also see *Afrocentricity: the theory of social change* (Buffalo, 1980) and the enlarged third edition, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, 1989); Molefi K. Asante and K.W. Asante, *African Culture: the rhythms of unity* (Trenton, 1988); Molefi K. Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (Trenton, 1990); 'Putting Africa at the center', *Newsweek* (23 September 1991), p.46. For Sivanandan's work see *A Different Hunger*, op.cit., and *Communities of Resistance* (London, 1990).
- 11 Asante, *Afrocentric idea*, op.cit.
- 12 Many scholars made much the same point years ago. Among others, see W.E.B. DuBois, *The World and Africa* (New York, 1946), and A. Temu and B. Swai, *Historians and Africanist History: a critique* (London, 1981).
- 13 Tom Bottomore, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 1991). Also see Robinson, op.cit., part I.
- 14 Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, op.cit., p.5.
- 15 See Robinson, op.cit., chapters 3-4.
- 16 Asante, *Afrocentricity*, op.cit., p.1, and *Afrocentric Idea*, op.cit., pp149-56.
- 17 The best authority on this topic remains George Plekhanov, *The Role of the Individual in History* (New York, 1940). For an 'idealist' interpretation, see Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History* (Boston, 1943).
- 18 E. Frances White, 'Africa on my mind: gender, counter discourse and African-

- American nationalism', *Journal of Women's History* (Vol.2, no.1, Spring 1990), pp73-4.
- 19 Anne McClintock, 'No longer in a future heaven: women and nationalism in South Africa', *Transition* (No.51, 1991), p.104.
- 20 Darlene Clark Hine, 'The Black Studies Movement: Afrocentric-traditionalist-feminist paradigms for the next stage', *The Black Scholar* (Vol.22, no.3, 1992), p.15. See bell hooks, 'Feminism: a transformational politic', in Deborah L. Rhodes (ed.), *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference* (New Haven, 1990), and Patricia Hills Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment* (Boston, 1990).
- 21 Asante, 'African American Studies', op.cit., p.24.
- 22 Ibid., p.27.
- 23 See Asante, *Afrocentricity*, op.cit., chapter I, and 'Putting Africa at the center', op.cit., p.46.
- 24 V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington, 1988), especially chapters I and IV.
- 25 Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, op.cit., p.65.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Asante, 'African American Studies', op.cit., p.27.
- 28 See Sidney J. Lemelle, 'Ritual, resistance and social reproduction', *Journal of Historical Sociology* (Vol.5, no.2, June 1992).
- 29 McClintock, op.cit., p.122.
- 30 Asante, 'African American Studies', op.cit., p.27.
- 31 E. Francis White has made a similar point in her critique of Afrocentricity, op.cit., pp84-5. See also Asante, 'African American Studies, op.cit., p.22.
- 32 A. Sivanandan, 'The liberation of the Black intellectual', in *A Different Hunger*, op.cit., pp82-98.
- 33 Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, op.cit., p.167, and *Afrocentricity*, op.cit., p.31.
- 34 Sivanandan, 'The liberation of the Black intellectual', op.cit., pp85-6.
- 35 Ibid., pp.89-93.
- 36 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, op.cit.
- 37 George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the culture of oppression* (Philadelphia, 1988), p.9.
- 38 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York, 1987), p.3.
- 39 Ibid., p.10.
- 40 Ibid., p.4.
- 41 Sivanandan, 'The liberation of the Black intellectual', op.cit., p.93.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, op.cit., p.8. Also see *Afrocentricity*, op.cit., p.17. It is interesting that Asante must resort to philosophical gymnastics to maintain the coherence of his argument by saying: 'DuBois became more and more African in his outlook ... he rejected the inherent racism in capitalism and pursued socialist thought. He moved toward the rejection of materialism which was deeply imbedded in Marxist thought. Because DuBois was beyond the limitations of a Eurocentric analysis, he could never be restricted by Marxist thought.'
- 44 Sivanandan, 'The liberation of the Black intellectual', op.cit., p.94.
- 45 Robinson, op.cit., p.434.
- 46 Sivanandan, 'The liberation of the Black intellectual', op.cit., p.94.
- 47 A. Sivanandan, 'Black Power: the politics of existence', in *A Different Hunger*, op.cit., pp57-66.
- 48 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion* (Jackson, 1992), p.125.
- 49 Sivanandan, 'Black Power', op.cit., p.59. It should be noted that Sivanandan lumped Baraka and Karenga together as cultural nationalists before either claimed their current 'socialist' orientation. For an interesting treatment of this period, see Ward

- Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression* (Boston, 1990), chapter 3. Also see Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, op.cit., chapter 5. For related struggles in the UK, see Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (Chicago, 1991), chapters 3, 5; Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: race and racism in 70s' Britain* (London, 1988).
- 50 Sivanandan, 'Black Power', op.cit., p.59.
- 51 Ibid., p.60.
- 52 Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, op.cit., p.22.
- 53 Ibid., p.17, and *Afrocentricity*, op.cit., p.1.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 *Afrocentric Idea*, op.cit., p.10. See also Asante, 'African American Studies', op.cit., p.27.
- 56 A. Sivanandan, 'Culture and identity', *Liberator* (Vol.10, no.6, June 1970), p.11.
- 57 Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, op.cit., p.98.
- 58 Sivanandan, 'Culture and identity', op.cit., p.11.
- 59 Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, op.cit., p.125.
- 60 Asante, 'African American Studies', op.cit., p.21.
- 61 Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, op.cit., p.175; *Afrocentricity*, op.cit., p.31.
- 62 Manning Marable, 'Blueprint for Black Studies and multiculturalism', *The Black Scholar* (Vol.22, no 3, 1992), p.32.
- 63 Sivanandan, 'Culture and identity', op.cit., p.11.
- 64 Marable, 'Blueprint', op.cit., p.32.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Originally a lyric by George Clinton Parliament/Funkadelic. The term has been used by many, among them Digital Underground, 'Free Your Mind', on album *Sons of the P* (1991).
- 67 Sivanandan, 'The liberation of the Black intellectual', op.cit., p.95.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, op.cit., p.234.
- 70 Gramsci, *Notebook*, op.cit., p.368.
- 71 *Wall Street Journal* (16 March 1993); *New York Times* (15 March 1993).
- 72 McClintock, 'Future heaven', op.cit., p.120.
- 73 See Elenga M'buyinga, *Pan Africanism or Neo-Colonialism* (London, 1982).
- 74 Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, op.cit., pp120-21.
- 75 Ibid., p.120.
- 76 Asante, 'African American Studies', op.cit., p.21.
- 77 Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, op.cit., p.9.

MANNING MARABLE

Beyond racial identity politics: towards a liberation theory for multicultural democracy

Americans are arguably the most 'race-conscious' people on earth. Even in South Africa, the masters of apartheid recognised the necessity to distinguish between 'coloureds' and 'black Africans'. Under the bizarre regulations of apartheid, a visiting delegation of Japanese corporate executives or the diplomatic corps of a client African regime such as Malawi could be classified as 'honorary whites'. But in the US, 'nationality' has been closely linked historically to the categories and hierarchy of national racial identity. Despite the orthodox cultural ideology of the so-called 'melting pot', power, privilege and the ownership of productive resources and property has always been unequally allocated in a social hierarchy stratified by class, gender and race. Those who benefit directly from these institutional arrangements have historically been defined as 'white', overwhelmingly upper class and male. And it is precisely here, within this structure of power and privilege, that 'national identity' in the context of mass political culture is located. To be an 'all-American' is, by definition, *not* to be an Asian-American, Pacific-American, American Indian, Latino, Arab-American or African-American. Or, viewed another way, the hegemonic ideology of 'whiteness' is absolutely central in rationalising and justifying the gross inequalities of race, gender and class experienced by millions of Americans relegated to the politically peripheral status of 'Others'. As marxist cultural critic E. San Juan has observed: 'Whenever the question of the national identity is at stake, boundaries in space and

Manning Marable is Professor of History and Political Science at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and author most recently of *The Crisis of Color and Democracy: essays on race, class and power* (Monroe, Common Courage Press, 1992).

Race & Class, 35, 1 (1993)

time are drawn... A decision is made to represent the Others – people of color – as missing, absent, or supplemental.⁷¹ ‘Whiteness’ becomes the very ‘centre’ for the dominant criteria for national prestige, decision-making, authority and intellectual leadership.

Ironically, because of the centrality of ‘whiteness’ within the dominant national identity, Americans generally make few distinctions between ‘ethnicity’ and ‘race’, and the two concepts are usually used interchangeably. Both the oppressors and those who are oppressed are, therefore, imprisoned by the closed dialectic of race. ‘Black’ and ‘white’ are usually viewed as fixed, permanent and often antagonistic social categories. Yet, in reality, ‘race’ should be understood not as an entity, within the histories of all human societies, or grounded to some inescapable or permanent biological or genetic differences between human beings. ‘Race’ is, first and foremost, an unequal relationship between social aggregates, characterised by dominant and subordinate forms of social interaction, and reinforced by the intricate patterns of public discourse, power, ownership and privilege within the economic, social and political institutions of society.

Race only becomes ‘real’ as a social force when individuals or groups behave towards each other in ways which either reflect or perpetuate the hegemonic ideology of subordination and the patterns of inequality in daily life. These are, in turn, justified and explained by assumed differences in physical and biological characteristics, or in theories of cultural deprivation or intellectual inferiority. Thus, far from being static or fixed, race as an oppressive concept within social relations is fluid and ever changing. What is an oppressed ‘racial group’ changes over time, geographical space and historical conjuncture. What is termed ‘black’, ‘Hispanic’ or ‘Oriental’ by those in power to describe one human being’s ‘racial background’ in a particular setting can have little historical or practical meaning within another social formation which is also racially stratified, but in a different manner.

Since so many Americans view the world through the prism of permanent racial categories, it is difficult to convey the idea that radically different ethnic groups may have a roughly identical ‘racial identity’ imposed on them. For example, although native-born African-Americans, Trinidadians, Haitians, Nigerians and Afro-Brazilians would all be termed ‘black’ on the streets of New York City, they have remarkably little in common in terms of language, culture, ethnic traditions, rituals and religious affiliations. Yet they are all ‘black’ racially, in the sense that they will share many of the pitfalls and prejudices built into the institutional arrangements of the established social order for those defined as ‘black’. Similarly, an even wider spectrum of divergent ethnic groups – from Japanese-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Filipino-Americans and Korean-Americans to Hawaiians, Pakistanis, Vietnamese, Arabs and Uzbekis – are described

and defined by the dominant society as 'Asians' or, worse yet, as 'Orientals'. In the rigid, racially stratified American social order, the specific nationality, ethnicity and culture of a person of colour has traditionally been secondary to an individual's 'racial category', a label of inequality which is imposed from without rather than constructed by the group from within. Yet, as Michael Omi, Asian-American Studies Professor at the University of California at Berkeley, has observed, we are also 'in a period in which our conception of racial categories is being radically transformed'. The waves of recent immigrants create new concepts of what the older ethnic communities have been. The observations and generalisations we imparted 'to racial identities' in the past no longer make that much sense.

In the United States, 'race' for the oppressed has also come to mean an identity of survival, victimisation and opposition to those racial groups or elites which exercise power and privilege. What we are looking at here is *not* an *ethnic* identification or culture, but an awareness of shared experience, suffering and struggles against the barriers of racial division. These collective experiences, survival tales and grievances form the basis of an historical consciousness, a group's recognition of what it has witnessed and what it can anticipate in the near future. This second distinct sense of racial identity is both imposed on the oppressed and yet represents a reconstructed critical memory of the character of the group's collective ordeals. Both definitions of 'race' and 'racial identity' give character and substance to the movements for power and influence among people of colour.

* * *

In the African-American experience, the politics of racial identity has been expressed by two great traditions of racial ideology and social protest – integrationism and black nationalism. The integrationist tradition was initiated in the antebellum political activism of the free Negro community of the North, articulated by the great abolitionist orator, Frederick Douglass. The black nationalist tradition was a product of the same social classes, but influenced by the pessimism generated by the Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act, the Dred Scott decision, and the failure of slave uprisings and revolts such as Nat Turner's to end the tyranny and inhumanity of the slave regime. The integrationist perspective was anchored in a firm belief in American democracy, and in the struggle to outlaw all legal barriers which restricted equal access and opportunities to racial minorities. It was linked to the politics of coalition-building with sympathetic white constituencies, aimed at achieving reforms within the context of the system. The integrationist version of racial politics sought the deracialisation of the hierarchies of power within society and the

economic system. By contrast, the black nationalist approach to racial politics was profoundly sceptical of America's ability to live up to its democratic ideals. It assumed that 'racial categories' were real and fundamentally significant, and that efforts to accumulate power had to be structured along the boundaries of race for centuries to come. The nationalist tradition emphasised the cultural kinship of black Americans to Africa, and emphasised the need to establish all-black-owned institutions to provide goods and services to the African-American community.

Although the integrationists and nationalists seemed to hold radically divergent points of view, there was a subterranean symmetry between the two ideologies. Both were based on the idea that the essential dilemma or problem confronting black people was the omnipresent reality of race. The integrationists sought power to dismantle the barriers of race, to outlaw legal restrictions on blacks' access to the institutions of authority and ownership, and to assimilate into the cultural 'mainstream' without regard to race. The black nationalists favoured a separatist path towards empowerment, believing that even the most liberal-minded whites could not be trusted to destroy the elaborate network of privileges from which they benefited, called 'white supremacy'. But along the assimilationist-separatist axis of racial identity politics is the common perception that 'race', however it is defined, is the most critical organising variable within society. Race mattered so much more than other factors or variables, that, to a considerable degree, the concept of race was perpetuated by the types of political interventions and tactical assumptions by activists and leaders on both sides of the assimilationist/separatist axis.

Both schools of racial identity espoused what can be termed the politics of 'symbolic representation'. Both the nationalists and integrationists believed that they were speaking to 'white power brokers' on behalf of their 'constituents' – i.e., black Americans. They believed that the real measure of racial power a group wielded within any society could be calibrated according to the institutions it dominated or the numbers of positions it controlled which influenced others. For the integrationists, it was a relatively simple matter of counting noses. If the number of African-Americans in elective offices nationwide increased from 103 in 1964 to over 8,000 in 1993, for example, one could argue that African-Americans as a *group* had increased their political power. Any increase in the number of blacks as mayors, members of federal courts, and on boards of education, was championed as a victory for *all* black people. The black nationalists tended to be far more sceptical about the promise or viability of an electoral route of group empowerment. However, they often shared the same notions of symbolic representation when it came to the construction of social and economic institutions based on private-ownership models.

The development of a black-owned shopping plaza, supermarket or private school was widely interpreted as black social and economic empowerment for the group as a whole.

The problem with 'symbolic representation' is that it presumes structures of accountability and allegiance between these blacks who are elevated into powerful positions of authority in the capitalist state with millions of African-Americans clinging to the margins of economic and social existence. The unifying discourse of race obscures the growing class stratification within the African-American community. According to the Census Bureau, for example, back in 1967, about 85 per cent of all African-American families earned between \$5,000 to \$50,000 annually, measured in inflation-adjusted 1990 dollars, while 41 per cent earned between \$10,000 to \$25,000. In short, the number of extremely poor and destitute families was relatively small. The Census Bureau's statistics on African-American households as of 1990 were strikingly different. The size of the black working class and moderate-income group had declined significantly, and the two extremes of poverty and affluence had grown sharply. By 1990, about 12 per cent of all black households earned less than \$5,000 annually, and one-third of all blacks lived below the federal government's poverty level. Conversely, a strong African-American petty bourgeoisie, representing the growth of thousands of white collar professionals, executives and managers created by affirmative action requirements, had been established. The median incomes of African-American families in which both the wife and husband were employed rose from about \$28,700 in 1967 to over \$40,000 in 1990, an increase of 40 per cent. More than 15 per cent of all African-American households earn above \$50,000 annually, and thousands of black professional families have incomes exceeding \$100,000 annually.² Many of these newly affluent blacks have moved far from the problems of central cities, into the comfortable white enclaves of suburbia. Nevertheless, many of the strongest advocates of racial identity politics since the demise of Black Power and the black freedom movement come from the most privileged, elitist sectors of the black upper middle class. The dogmatic idea that 'race' alone explains virtually everything which occurs within society has a special appeal to some African-American suburban elites who have little personal connections with the vast human crisis of the ghetto – unemployment, black-on-black crime, rampant drugs, gang violence and deteriorating schools. Moreover, for black entrepreneurs, traditional race categories could be employed as a tool to promote petty capital accumulation, by urging black consumers to 'buy black'.

Racial identity politics in this context is contradictory and conceptually limited in other critical respects. As noted, it tends to minimise greatly any awareness or analysis of class stratification and

concentrations of poverty or affluence among the members of the defined 'racial minority group'.

Issues of poverty, hunger, unemployment and homelessness are viewed and interpreted within a narrowly racial context – that is, as a by-product of the large racist contradiction within the society as a whole. Conversely, concentrations of wealth or social privilege within sectors of the racial group are projected as 'success stories' – see, for example, issue after issue of *Ebony*, *Black Enterprise* and *Jet*. In the context of racial identity politics, the idea of 'social change' is usually expressed in utilitarian and pragmatic terms, if change is expressed at all. The integrationist generally favours working within the established structures of authority, influencing those in power to dole out new favours or additional privileges to minorities. The argument is that 'democracy' works best when it is truly pluralistic and inclusive, with the viewpoints of all 'racial groups' taken into account. But such a strategy rarely, if ever, gets at the root of the real problem of the persuasiveness of racism – social inequality. It articulates an eclectic, opportunistic approach to change, rather than a comprehensive or systemic critique, informed by a social theory of any kind. In the case of the racial separatists, the general belief that 'race' is a relatively permanent social category in all multi-ethnic societies, and that virtually all whites are immutably racist, either for genetic, biological or psychological reasons, compromises the very concept of meaningful social change. If allies are non-existent or at best untrustworthy, or if dialogues with progressive whites must await the construction of broad-based unity among virtually all blacks, then even tactical alliances with social forces outside the black community become difficult to sustain.

But perhaps the greatest single weakness in the politics of racial identity is that it is rooted implicitly in a competitive model of group empowerment. If the purpose of politics is the realisation of a group or constituency's specific, objective interest, then racial identity politics utilises racial consciousness or the group's collective memory and experiences as the essential framework for interpreting the actions and interests of all other social groups. This approach is not unlike a model of political competition based on a 'zero-sum' game such as poker, in which a player can be a 'winner' only if one or more other players are 'losers'. The prism of a group's racial experiences tends to blunt the parallels, continuities and common interests which might exist between oppressed racial groups, and highlights and emphasises areas of dissension and antagonism.

The black-nationalist-oriented intelligentsia, tied to elements of the new African-American upper middle class by income, social position and cultural outlook, began to search for ways of expressing itself through the 'permanent' prism of race, while rationalising its relatively

privileged class position. One expression of this search for a social theory was found in the writings of Afrocentric theorist Molefi Asante.³ Born Arthur Lee Smith in 1942, Asante emerged as the founding editor of the *Journal of Black Studies* in 1969. Asante became a leading force in the National Council of Black Studies, the African Heritage Studies Association and, after 1980, Chair of the African-American Studies Department at Temple University. Asante's basic thesis, the cultural philosophy of 'Afrocentrism', began with the insight that people of European descent or cultures have a radically different understanding of the human condition than people of African and/or non-western cultures and societies.

'Human beings tend to recognise three fundamental existential postures one can take with respect to the human condition: feeling, knowing, and acting', Asante observed in 1983. Europeans utilise these concepts separately in order to understand them objectively. Thus 'Eurocentrists' tend to understand their subjects 'apart from the emotions, attitudes, and cultural definitions of a given context'. Scholars with a 'Eurocentric' perspective, those who view the entire history of human development through the vantage point and interests of European civilisation, are also primarily concerned with a 'subject/object duality' which exists in a linear environment. European cultures and people are viewed as the central subjects of history, the creative forces which dominate and transform the world over time. Asante states that this 'Euro-linear' viewpoint helps to explain the construction of institutional racism, apartheid and imperialism across the non-white world.

By contrast, the Afrocentric framework for comprehending society and human development is radically different, according to Asante. Afrocentrism 'understands that the interrelationship of knowledge with cosmology, society, religion, medicine, and traditions stands alongside the interactive metaphors of discourse as principal means of achieving a measure of knowledge about experience'. Unlike a linear view of the world, the Afrocentric approach is a 'circular view' of human interaction which 'seeks to interpret and understand'. In theoretical terms, this means that the study of African and African-American phenomena should be within their original cultural contexts, and not within the paradigmatic frameworks of Eurocentrism. Drawing upon African cultural themes, values and concepts, Afrocentrism seeks, therefore, the creation of a harmonious environment in which all divergent cultures could coexist and learn from each other. Rather than seeking the illusion of the melting pot, Asante calls for the construction of 'parallel frames of reference' within the context of a multicultural, pluralistic environment. 'Universality', Asante warns, 'can only be dreamed about when we have slept on truth based on specific cultural experience.'

The practical impact of the theory of Afrocentrism was found among black educators. After all, if people of African descent had a radically different cultural heritage, cosmology and philosophy of being from whites, it made sense to devise an alternate curriculum which was 'Afrocentric'. Such an alternative approach to education would be completely comprehensive, Asante insisted, expressing the necessity for 'every topic, economics, law communication, science, religion, history, literature, and sociology to be reviewed through Afrocentric eyes'. No African-American child should 'attend classes as they are currently being taught or read books as they are currently being written without raising questions about our capability as a people... All children must be centered in a historical place, or their self-esteem suffers.' By 1991, approximately 350 'Afrocentric academies' and private schools were educating more than 50,000 African-American students throughout the country. Many large public school districts adopted Afrocentric supplementary and required textbooks, or brought in Afrocentric-oriented educators for curriculum development workshops. Several public school systems, notably in Detroit, Baltimore and Milwaukee, established entire 'Afrocentric schools' for hundreds of school-aged children, transforming all aspects of their learning experience. On college campuses, many Black Studies programmes and departments began to restructure many of their courses to reflect the general approach of the Afrocentric philosophy.

There is no doubt that Afrocentrism established a vital and coherent cultural philosophy which appealed to African-Americans favourable towards black nationalism. Some Afrocentric scholars in the area of psychology, notably Linda James Myers, established some innovative and effective measures for promoting the development of positive self-concepts among African-Americans. Asante used his position at Temple to create a scholastic tradition which represented a sharp critique and challenge to Eurocentrism. The difficulty was that this scholarly version of Afrocentrism tended to be far more sophisticated than the more popular version of the philosophy embraced by elements of the dogmatically separatist, cultural nationalist community. One such Afrocentric populariser was Professor Len Jeffries, the Chair of the Black Studies Programme at the City College of New York. Jeffries claimed that white Americans were 'ice people' due to environmental, psychological and cultural factors inherent in their evolution in Europe; African-Americans by contrast were defined as 'sun people', characteristically warm, open and charitable. At the level of popular history, the vulgar Afrocentrists glorified in an oversimplistic manner the African heritage of black Americans. In their writings, they rarely reflected the actual complexities of the local cultures, divergences of language, religions and political institutions, and tended to homogenise the sharply different social structures found within the African

diaspora. They pointed with pride to the dynasties of Egypt as the classical foundation of African civilisation – without also examining with equal vigour or detail Egypt's slave structure. At times, the racial separatists of vulgar Afrocentrism embraced elements of a black chauvinism and intolerance towards others, and espoused public positions which were blatantly anti-Semitic. Jeffries' public statements attacking Jews and the charge that he espoused anti-Semitic viewpoints made it easier for white conservatives to denigrate all African-American studies, and to undermine efforts to require multicultural curricula for public schools.

Scholarly Afrocentrism coexisted uneasily with its vulgar, populist variety. When Jeffries was deposed as Chair of City College's Black Studies Department in the controversy following his anti-Semitic remarks, Asante wisely stayed outside the debate. Nevertheless, there remained theoretical problems inherent in the more scholarly paradigm. Afrocentric intellectuals gave eloquent lip service to the insights of black scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois as 'pillars' of their own perspective, without also acknowledging that DuBois's philosophy of culture and history conflicted sharply with their own. DuBois's major cultural and philosophical observation, expressed nearly a century ago in *The Souls of Black Folk*, claimed that the African-American expresses a 'double consciousness'. The black American was 'an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder'.⁴ Africa, in effect, represents only one-half of the dialectical consciousness of African-American people. Blacks are also legitimately Americans and, by our suffering, struggle and culture, we have a destiny within this geographical and political space equal to or stronger than that of any white American. This realisation that the essence of the inner spirit of African-American people was reflected in this core duality was fundamentally ignored by the Afrocentrists.

Vulgar Afrocentrists deliberately ignored or obscured the historical reality of social class stratification within the African diaspora. They essentially argued that the interests of all black people – from Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Colin Powell to conservative Supreme Court Associate Justice Clarence Thomas, to the black unemployed, homeless and hungry of America's decaying urban ghettos – were philosophically, culturally and racially the same. Even the scholarly Afrocentric approach elevated a neoKantian idealism above a dialectical idealist analysis – much less did it speak to historical materialism, except to attack it. As such, vulgar Afrocentrism was the perfect social theory for the upwardly mobile black petty bourgeoisie. It gave them a vague sense of ethnic superiority and cultural originality, without requiring the hard, critical study of historical realities.

It provided a philosophical blueprint to avoid concrete struggle within the real world, since potential white 'allies' were certainly non-existent and all cultural change began from within. It was, in short, only the latest theoretical construct of a politics of racial identity, a worldview designed to discuss the world, but never really to change it.

* * *

How do we transcend the theoretical limitations and social contradictions of the politics of racial identity? The challenge begins by constructing new cultural and political 'identities', based on the realities of America's changing multicultural, democratic milieu. The task of constructing a tradition of unity between various groups of colour in America is a far more complex and contradictory process than any progressive activists or scholars have admitted, precisely because of divergent cultural traditions, languages and conflicting politics of racial identities – by Latinos, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Pacific Island Americans, Arab-Americans, American Indians and others. Highlighting the current dilemma in the 1990s is the collapsing myth of 'brown-black solidarity'. Back in the 1960s and early 1970s, with the explosion of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the African-American community, activist formations with similar objectives also emerged among Latinos. The Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, for example, found their counterparts among Chicano militants with La Raza Unida Party in Texas, or the Crusade for Justice in Colorado. The Council of La Raza and the Mexican American Legal Defence Fund began to push for civil rights reforms within government and expanding influence for Latinos within the Democratic Party, paralleling the same strategies of Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

With the growth of a more class-conscious black and Latino petty bourgeoisie, ironically a social product of affirmative action and civil rights gains, tensions between these two large communities of people of colour began to deteriorate. The representatives of the African-American middle class consolidated their electoral control of the city councils and mayoral posts of major cities throughout the country. Black entrepreneurship increased, as the black American consumer market reached a gross sales figure of \$270 billion by 1991, an amount equal to the gross domestic product of the fourteenth wealthiest nation on earth. The really important 'symbolic triumphs' of this privileged stratum of the African-American community were not the dynamic 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson; they were instead the electoral victory of Democratic 'moderate' Doug Wilder as Virginia governor in 1990, and the appointment of former Jackson

lieutenant-turned-moderate Ron Brown as head of the Democratic National Committee. Despite the defeats represented by Reaganism and the absence of affirmative action enforcement, there was a sense that the strategy of 'symbolic representation' had cemented this stratum's hegemony over the bulk of the black population. Black politicians like Doug Wilder and television celebrity journalists such as black nationalist-turned-Republican Tony Brown were not interested in pursuing coalitions between blacks and other people of colour. Multiracial, multiclass alliances raised too many questions about the absence of political accountability between middle-class 'leaders' and their working-class and low-income 'followers'. Even Jesse Jackson shied away from addressing a black-Latino alliance except in the most superficial terms.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, the long-delayed brown-black dialogue at the national level began crystallising into tensions around at least four critical issues. First, after the Census of 1990, scores of congressional districts were reapportioned to have African-American or Latino pluralities or majorities, guaranteeing greater minority group representation in Congress. However, in cities and districts where Latinos and blacks were roughly divided, or especially in those districts which blacks had controlled in previous years but in which Latinos were now in the majority, disagreements often led to fractious ethnic conflicts. Latinos claimed that they were grossly underrepresented within the political process. African-American middle-class leaders argued that 'Latinos' actually represented four distinct groups with little to no shared history or common culture: Mexican-Americans, concentrated overwhelmingly in the south-western states; Hispanics from the Caribbean, chiefly Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, most of whom had migrated to New York City and the north-east since 1945; Cuban-Americans, mostly middle-to-upper-class exiles of Castro's Cuba, and who voted heavily Republican; and the most recent Spanish-speaking emigrants from Central and South America. Blacks insisted that Cuban-Americans definitely were not an 'underprivileged minority' and, as such, did not merit minority set-aside economic programmes, affirmative action and equal opportunity programmes. The cultural politics of Afrocentrism made it difficult for many African-Americans to recognise any common interest which they might share with Latinos.

Immigration issues are also at the centre of recent Latino-black conflicts. Over one-third of the Latino population of more than 24 million in the US consists of undocumented workers. Some middle-class African-American leaders have taken the politically conservative viewpoint that undocumented Latino workers deprive poor blacks of jobs within the low wage sectors of the economy. Third, bilingual education and efforts to impose language and cultural conformity upon

all sectors of society such as 'English-only' referenda have also been issues of contention. Finally, the key element which drives these topics of debate is the rapid transformation of America's non-white demography. Because of relatively higher birth rates than the general population and substantial immigration, within less than two decades Latinos as a group will outnumber African-Americans as the largest minority group in the US. Even by 1990, about one out of nine US households spoke a non-English language at home, predominantly Spanish.

Black middle-class leaders accustomed to advocating the interests of their constituents in simplistic racial terms have been increasingly confronted by Latinos who feel alienated from the system and largely ignored and underrepresented by the political process. Thus, in May 1991, Latinos took to the streets in Washington DC, hurling bottles and rocks and looting over a dozen stores, when local police shot a Salvadorean man who they claimed had wielded a knife. African-American mayor Sharon Pratt Dixon ordered over 1,000 police officers to patrol the city's Latino neighbourhoods, and used tear gas to quell the public disturbances. In effect, a black administration in Washington DC used the power of the police and courts to suppress the grievances of Latinos – just as a white administration had done against black protesters during the urban uprisings of 1968.⁵

The tragedy here is that too little is done either by African-American or Latino 'mainstream' leaders who practise racial identity politics to transcend their parochialism and to redefine their agendas on common ground. Latinos and blacks alike can agree on an overwhelming list of issues – such as the inclusion of multicultural curricula in public schools, improvements in public health care, job training initiatives, the expansion of public transportation and housing for low to moderate income people, and greater fairness and legal rights within the criminal justice system. Despite the image that Latinos as a group are more 'economically privileged' than African-Americans, Mexican-American families earn only slightly more than black households, and Puerto Rican families earn less than black Americans on average. Economically, Latinos and African-Americans have both experienced the greatest declines in real incomes and some of the greatest increases in poverty rates within the US. From 1973 to 1990, for example, the incomes for families headed by a parent under 30 years of age declined 28 per cent for Latino families and 48 per cent for African-American families. The poverty rates for young families in these same years rose 44 per cent for Latinos and 58 per cent for blacks.

There is also substantial evidence that Latinos continue to experience discrimination in elementary, secondary and higher education which is in many respects more severe than that experienced by African-Americans. Although high school graduation rates for the entire population have steadily improved, the rates for Latinos have declined

consistently since the mid-1980s. In 1989, for instance, 76 per cent of all African-Americans and 82 per cent of all whites who were aged 18 to 24 years had graduated from high school. By contrast, the graduation rate for Latinos in 1989 was 56 per cent. By 1992, the high school completion rate for Latino males dropped to its lowest level, 47.8 per cent, since 1972 when such figures were first collected by the American Council on Education. In colleges and universities, the pattern of Latino inequality was the same. In 1991, 34 per cent of all whites and 24 per cent of all African-Americans aged 18 to 24 years were enrolled in college. Latino college enrolment for the same age group was barely 18 per cent. As of 1992, approximately 22 per cent of the non-Latino adult population in the US possessed at least a four-year college degree. College graduation rates for Latino adults were just 10 per cent.⁶ Thus, on a series of public policy issues – access to quality education, economic opportunity, the availability of human services, and civil rights – Latinos and African-Americans share a core set of common concerns and long-term interests. What is missing is the dynamic vision and political leadership necessary to build something more permanent than temporary electoral coalitions between these groups.

A parallel situation exists between Asian-Americans, Pacific-Americans and the black American community. Two generations ago, the Asian-American population was comparatively small, except in states such as California, Washington and New York. With the end of discriminatory immigration restrictions on Asians in 1965, however, the Asian-American population began to soar dramatically, changing the ethnic and racial character of urban America.⁷ For example, in the years 1970 to 1990, the Korean population increased from 70,000 to 820,000. Since 1980, about 33,000 Koreans have entered the US each year, a rate of immigration exceeded only by Latinos and Filipinos. According to the 1990 Census, the Asian-American and Pacific Islander population in the US exceeds 7.3 million.

Some of the newer Asian immigrants in the 1970s and 1980s were of middle-class origins, with backgrounds in entrepreneurship, small manufacturing and in the white-collar professions. Thousands of Asian-American small-scale, family-owned businesses began to develop in black and Latino neighbourhoods, in many instances taking the place which Jewish merchants had occupied in ghettos a generation before. It did not take long before Latino and black petty hostilities and grievances against these new ethnic entrepreneurial groups began to crystallise into deep racial hatred. When African-American rapper Ice Cube expressed his anger against Los Angeles' Korean-American business community in the 1991 song 'Black Korea', he was also voicing the popular sentiments of many younger blacks:

So don't follow me up and down your market, or your little chop-

...suey ass will be a target of the nationwide boycott. Choose with the people, that's what the boy got. So pay respect to the black fist, or we'll burn down your store, right down to a crisp, and then we'll see you, 'cause you can't turn the ghetto into Black Korea.

Simmering ethnic tensions boiled into open outrage in Los Angeles when a black teenage girl was killed by Korean-American merchant Soon Ja Du. Although convicted of voluntary manslaughter, Du was sentenced to probation and community service only. Similarly, in the early 1990s, African-Americans launched economic boycotts and political confrontations with Korean-American small merchants in New York.

Thus, in the aftermath of the blatant miscarriage of justice in Los Angeles last year – the acquittals of four white police officers for the violent beating of Rodney King – the anger and outrage within the African-American community was channelled not against the state and the corporations, but small Korean-American merchants. Throughout Los Angeles, over 1,500 Korean-American-owned stores were destroyed, burned or looted. Following the urban uprising, a fiercely anti-Asian sentiment continued to permeate sections of Los Angeles.⁸ In 1992-3 there have been a series of incidents of Asian-Americans being harassed or beaten in southern California. After a rail system contract was awarded to a Japanese company, a chauvinistic movement was launched to 'buy American'. Asian-Americans are still popularly projected to 'other non-whites as America's successful 'model minorities', which fosters resentment, misunderstandings and hostilities among people of colour. Yet black leaders have consistently failed to explain to African-Americans that Asian-Americans as a group do not own the major corporations or banks which control access to capital. Asian-Americans as a group do not own massive amounts of real estate, control the courts or city governments, have ownership in the mainstream media, dominate police forces or set urban policies.

While African-Americans, Latinos and Asian-Americans scramble over which group should control the mom-and-pop grocery store in their neighbourhood, almost no one questions the racist 'redlining' policies of large banks which restrict access to capital for nearly all people of colour. Black and Latino working people usually are not told by their race conscious leaders and middle-class 'symbolic representatives' that institutional racism has also frequently targeted Asian-Americans throughout US history – from the recruitment and exploitation of Asian labourers, through a series of lynchings and violent assaults culminating in the mass incarceration of Japanese-Americans during the second world war, to the slaying of Vincent Chin in Detroit and the violence and harassment of other Asian-Americans. A central ideological pillar of 'whiteness' is the consistent scapegoating of the

'oriental menace'. As legal scholar Mari Matsuda observes: 'There is an unbroken line of poor and working Americans turning their anger and frustration into hatred of Asian-Americans. Every time this happens, the real villains – the corporations and politicians who put profit before human needs – are allowed to go about their business free from public scrutiny, and the anger that could go to organising for positive social change goes instead to Asian-bashing.'

* * *

What is required is a radical break from the narrow, race-based politics of the past, which have characterised the core assumptions about black empowerment since the mid-nineteenth century. We need to recognise that both perspectives of racial identity politics which are frequently juxtaposed, integration/assimilation vs nationalism/separatism, are actually two different sides of the same ideological and strategic axis. To move into the future will require that we bury the racial barriers of the past, for good. The essential point of departure is the deconstruction of the idea of 'whiteness', the ideology of white power, privilege and elitism which remains heavily embedded within the dominant culture, social institutions and economic arrangements of the society. But we must do more than critique the white pillars of race, gender and class domination. We must rethink and restructure the central social categories of collective struggle by which we conceive and understand our own political reality. We must redefine 'blackness' and other traditional racial categories to be more inclusive of contemporary ethnic realities.

To be truly liberating, any social theory must reflect the actual problems of an historical conjuncture with a commitment to rigour and scholastic truth. 'Afrocentrism' fails on all counts to provide that clarity of insight into the contemporary African-American urban experience. It looks to a romantic, mythical reconstruction of yesterday to find some understanding for the cultural basis of today's racial and class challenges. Yet that critical understanding of reality cannot begin with an examination of the lives of Egyptian Pharaohs. It must begin by critiquing the vast structure of power and privilege which characterises the political economy of post-industrial, capitalist America. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, during the Reagan-Bush era of the 1980s, the poorest one-fifth of all Americans earned about \$7,725 annually, and experienced a decline in before-tax household incomes of 3.8 per cent in the decade. The middle fifth of all US households earn about \$31,000 annually, with an income gain of 3.1 per cent during the 1980s. Yet the top fifth household incomes reached over \$105,200 annually, by 1990, with before-tax incomes soaring 29.8 per cent in the 1980s. The richest 5 per cent of all American

households exceeded \$206,000 annually, improving their incomes by 44.9 per cent under Reagan and Bush. The wealthiest 1 per cent of all US households reached nearly \$550,000 per year, with average before-tax incomes increasing by 75.3 per cent. In effect, since 1980, the income gap between America's wealthiest 1 per cent and the middle class *nearly doubled*.¹⁰ As the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities relates, the wealthiest 1 per cent of all Americans, roughly 2.5 million people, receive 'nearly as much income after taxes as the bottom 40 per cent, about 100 million people. While wealthy households are taking a larger share of the national income, the tax burden has been shifted down the income pyramid.' A social theory of a reconstructed, multicultural democracy must advance the reorganisation and ownership of capital resources, the expansion of production in minority areas and provide guarantees for social welfare such as a single-payer, national health care system.

The factor of 'race', by itself, does not and cannot explain the massive transformation of the structure of capitalism in its post-industrial phase, and the destructive redefinition of 'work' itself as we enter the twenty-first century. Increasingly in western Europe and America, the new division of 'haves' vs 'have-nots' is characterised by a new segmentation of the labour force. The division is between those workers who have maintained basic economic security and benefits – such as full health insurance, term life insurance, pensions, educational stipends or subsidies for the employee's children, paid vacations and so forth – vs those marginal workers who are either unemployed, part-time employees, or who labour but have few, if any, benefits. Since 1982, 'temporary employment' or part-time hirings without benefits have increased 250 per cent across the US, while all employment has grown by less than 20 per cent. Today, the largest private employer in the US is Manpower Inc, the world's largest temporary employment agency, with 560,000 workers. By the year 2000, one-half of all American workers will be classified as part-time employees or, as they are termed within IBM, 'the peripherals'. The reason for this massive restructuring of labour relations is capital's search for surplus value or profits. In 1993, it is estimated that total payroll costs in the US of \$2.6 billion annually will be reduced by \$800 million through the utilisation of part-time labourers and employees. Increasingly, disproportionately high percentages of Latino and African-American workers will be trapped within this second-tier labour market. Black, Latino, Asian-American and low-income white workers all share a stake in fighting for a new social contract relating to work and social benefits: the right to a good job should be as guaranteed as the human right to vote; the right to free quality health care should be as secure as the freedom of speech. The radical changes within the domestic economy require that black leadership reaches out to other oppressed sectors of the society,

creating a common programme for economic and social justice. Vulgar Afrocentrism looks inward; the new black liberation of the twenty-first century must look outward, embracing those people of colour and oppressed people of divergent ethnic backgrounds who share our democratic vision.

The multicultural democratic critique must consider the changing demographic, cultural and class realities of modern, post-industrial America. By the year 2000, one-third of the total US population will consist of people of colour. Within seventy years, roughly one-half of America's entire population will be Latino, American Indian, Asian-American, Pacific-American, Arab-American and African-American. The ability to create a framework for multicultural democracy, inter-group dialogue and interaction within and between the most progressive leaders, grassroots activists, intellectuals and working people of these communities will determine the future of American society itself. Our ability to transcend racial chauvinism, inter-ethnic hatred and the old definitions of 'race', to recognise the class commonalities and joint social justice interests of all groups in the restructuring of this nation's economy and social order, will be key in constructing a nonracist democracy, which will break down the ancient walls of white violence, corporate power and class privilege. By dismantling the narrow politics of racial identity and selective self-interest, by going beyond 'black' and 'white', we may construct new values, new institutions and new visions of an America beyond traditional racial categories and racial oppression.

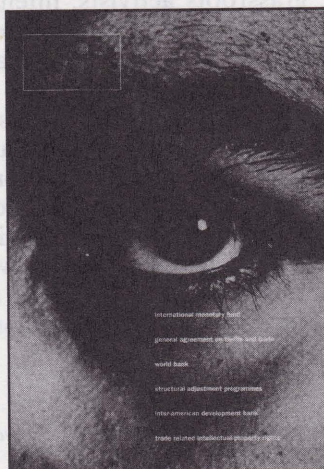
References

- 1 E. San Juan, 'Racism, ideology and resistance', *Forward Motion* (Vol.10, no.3, September 1991), pp35-42.
- 2 See F. Barringer, 'Rich-poor gulf widens among blacks', *New York Times* (25 September 1992).
- 3 See, e.g., M. Asante, 'Transracial communication and the changing image of Black Americans', *Journal of Black Studies* (Vol.4, September 1973), pp69-80; 'Systematic nationalism: a legitimate strategy for national self-hood', *Journal of Black Studies* (Vol.9, September 1978), pp115-28; 'The ideological significance of Afrocentricity in intercultural communication', *Journal of Black Studies* (Vol.14, September 1983), pp3-19' *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia, 1987).
- 4 W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: essays and sketches* (Chicago, 1903), p.3.
- 5 See R.W. Apple, 'In clashes, a Hispanic agenda enters' *New York Times* (9 May 1991); 'Capital unrest reminds Latinos of their past', *New York Times* (8 May 1991); Earl Ofari Hutchinson, 'Black-Latino clashes shatter solidarity myth', *Guardian* (NY) (25 September 1991).
- 6 See Ellen K. Coughlin, 'Sociologists examine the complexities of racial and ethnic identity in America', *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Vol.39, no.29, March 1993), ppA6-8; Denise K. Magner, 'Hispanics remain "grossly underrepresented" on campuses, report says', *Chronicle of Higher Education* (25 January 1991); Anthony DePalma, 'College still remains an elusive goal for minority students', *New York Times* (18 January 1993).

- 7 Ron Takaki, *Strangers from a different shore* (Boston, 1989).
- 8 Scott Kurashige, 'How we got to this point: an Asian-Pacific perspective on the Los Angeles rebellion', *Forward Motion* (Vol.11, no.3, July 1992), pp5-12; Darell Y. Hamamoto, 'Black-Korean conflict in Los Angeles', *Z Magazine* (July/August 1992), pp61-2.
- 9 Mari Matsuda, 'Are Asian Americans a racial bourgeoisie?', *Katipunan* (Vol.4, no.1, September 1990), p.12.
- 10 Holly Sklar, 'The truly greedy', *Z Magazine* (Vol.4, no.6, June 1991), p.10.

THE NEW CONQUISTADORS

A new book from Race & Class



Five hundred years after that first reckless plundering has come another, of gigantic and devastating proportions, its zealous conquistadors those innocuous sounding agencies – GATT, the IMF and the World Bank – its absolute monarch transnational capital and the governments that minister to it.

The reconquest of India • GATT and the Third World • Africa: a political audit • Jamaica: stories of poverty • The World Bank and education in Africa • Debt and ecological disaster in Latin America • Agri-cultural madness • Pesticide exports to the Third World

Price £4/\$6.50 ISBN 0 85001 040 3

Cheques and postal orders should be made payable to 'Institute of Race Relations'. Send to IRR, 2-6 Leeke Street, London WC1X 9HS, UK.

Editorial Working Committee

John Berger

Lee Bridges

Jan Carew

Basil Davidson

David Edgar

Saul Landau

Manning Marable

Nancy Murray

Colin Prescod

Barbara Ransby

Cedric Robinson

Edward Said

Chris Searle

Editors: A. Sivanandan and Eqbal Ahmad

Deputy Editor: Hazel Waters

Editorial Staff: Hilary Arnott, Liz Fekete and Jenny Bourne

Contributions

Contributions, editorial and advertising correspondence and books for review should be sent to:

The Institute of Race Relations, 2-6 Leeke Street, King's Cross Road,
London WC1X 9HS, England. Fax 071-278 0623. Tel 071-837 0041.

The Institute of Race Relations is precluded from expressing a corporate view: the opinions expressed are therefore those of the contributors.

While welcoming contributions, particularly on Third World problems and realities, we would like to remind our contributors that manuscripts should be short (ideally, 5,000 words), clear (as opposed to obscure) and free of jargon. Typescripts should be double-spaced.

Photocopying and reprint permissions

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means, only with prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the Institute of Race Relations.

Subscriptions and distribution

Subscriptions correspondence, including payments and address changes should be sent to
120-126 Lavender Avenue, Mitcham, Surrey CR4 3HP, UK. Tel 081-685 0301.

Current rates

	Individual	Institutional
Inland and surface mail	£16/US\$28	£22/US\$48
Airmail	£26/US\$43	£32/US\$63

Race & Class is published quarterly (in July, October, January and April) and subscriptions can be entered at any point in the volume. Cheques should be made payable to the *Institute of Race Relations*, and should either be in sterling drawn on a UK bank, or US dollars drawn on a US bank.

UK Bookshop Distribution

Turnaround, 27 Horsell Road, London N5 1XL.

US Mailing Agent

Expeditors of the Printed Word, 2323 Randolph Avenue, Avenel, NJ 07001, USA

2nd class postage paid at Rahway, NJ.

£6.00/\$9.00

Black America: the street and the campus

Culture and rebellion
JAN CAREW

The Black Panthers: Heike Kleffner interviews
GERONIMO JI-JAGA PRATT and MUMIA ABU JAMAL

Guerrilla artists of New York City
IVOR MILLER

Rap, race and politics
CLARENCE LUSANE

Black popular culture and the transcendence
of patriarchal illusions
BARBARA RANSBY and TRACYE MATTHEWS

Public enemies and private intellectuals:
Apartheid USA
RUTH WILSON GILMORE

The appropriation of Frantz Fanon
CEDRIC ROBINSON

The politics of cultural existence: Pan-Africanism,
historical materialism and Afrocentricity
SIDNEY J. LEMELLE

Beyond racial identity politics: towards a liberation
theory for multicultural democracy
MANNING MARABLE

Institute of Race Relations