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# Inside the American Stratification System: Imageries from Black Writers

by  
Clinton M. Jean

*The following paper was given at a seminar, "Teaching African-American Literature," at the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies of Harvard University in April 1991. The paper addresses several questions. If social science, as a matter of scientific principle, must choose to avoid ethical conclusions, do black novelists, poets, and essayists help fill the ethical void? But then, are they objective enough?*

It is, of course, better to be just a little unbalanced before talking about anything important. Was it some irreverent insight that prompted a student who had been reading Michael Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* to remark to me, "The term American suggests ethnic neutrality, and Anglo is silent because we want to keep quiet [about] where the dominant power is coming from. In essence, the real American has not come yet"? She was Italian.

Irreverence is not an acceptable mode in social scientific discourse. Protocol demands objectivity, as they call it. One discusses triads, religion, and social despair all in a rage of analytic dispassion. Objective distance has the virtue, so it is said, of leading to truth. It frees discussion from the pressure of partisan entanglement and polemical distortion. Would that it were so.

As a property of the world of facts, objectivity simply reflects what exists. It is indifferent. It is neither hot nor cold. But as a principle that should govern the mood or temper of research it is anything but indifferent. It has, as a worn sociological insight tells us, latent functions.

Surely, an ironic commentary from an Italian on the reality of Anglo dominance betrays something subjective—distaste perhaps? But then, does irony put the objective factualness of the commentary into question? Hardly.

Historians tell us that during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries nativist Anglos (poor whites, suffragists, abolitionists, intellectuals, statesmen, presidents) had no doubt as to who ran



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the show in America; and no doubt as to their right to run the same show elsewhere—"in all the waste places of the earth," in Henry Cabot Lodge's phrasing.<sup>1</sup> Theodore Roosevelt felt that the lynching of Italians in New Orleans was "a good thing" and said so in the presence of "various dago diplomats . . . [who were] all wrought up about [it]."<sup>2</sup> "I don't go so far as to think that the only good Indians are dead Indians," Roosevelt commented another time, "but I believe nine out of every ten are, and I shouldn't like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth. The most vicious cowboy has more moral principle than the average Indian."<sup>3</sup> These are not the sentiments of people who need to retreat into irony—or distaste. They liked what they saw. The hegemony they enjoy is no less a fact for that.

The declamatory arrogance of Roosevelt's time has given way to a different mood, although I cannot examine here how that came to pass. There has been a change in the lexicon of terms and emotional tones that addresses Anglo-American power in America and elsewhere. One no longer speaks of Teutons and Anglo-Saxons as being among "the great masterful races." Instead, democracy, individual freedom, and free speech are the terms that now argue hegemony. Clearly, such terms do not describe Social Darwinist endowments of "masterful races," but rather are structural features of a cultural system. This cultural system was the first to conceive the vision of a world where "you could make something of yourself"; and it was the first that had the institutional inventiveness to bring such a world into being.

The new lexicon, as lexicons generally do, tells us how to see, how to do once we have seen, and how to react. Looked at from the new angle, all that being first to conceive such a vision allows is a claim to primacy; it is not necessary that it suggest hegemony—

indeed, what need is there for that? As for those straggling behind along the road to Anglo world, they are not so much peoples any more. They are just cultures. The peoples are as invisible as Anglo is silent.

Passion, sentiment could have no place here.

But what if one needs passion to be able to grasp things more fully, or even to see them? Is not objectivity then a sort of license for myopia? Perhaps one sees better if disgust is in the eye. What is it that one should not see?

Anglo power, an Italian student said. And its victims, we must add, are that large company of stragglers crowding the American landscape. Here is where the black folks live. We know, or we could know. We have merely to follow the sound of their poetic rages.

The howl of black discourse seldom breaches Anglo silence or uncloaks invisibility. To understand that, it is important to keep the context of discourse in mind.

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"An impersonal, uninvolved discussion," Thomas Kochman says, "is the kind of discussion to which whites in official positions are accustomed. . . . In discussion, one can be dispassionate; in argument, when one's own needs and views matter, it is much more difficult, and sometimes injurious to one's cause, to sound dispassionate. Moreover, it is possible that the ability to remain dispassionate can be achieved only by those who have worked long and hard to separate thought from feeling. . . . It is also possible that those who have succeeded in separating thought from feeling are able to do so only when they have nothing at stake."

For blacks, he continues, "to leave their emotions aside is not their responsibility; it is the whites' responsibility to provide them first with a reason to do so."<sup>4</sup>

In this context responsibility presumes power. It follows that it is not possible to claim just honor, if that's what it's all about, as the first on the road to progress. Honor and primacy, one could argue, which are all objective dispassion seems able to discern, are cover for a truth that a different age had no problem affirming. Beyond that, is there not a larger truth at stake? For, indeed, stragglers must argue that what silence dictates is political. And a question of politics is surely a question of ethics. Perhaps silence is not so secure against this kind of clamor.

Why risk that? Objectivity aborts the risk; it keeps things out of earshot.

Let us admit that the pen is not as mighty as the sword; that, in fact, it is impotent without collective action. Still, the oppressed must speak; and many blacks, resolutely non-accommodationist, have done so in the social sciences and in the literary arts. They are armed with different kinds of intellectual weaponries.

We are indebted to those paleontologists, historians, and sociologists who have rescued African life from Anglo-imposed darkness. We know, for instance, that Africans have a legitimate claim to primacy as the first humans and as inventors of the first civilization. We also know that white progress has been, and is, fueled by the rape and manipulation of black peoples; and that many blacks have acted in willing collusion with the destructiveness of white designs.

We may be sure that the impulse for these investigations, often enough, is the search for larger truth; not just what happened, but the politics and ethics of it, and the sensual human realities agonizing within the social order. Yet, social science, even a critical black science, cannot completely reveal this larger truth. The rule of objectivity prevents it.

However factual the findings of research may be, science forbids their use as grounds for moral judgment. Black people cannot demand just treatment as something that follows from the logic of objective inquiry. The social agonies that inquiry reveals do not make justice imperative. Well then, one might say, are their agonies as real and as visceral as inquiry makes them out to be? Or, in a more popular vein (and usually asked in a tone of impatient frustration): what do black people want?

There is no answer to this kind of hard-nosed skepticism, unless one can come up with something that plays on imagination. That something must put blood and muscle into history—jealousies; virtue; ugly local treacheries swallowed up by treacheries of encompassing cruelty; foresight; resolve; anxiety and despair; pathological rage in once balanced and contented spirits; insecurity and arrogance and venomous jealousy and a demonic use of power; Pilate and her opposite (let us call her Imitation Snow White). Social science does not (cannot?) exploit this option. That has been left to novelists and poets.

there's only two parties in this country  
anti-nigger and pro-nigger  
most of the pro-niggers are now dead  
this second reconstruction is being aborted  
as was the first  
the pro-niggers council voting  
the anti-niggers have guns . . .<sup>5</sup>

It is possible not to understand what Nikki Giovanni is saying. It is also possible to understand her only too well, even without a single word of explanation. Listen to Toni Morrison talk about Sethe, the main character in *Beloved*: “Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn’t get it right off—she could never explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. Simple . . .”<sup>6</sup>

And what about the doubters, embattled skeptics snarling at truth winging in the nightmares of conscience? Black Herman, one of Ishmael Reed’s fictional creations in *Mumbo Jumbo*, gives the word: “1st they intimidate the intellectuals by condemning work arising out of their own experience as being 1-dimensional, enraged, non-objective, preoccupied with hate and not universal, universal being a word co-opted by the Catholic Church when the Atonists took over Rome, as a way of measuring every 1 by their ideals.”<sup>7</sup>

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Clearly, Atonism—shifting, clutching, pushing through history—thought it found an appropriate text for its legacies in modern science, in claims to scientific universalism. But moralists, gnostics, and rhythmicists denied Atonism universalist jurisdiction in all arenas of speech. It did not even have unchallenged jurisdiction in the world of indifferent fact, a world it thought to colonize as its own.

Stone, cold truth, without any pretense of scientific genesis, could appear in the passionate musings of Sethe and in the musings of Paul D “listening to the doves in Alfred, Georgia, and having neither the right nor the permission to enjoy it because in that place mist, doves, sunlight, copper dirt, moon—everything belonged to the men who had the guns. Little men, some of them, big men too, each one of whom he could snap like a twig if he wanted to. Men who knew their manhood lay in their guns and were not even embarrassed by the knowledge that without gunshot fox would laugh at them.”<sup>8</sup>

No doubt, facts revealed in the hardheaded musings of muscular, agonistic historical consciousness can be questioned just as facts differently derived can also be questioned. But in this realm of hardheaded historical immediacy, an anthropologist tells us, people live in a blaze of reality.<sup>9</sup> Questioning is not allowed to retreat into an endless search, sup-

posedly, for confirming facts—as in, *the facts are not all in*. Questioning is not allowed to demand the “long-drawn-out record.” There is already enough to prove the case.

All of a sudden scientific skepticism about facts comes face to face with a dialogue it always avoids. If enough of the facts are in, then there is a question that must be asked. Stamp Paid asks it: “What are these people? You tell me, Jesus. What are they?”<sup>10</sup>

Stamp Paid’s question is an ethical one. It lays the charge of injustice for historical crimes on the Anglo world and, indeed, on Western culture as a whole. The question and the charge, in American social thought, are relegated to the world of values where one ethical judgment is as good as another, where everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion. It follows that Stamp Paid’s judgment will not be accepted as final or binding. From a different angle, though, it does not follow at all.

The separation of ethical thought from factually objective analysis is not something divinely revealed. It is a socially constructed practice by people who breathe, eat, sleep, and change their underwear (thank you, Albert Camus)<sup>11</sup> just like the rest of us. Against the background of human history in its variegated multicultural expressions, such a separation is, frankly, an unusual practice. One might even say that it is a phenomenological curiosity. Perhaps it is culturally unique. What is certain is that it thrives on and feeds the malignancy of power. That is its function or, shall we say, its latent function.

Anglo power will not promote the reunification of the rational-ethical mind. It is not in its interest to do so. Under Anglo aegis, modern social science will remain morally emasculated. Behind this unhappy conclusion lies much more than the political-economic realities of the modern age. The fatal splitting of Western consciousness is rooted in ancient European history. (This has to be argued but that cannot be done here.) The reintegration of human consciousness, a consciousness that has been in the grip of the West for some time, will have to come from elsewhere. Black writers, some of them at least, show the way.

It is not implied here that people in other cultures do not commit mortal sin among themselves or against others. But there is sufficient evidence to show that they did not pretend they did not do what they did however brass-faced they might have been about not giving it up. Chaka Zulu, that formidable nineteenth-century African, was hardly surprised that he got it in the end. And everybody was a witness.

History, it has been said, is ironic. So it is. It produced Chaka. Or do we wish to think that his rise to power at the very moment of Western intrusion into his neighborhood is pure historical coincidence? His people were still African enough to judge that he

had gone too far. But there would come a time when, caught in the culturally destructive tow of the West, Africans everywhere would begin to lose this gift.

As Ayi Kwei Armah tells us in his novel, *The Healers*, the Ashanti lost the gift. Their empire was brought to ruin by the force of British arms, but not by that alone. The divisions among the Ashanti laid the groundwork for their collapse—divisions that existed before the coming of the British. The British presence, though, gave these divisions room to flourish and, ultimately, to destroy Ashanti society.

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Ababio, Armah's king of Esuano, is corrupt. He has committed a heinous crime, the murder of Prince Appia and the brutalization of the Prince's mother, and is without remorse. He gloats as he puts his actions in the context of things to come. "You've always been slow to comprehend reality," he tells the young hero, Densu. "Let me describe it for your benefit. This is a new day in the land. The whites are in control. They recognize those who have helped them. They recognize me, Ababio, as king of Esuano. Whoever goes against me will have to take on the whites. They protect me. They look after me. Whatever I want from them, I can ask for it, and I'll get it."<sup>12</sup>

Ababio betrayed his village. The queen-mother of Ashanti was caught by the same ambitions. She betrayed her people.

Ababio is the offspring of spitlickers on the make. He bragged of this himself. The new brood of safari bourgeois in Africa, the Caribbean, and America still speaks the way he spoke. "Keep this nigger running," said Ellison's Bledsoe.<sup>13</sup>

The gift of rightful vision is not lost, though. It survived in Sethe's community, which is why Stamp Paid was riled up at the thought that nobody had offered shelter to Paul D. It is why he stayed riled up until he got an explanation. It is also why everybody in the community cut Sethe loose. They could understand the wretched necessity that made her do what she did. But they did not like the fact that she showed no regret for it. Even so, they refused to let Beloved destroy her. Haint or no haint. "But nothing," said Ella. "What's fair ain't necessarily right."<sup>14</sup>

Pilate is the quintessential embodiment of African consciousness enduring in the storm.<sup>15</sup> The

spirits have blessed her. She has no umbilical attachment to white society and is beyond the blandishments of bourgeois tease. It was she who made Milkman fly. In the land beyond time she surely recognized a kindred soul in Invisible Man's grandfather. "'Son,' " he said, "'after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. . . . Learn it to the younguns,' he whispered fiercely; then he died."<sup>16</sup>

Our novelists and poets show us how to think in line with what is objectively factual, how to think in line with what is substantive and moral, and how to judge whether what is revealed as fact is in harmony with what is substantively reasonable. The novel and other creative forms use tools that creative fancy provides to make its arguments: it makes virtue, wrong, contradiction, and turmoil visceral and immediate. If it does not restore human consciousness, it at least brings us face to face with what is to be done.

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## Notes

1. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 291.
2. *Ibid.*, 291, 293.
3. Robert Allen, *Reluctant Reformers* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1983), 89.
4. Thomas Kochman, *Black and White Styles in Conflict* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 40, 41.
5. Nikki Giovanni, *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 169.
6. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 163.
7. Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), 153.
8. Morrison, *Beloved*, 162.
9. Paul Radin, *The World of Primitive Man* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1953).
10. Morrison, *Beloved*, 180.
11. Albert Camus, *L'Etranger* (Paris: Bordas, 1980), 119.
12. Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Healers* (London: Heinemann, 1979), 299.
13. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1947), 191.
14. Morrison, *Beloved*, 256.
15. Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: New America Library, 1977).
16. Ellison, 16.