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AFRICA OR AMERICA:
RACE, CULTURE, AND POLITICS IN AFROCENTRIC THOUGHT

A Thesis Presented

by

BRETT V. GADSDEN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	IV
Chapter	
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1. ASANTE'S AFROCENTRISM: THE NEXUS OF RACE AND CULTURE.....	10
2. AFROCENTRISM MEETS FEMINISM.....	39
3. AMERICANIZED AFRICAN OR AFRICANIZED AMERICAN: THE PITFALLS OF RACIAL REASONING.....	51
4. PUBLIC POLICY AND AFROCENTRICITY: THE POLITICS OF DISLOCATION.....	69
CONCLUSION.....	91
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	93

INTRODUCTION

The Afrocentric project stands for Molefi Asante as "a critical corrective to a displaced agency among Africans."¹ Asante considers it a project to imbue knowledge upon African Americans as the first step towards liberation. The freeing of the mind from the distorted view of Eurocentrism will make constructive political, economic, social, and cultural action possible. It essentially advocates an inner, individual transformation from one of cultural dislocation to cultural relocation. In the process, African Americans are re-connected with an African ethos which, according to Asante's rationale, has fomented and nurtured the evolution of African culture. Through this Afrocentric lens, a true understanding of the fundamental challenges to the realization of potential of the African American individual and, by extension, the community, can be realized free from the distortions of Eurocentrism that can be traced back to the Middle Passage, the defining and dislocating moment of African American history.

I would like to study the degree to which Asante's Afrocentric project represents a framework compatible with a progressive political agenda. The question I seek to ask is: To what extent does it provide African Americans with a framework from which to understand and address the fundamental challenges to African American existence? More specifically, what are the essential elements of Asante's historical narrative and, in a context where theory and praxis can not be separated, what type of politics does his paradigm generate?

My intention in this thesis is not to engage in dialogue with critics who concentrate on the supposed racial chauvinism or divisiveness of Molefi Asante's project. These discussions fail to take the lives of African Americans

¹Molefi Kete Asante, "Afrocentricity, Race, and Reason," *Race & Reason* (Autumn 1994) vol. 1, no. 1, p. 20.

seriously and as central to their analysis and truly fail to understand the complexities of this black nationalist paradigm or understand it in its historical context. At the most basic level these critics fail entirely to appreciate history and the effects of power. Manning Marable stated in his critique of critics of multiculturalism and ethnic studies: "What is most revealing about the intellectual bankruptcy of . . . conservative critics of Ethnic Studies is that their critique is *silent on the actual power relationship between people of color and women and the dominant upper-class elites which control American higher education.*"² This is the only way to justify the historically naive and racist approach of Arthur Schlesinger's attack on multiculturalism and Afrocentrism in his monograph *The Disuniting of America*.

These mischaracterizations inhibit our understandings of the dynamics of racism and strategies for overcoming its pervasive effects. This predicament does not only surround this case but also the appreciation of much of African American intellectual and activist production in which there is never a true examination of what each particular project entails. Indeed it surrounds most discussions of race relations in general. Such observations were made by W.E.B. DuBois some years earlier.

It is difficult to let others see the full psychological meaning of caste segregation. It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world. One talks on evenly and logically in this way, but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on. It gradually penetrates the minds of

²Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African-American Politics*, (London and New York: Verso, 1995), p. 114. Italic added.

the prisoners that the people do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. They get excited; they talk louder; they gesticulate. Some of the passing world stop in curiosity; these gesticulations seem so pointless; they laugh and pass on. They still either do not hear at all, or hear but dimly, and even what they hear, they do not understand.³

And what is truly ironic is that such ill-inspired criticism, understood historically in which all black resistance irrespective of its content has elicited a white backlash, serves as a basis for the increased popularity of many streams of African American discourse within the black community in some ways irrespective of its content. For example, after Mike Wallace's documentary "The Hate That Hate Produced" aired the popularity of the Black Muslims skyrocketed.⁴ In a similar way, the backlash against multiculturalism has fueled the exploration of our Afrocentric roots. The logic goes: 'If white folks hate it there must be something to what they are saying.'

I would like to consider this thesis, rather, as part of a larger discussion by those committed (both black and white) to addressing the fundamental challenges to the African American community and transcending both a nationalist and bourgeois politics. It is not intended as ammunition by those committed to the maintenance of America's apartheid system and racial caste system or a realpolitik washing of the hands of obligations to the promotion of racial justice. It is a discussion of what Afrocentricity *means* for Black people and the extent to which it addresses the fundamental challenges to Black existence. It is an effort to evaluate its possible strengths and consequent contributions to the struggle for the recognition of Black

³W.E.B. DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions, 1992), pp. 131-32.

⁴Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Wings of Ethiopia: Studies in African American Life and Letter*, (Ames, IO: Iowa State University, 1990), p 120.

humanity and human equality. It is also an effort to understand the possible contradictions inherent in this ideological approach, with a particular emphasis on how it misunderstands the dynamics of race, racism, and culture in American society, and what type of politics this Afrocentric paradigm produces. To draw upon Baldwin, his consideration of Malcolm X reminds us of the complexities inherent in the appreciation of Afrocentrism and warns us of overly simplistic dismissals or acceptances.

I, in any case, certainly refuse to be put in the position of denying the truth of Malcolm's statements simply because I disagree with his conclusions, or in order to pacify the liberal conscience. Things are as bad as the Muslims say they are -- in fact, they are worse, and the Muslims do not help matters -- but there *is* no reason that black men should be expected to be more patient, more forbearing, more farseeing than whites; indeed, quite the contrary.⁵

This serves as the main motivation for my own exploration of Asante's Afrocentric project. On face value, the premise of Afrocentrism seems appealing. It seems to provide a framework from which to critique Eurocentrism and understand the pervasive effects that such theory has had on African and African American people. I agree with Asante's original position even as I disagree with the elaboration and prescriptions.

At its roots, this criticism is intended to be constructive, reflecting a personal and professional exploration of how race and culture are understood in African American discourse and the type of politics that Afrocentrism generates. Living in such a racialized society we are victimized by 'race think.' Having no analytical basis, it serves largely to blind us to the intricacies and subtleties of human existence. We are constantly battling white racialized thought. It is evident in political debates on welfare, crime,

⁵James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, (New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985), p. 358.

health care, and foreign policy. Race plays a large role in determining which political candidates we choose to represent us. When considering these practices by whites, it does not take much probing to understand its consequences.

It is ironic that Blacks are engaged in many of the same methods of racialized reasoning, even as they resist oppressive and exploitative hegemonic discourses and structures. This is not to suggest that Blacks should know better. This argument only leads to dead ends. As Baldwin reminded us above, we are all human beings, capable of the same successes and the same failures. It is to suggest rather that we are all products of similar socialization processes and regimes of truths. This process has political consequences for blacks as well as whites. It seems that in constructing a resistance politics, it seems that our response must, while understanding race as a central component in our lives, transcend these simple characterizations to understand the other complexities of our lives, both revolving around our other interrelated identities and the related issues that affect our day to day existence.

It is my belief that a discussion of this nature is particularly important at this historical period given the precarious situation that the African American community faces. Despite the victories won during the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, among them the formal outlawing of segregation with the *Brown* decision, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the challenges facing African Americans are as great as ever. There is a decided shift away from political and economic solutions to the lingering effects of racism. The conservative move to construct a race-free society should be regarded with great suspicion. President Clinton's move to 'reevaluate' affirmative action programs is indicative of larger moves to

undermine the victories of the past and could very well mark the rebirth of Jim Crow in more invidious ways. In addition, increased privatization, capital flight from urban centers where communities of color tend to concentrate, economic shifts from manufacturing to service, the technological displacement of the workforce, segregated labor markets and wage disparities rooted in gender inequality, and the rise of homophobic violence rank among our biggest threat. The backlash against hard-fought advances in the quest for human dignity and equality has proven quite severe. It is within this context that I present my critique of Afrocentrism.

It is in this context that I would like to examine the ideological foundations of Afrocentrism as developed by Molefi Asante as it attempt to provide a framework with which to address the problems of the African American community. What in the 'text' provides us with authoritative insights into and prescriptions to these problems and where do they prove inadequate? Among my concerns are: How does Asante understand race and culture and to what extent does his appreciation of these phenomena differ from many commonly held views which perpetuate divisiveness and white hegemony? Has he extricated himself from the webs of western essentialism? And to what extent do they represent a mobilizing force in the African American community that propels us to confront the discursive and institutional mechanisms that are the most fundamental threat to African American existence?

This thesis is relevant in that Asante's Afrocentricity enjoys a degree of currency within the Black community both within the academy and the community-at-large. In each site, each exhibits more than a modicum of power. Molefi Asante is Professor and Chair of the Department of African American Studies at Temple University. He has authored a number of

important books on the subject of Afrocentrism. The main subjects of my thesis are *Afrocentricity*, *The Afrocentric Idea*, *Kemet*, *Afrocentricity & Knowledge*, and *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*. He has been the editor of the *Journal of Black Studies* for over two decades and has been widely published in a number of journals. Within academic circles Asante is important because he heads one of but a hand full of programs that offers PhDs in African American Studies. Asante's project is also part of a larger movement in more popular circles that sees African Americans embracing Afrocentric orientations in their fashion, religion, and names.

Asante, while playing an instrumental role in the development of Afrocentric discourse, is not representative of all its adherents. There are significant variations within this paradigm that must be recognized. Just as within any other intellectual movement, we are bound by our academic responsibility to make choices. We must consider the works of Afrocentrists such as Asante, Cheikh Anta Diop,⁶ Maulana Karenga,⁷ and Patricia Hill Collins singularly and representative of individual efforts, even as we attempt to understand their connection and classify them into one intellectual school. It is in this sense that I am considering Asante project.

I would like to study Asante's project at two levels: the discursive and the political. At the discursive level he engages Eurocentrism and questions its hegemonic position. I would like to examine his constructions of culture and race. I will argue that he (1) understands culture as a rather static notion, free from the constraints of history which ultimately fails to appreciate the complexity and nuance of African, African American, and American culture; (2) holds a view of race as a biological notion which is retrogressive,

⁶Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop is widely recognized as one of the founding fathers of the Afrocentric movement. He is best know for his work *The African Origin of Civilization*.

⁷Cultural Nationalist Maulana Ron Karenga is considered Afrocentric in orientation. Asante seems to draw a great deal of inspiration from him. He is know as the inventor of the black holiday Kwanzaa.

inscribing it with a significance that has grave implications; and (3) conflates the two concepts in ways that misrepresent the dynamism of the African American community.

In this section I will examine Asante's Afrocentric project in two ways, as a possible counter-hegemonic tactic and set of truth claims. First, I would like to examine it as a counter-hegemonic tactic which challenges the western predisposition towards Eurocentrically informed, 'objective,' egocentric appreciations of human phenomena. It is here that I believe Asante's project has the most potential with its emphasis on perspective and relativism, even if it is not completely realized, as a liberatory tool in African American culture and politics. Second, I would like to examine the Afrocentric project as a set of truth claims about African and African American people as he attempts to create or define a 'space' or framework in which Africans do/should exist in which they have/may realize their potential individually and as a community.

It is important to understand that Asante's Afrocentric tactic and truth claims cannot be considered mutually exclusive, but are employed as complementary, dependent upon one another and interwoven in some very interesting ways throughout his work.

My conclusion is that Asante fails to construct a counter-hegemonic discourse and by extension produces a politics that is essentially conservative, divorced from a political program that is sensitive to the fundamental concerns facing the African American community today. What is most problematic about Asante's work is that while he initially sets out to challenge convention, he comes full circle, complementing and reifying much of the parochial framework, methods, and language that he attempts to undermine. While attempting to undermine the dominant paradigm, he

constructs one that replicates many of the ideological currents fundamental to European philosophy. His work, while attempting to contextualize, historicize, and promote relativism in the study of African people, contributes in many ways to the processes of decontextualization, ahistoricism, and essentialism in ways similar to his Eurocentric counterparts. These problems are especially evident in his project around the notions of culture and race.

CHAPTER 1

ASANTE'S AFROCENTRISM: THE NEXUS OF RACE AND CULTURE

While it is difficult to define precisely the nature of any intellectual project, it is helpful in understanding the historical forces that have helped to shape it. Sidney J. Lemelle notes: "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."⁸ I find evidence of a number of intellectual elements throughout Asante's texts including post-modernism, multiculturalism, black nationalism, and more specifically cultural nationalism. In many ways, Afrocentricity stands squarely in the post-modern tradition which in many ways contributes to the black intellectuals' exploration of liberatory paradigms. West highlights this general methodological orientation: "The Foucaultian model and project are attractive to Black intellectuals primarily because they speak to the Black postmodern predicament, defined by the rampant xenophobia of bourgeois humanism predominant in the whole academy, the waning attraction to orthodox reductionist and scientific versions of Marxism, and the need for reconceptualization regarding the specificity and complexity of Afro-American oppression."⁹ Much of the potential of Asante's discourse critique of essentialist notions regarding humanity lies here. In his move from the center, the origin, and the master codes representative of Eurocentric discourse towards the margin, difference

⁸Sidney J. Lemelle. "The Politics of Cultural Existence: Pan-Africanism, Historical Materialism and Afrocentricity," *Race & Class* (1993) vol. 35, no. 1, p. 95.

⁹bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*, (Boston: South End Press, 1991), p. 142.

and idiolect his Afrocentric discourse¹⁰ contributes to the quest for, what hooks characterizes as "black radical subjectivity,"¹¹ or an understanding of Black life and struggles in a particularized and historical sense.

Asante's Afrocentrism represents a strand of discourse in an era of multiculturalism. This discourse revolves around a number of issues including the need to appreciate the multiplicity of American experiences and the nuanced appreciation of history, culture, language, and ritual. Charles Taylor termed it the 'Politics of Recognition.' He stated: "A number of strands in contemporary politics turn on the need, sometimes the demand, for *recognition*. The need it can be argued, is one of the driving forces behind nationalist movements in politics. And the demand comes to the fore in a number of ways in today's politics, on behalf of minority or 'subaltern' groups, in some forms of feminism and in what is today called the politics of 'multiculturalism'."¹² Asante certainly draws inspiration from and contributes to the litany of multicultural texts that pervade the academy. While this movement is by no means homogenous or organized around a central premise, their challenge to the canons of European political, economic, social, and cultural texts has created spaces for non-traditional discourses. Baraka summarizes it as such:

It is simply that we want the real lives of the people of our world, the whole world. American culture is the creation, for instance, of all Americans. It is the combining of all the nationalities and cultures here that is the actual national character of American culture. And no one is belittling the accomplishment of European Humanism. Actually, an authentically multinational and multicultural curriculum

¹⁰A helpful guide to the modern and postmodern projects can be found in the "Appendix: Schematic Differences between Modernism and Postmodernism" in Chris Brown, *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 228.

¹¹bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 29.

¹²Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in Amy Gutman, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 25.

would revalidate the authentic masterpieces of all cultures, highlight their fundamental unity, and help diminish their conflicts.¹³

Marable's comments are equally insightful.

What is the basis of multiculturalism? At heart, it is the recognition that the totality of American society within the United States is not expressed within one and only one cultural group, Western European, only one religion, Christianity, or only one language, English. Civilizations, cultures and language patterns from Africa, the Caribbean, Latin and Central America, Asia, the Pacific, and the Native American people, have also profoundly influenced the pluralistic American experience and the complex and contradictory identities of its people.¹⁴

The result is that we have been granted access to varied and empowering approaches and histories to the study of the human condition.

Afrocentrism clearly falls within the category of black nationalism. Broadly speaking, black nationalism characterizes a wide range of discourse that vary considerably. It has clearly evolved as an ideology across time and does not conform to any precise definitions. Its origins and constitutive elements have been an area of intense contest throughout African American discourse. In very general terms it characterizes a discourse that understands a clear and distinct black "nation" pitted against, what could be considered in equally general terms, a white "nation." Moses stated: "If there is one *essential* quality of black nationalism, however, it is the feeling on the part of black individuals that they are responsible for the welfare of other black individuals, or of black people as a collective entity, simply because of a

¹³Amiri Baraka. "Multinational, Multicultural American vs. White Supremacy." *Race & Reason* (Autumn 1994) vol. 1, no. 1, p. 24.

¹⁴Manning Marable. *Beyond Black and White*, p. 114.

shared racial heritage."¹⁵ A similar conviction is evident in the work of Sterling Stuckey. Black nationalism is "[a] consciousness of shared experience of oppression at the hands of white people, an awareness and approval of the persistence of group traits and preferences in spite of a violently anti-African larger society, a recognition of bonds and obligations between Africans everywhere, an irreducible conviction that Africans in America must take responsibility for liberating themselves -- these were among the pivotal components of the world view of the black men who finally framed the ideology."¹⁶

More specifically, Asante's Afrocentrism grows out of a cultural nationalist strain. It has had a particularly strong influence in the black community in the twentieth century. The focus is decidedly away from the political or economic structures which affect the community. Adolph Reed commented on the movement, "The formulation centers on identifying substantively assertive and resistive elements in the apparently apolitical, ordinary practices of daily interaction."¹⁷ Its focus is on the "cultural elements which give rise to collective identity, community, and a sense of 'peoplehood.'"¹⁸ Cultural nationalism focus surrounds the values and traditions which have presupposed a unified and 'developed' community. Cultural nationalists seek to perpetuate or re-kindle the cultural motifs which lie at the heart of the community. Success or failure, degrees of alienation or dislocation, and authenticity are measured against the numerous ways in which the culture is understood.

¹⁵Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850 - 1925*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 20.

¹⁶Sterling Stuckey, *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 6.

¹⁷Adolph Reed, Jr., "Mythologies of Cultural Politics and the Discrete Charm of the Black Petite Bourgeoisie," in Marilyn E. Lashley and Melanie Njeri Jackson, eds. *African Americans and the New Policy Consensus: Retreat of the Liberal State*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994), p. 26.

¹⁸Michael Omi & Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 42.

Afrocentrism: A Tactic

As I mentioned above, Asante's Afrocentric project exhibits its most potential as a counter-hegemonic tactic which questions the foundations of Eurocentrism. Asante opens *The Afrocentric Idea* by stating:

What has always fascinated me is the manner in which most of my colleagues have written theory and engaged in the social sciences in relationship to African people. They have often assumed that their 'objectivity', a kind of collective subjectivity of European culture, should be the measure by which the world marches.¹⁹

Asante begins by challenging the hegemony of Eurocentric epistemology as the only way of knowing and characterizing other approaches as illegitimate: "Neither rationalism nor empiricism encompasses all the ways of knowing; certainly the existential and so-called mystical ways of knowing constitute varieties of human knowing."²⁰ It is these ways, which Asante asserts are characteristic of African and African American ways of knowing, that his project examines. Asante considers his project in line with feminist critiques in the sense that they both challenge the objectivity which has served to marginalize their existence. As regards Eurocentric discourse: "The invalidity of an idea arises, not from its exponents, but from its own fundamental flaws. This is the point at which the feminist critique converges with the Afrocentric line of reasoning. What I seek to do here is to move closer to the possibility of a post-Eurocentric idea where true transcultural analysis become possible; this can be accomplished alongside a post-male ideology as we unlock creative human potential."²¹

¹⁹Molefi Kete Asante. *The Afrocentric Idea*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987). p. 3.

²⁰Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 31.

²¹Molefi Kete Asante. *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 8.

Eurocentric theory, and by extension praxis, has certainly fomented and perpetuated the disparate power relationship which exist between Europeans and Africans, Indigenous Americans, Asians, and Australians in both international and domestic contexts.²² As Europe perpetuated the physical colonization of the world, they also perpetuated the psychological and rhetorical colonization of the world. The colonization of the land coincided with the colonization of information. This intellectual imposition resulted in the displacement of non-European paradigms for hegemonically-oriented theoretical paradigms. Within the latter paradigm, we can measure the dehumanization of African people.

Fanon stated: "I believe that the fact of the juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex."²³ It is at this level that cultural hegemony of Europe, which is inextricably wedded to the degradation of non-Europeans (and even some Europeans), that Asante attempts to foment an opposition. He challenges the standards which have been established by Eurocentric discourse which has depreciated and depraved the African and the African American and upon which many blacks have come to understand themselves. He attempts to free the individual from this ideological imposition and reestablish them on their own 'terms' which are subjective and specific to ones own culture. They no longer see themselves 'fully human', but come to believe in themselves in terms prescribed by the oppressor. Taylor's comments help summarize Asante's efforts: "The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis* recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to

²²See chapter two "A Genealogy of Modern Racism," in Cornel West's, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), pp. 47-65.

²³Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 12.

them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being."²⁴

In the field of rhetoric Asante's analysis certainly contributes to our understanding of this process. In what Asante terms the rhetoric of domination, Eurocentric discourse shapes the rhetorical domain in order to ensure its own hegemony. This is accomplished by way of three methods: "control over the rhetorical territory through definition, establishment of a self-perpetuating initiation or *rite de passage* , and the stifling of opposing discourse."²⁵ The result is that clarity and understanding are compromised by manipulating the terms of discussion and the grounds upon which the discussion takes place. Truth becomes the sole property of the hegemonic actor. And, opposing views are met with direct resistance or subtle forms of resistance.

It is not merely the aggressive tendencies within Eurocentric discourse which must be addressed. The "'blind liberalisms,"²⁶ which deny heterogeneity and the inherent complexity of human life, couched in benevolent terms, a 'we are all alike', mentality must also be addressed. It is this decontextualization and lack of regard of the degree to which their biases are wedded to particular cultural ideals that makes them threatening. Asante stated: "More damaging still has been the inability of European thinkers, particularly of the neo-positivist or empiricist traditions, to see that human actions cannot be understood apart from emotions, attitudes, and cultural definitions of a given context."²⁷

²⁴Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, p. 25.

²⁵Molefi Kete Asante. *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 27.

²⁶Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, p. 44.

²⁷Molefi Kete Asante. *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 166.

Asante's effort to challenge the hegemony of Eurocentrism are certainly to be commended for at least one central reason: he challenges the empirical foundations of Eurocentric epistemology. Asante's Afrocentric project is most important for its promotion of relativism and perspective. He calls for the reexamination of elements of different cultures independent of egotistic, self-serving models. Through this lens we are able to discern a greater understanding of the humanity of Africans and their descendants. Marable's comments on the potential of the entire movement and Asante's work in particular are important here.

The strengths of the Afrocentric perspective and analysis are undeniable: the fostering of pride, group solidarity and self-respect among blacks themselves; a richer appreciation for African languages, art, music, ancient philosophies and cultural traditions; a commitment to unearth and describe the genius and creativity of blacks in the context of a racist and unforgiving America. As a paradigm for understanding and reinterpreting the contours of the African experience, Afrocentrism also advances an internationalist perspective, drawing correlations between black communities from Lagos to Los Angeles, from Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant to London's Brixton.²⁸

There is a great paradox evident in his work though. As he at once challenges convention, he also reifies many of its assertions. He challenges the European regime of truth and at the same time constructs a parallel, albeit Afrocentric, regime of truth which is guilty of many of the same indiscretions. He challenges essential notions of a *negatively-constructed* African rooted in white supremacy by proposing an alternative paradigm that is mired in a stasis, ahistoricism and essentialism that undermines the liberatory thrust of his discourse. An interrogation of objectivity and authenticity runs through his project that initially allows space for the 'other'

²⁸Manning Marable. *Beyond Black and White*, p. 121.

while at the same time collapsing and trapping them. These tensions are evident in Asante's appreciation of culture as he explores an Afrocentric space within which people of African descent should/do exist. The problems of Asante's work become especially evident upon a close examination of his truth claims.

Race and Culture: A Truth Claim

For Asante, "The Afrocentric analysis reestablishes the centrality of the ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) civilization and the Nile Valley cultural complex as points of reference for an African perspective. . . ." The ethos of African culture can be traced back to these centers. In the same vein, ancient Greece and Rome are at the foundation of European culture.²⁹ In ancient Kemetic civilization, Asante finds the cultural formulas that will fuel African American liberation. For Africans and Africans in the diaspora, the significance of these centers lies in the transcendent truths that emanate from them. It is with these truths in mind that African people must understand their world.

Asante defines culture as "shared perceptions, attitudes, and predispositions that allow people to organize experiences in certain ways."³⁰ He continues: "As a point of reference culture is a cognitive concept about how humans interact, create, maintain, and develop institutions inasmuch as culture exists in the brain as well as in the execution."³¹ In reference to Africans, culture conforms to continental boundaries and subsequently take into consideration certain migratory (voluntary and involuntary) patterns of peoples as they disperse across the globe from their cultural center. According to this reasoning, Africa constitutes one culture, and all Africans share a

²⁹Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 9

³⁰Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), p. 9.

³¹Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, p. 18.

common cultural character, despite whatever ethnic variation exists within the group. Despite movements of populations, Africans retain their Africanness. In Afrocentric terms, therefore the African community knows no spatial or temporal bounds: "The geographical scope of the African world, and hence, the Africalogical enterprise, includes Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, various regions of Asia and the Pacific. Wherever people declare themselves as African, despite the distance from the continent or the recentness of their out-migration, they are accepted as part of the African world. Thus, the indigenous people of Australia and New Guinea are considered African and in a larger context subjects for Africalogists who maintain a full analytical and theoretical discussion of African phenomena."³²

The assertion that African communities outside the continental border constitute entirely different cultural communities is false in this Afrocentric paradigm. For Asante this assertion is representative of Eurocentric ploys to divide and conquer. So, for example, African Americans are essentially an "African" people despite hundreds of years of physical separation. They are inextricably linked to the cultural complex of Africa. "[W]e are Africans who have lived amidst Europeans on the land of the ancestors of the Native Americans."³³ African Americans are, in a sense, a new people: "products of African amalgamation (Hausa, Asante, Yoruba, Ewe, Ibo, Wolof, Mandingo, Congo, and a hundred other ethnic groups) and the American crucible...unknown prior to the 15th century,...our perspectives, attitudes, and experiences. . . peculiarly fitted to change the frame of reference for African people."³⁴

³²Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, p. 15.

³³Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero & Other Afrocentric Essays*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1993), p. 18.

³⁴Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, Trenton, (NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1988), p. 58.

Asante concedes a particular distinctiveness to African American culture but that distinctiveness does not give license to separate them from their African origins, and to connect them to white America.

We are not as we left Africa. African Americans did not exist prior to the slave trade. We are, therefore, a new people, products of our time, place and struggle. We share in the great legacy of African traditions, values, and aspirations, and write our names on the face of the future from west of the Atlantic.³⁵

Their 'newness' cannot be understood as separate from that of the communities of continental Africa. To do so is to misunderstand the cultural dynamic of the African American people and their connection to their ancient Kemetic roots. Indeed, the estrangement of African Americans from their African origins has been a major goal of the Eurocentric project. This rule holds across the African cultural complex. Thus it is impossible to separate culturally African Americans from the Yoruba, Ibo, Haitians, Afro-Brazilians or the indigenous people of Australia within this Afrocentric complex.

There are three constitutive elements to Asante's cultural community. They include the philosophical, social, and material. Asante states: "I take philosophical culture to include the presuppositions, proverbs, myths epics and propositions that form an ideological position. Social culture relates to the political and behavioral aspects of a human group. Material culture refers to the objects, concrete, iconic, symbolic, and conceptual that constitute the visible, physical or cognitive aspect of the group."³⁶

Each individual is a member of a cultural community. You are born to a particular cultural context and must exist within it in order to function

³⁵Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*, p. 145.

³⁶Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, p. 146.

healthily. It is impossible to realize one's potential outside one's cultural context. For the African, "meaning in the contemporary context must be derived from the most centered aspects of the African's being. When this is not the case, psychological dislocation creates automatons who are unable to fully capture the historical moment because they are living on someone else's terms."³⁷ This is referred to as dislocation or a loss of terms. In Asante's words: "To become a victim of the other's attitudes, models, disciplines, and culture, and the ultimate point of such a massive loss is the destruction of self-confidence, the distortion of history and psychological marginality."³⁸

Nor does one possess any singular culture within this Afrocentric framework. Rather, one identifies with a number of what one could suppose to be subcultures composed of ethnicities, nationalisms, and wedded to geographic positions, within a particular macrocultural context. "One may be at the same time, a Yoruba, Nigerian, West African, and African,"³⁹ thereby not totally denying in-group variation, rather appreciating diversity within unity. But these in-group variations are subsumed by the same basic cultural matrix with a particular origin.

It is difficult to define exactly the constitutive elements of African culture from Asante's work. But it is evident in his writing that there is little doubt that he understands certain normative elements that comprise African culture: "The Afrocentrist will not question the idea of the centrality of African ideals and values but will argue over what constitutes those ideals and values."⁴⁰ On the basis of these ideals and values, one can understand differences between different cultural communities, particularly African and Europe. "We hear the rhythms differently and we walk the way of the world

³⁷Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, p. 8.

³⁸Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*, p. 48.

³⁹Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, p. 146.

⁴⁰Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, p. 6.

in the agbadas of our ancestors' spirits unless our minds have been stolen from us by deceit of individualism."⁴¹ This divergence can be traced to their cultural centers which have determined their separate paths. Within each macrocultural complex Asante identifies a center from which the common cosmological, epistemological, axiological, and aesthetic assumptions of each community may be studied.

The distinctions between African Americans and European Americans can be measured in their "essential historical qualities" which have a cultural/experiential basis. The historical qualities of centered African people are defined as follows:

1. Recognizing an irreducible commitment to the project of liberation and freedom: this means that the African American recognizes a different history than that of the European. Liberation becomes the project established in the initial enslavement and resistance.
2. Having roots in the great mythic, oral, and literary works of people of African descent.
3. Resonating with the rhythms, textures, and arts of the African world, that is, the arts produced by the people of the African world.
4. Serving the historical moment on the basis of classical transformations (Middle Passage, Kemet, Congo, Niger Valley, Meroe, Nubia) which we may have forgotten but which exist in the context and content of our current realities.⁴²

These distinctions can be traced to the nature of their introduction to United States. Asante continued: "[W]e are separate in our historical paths because of the differences in our coming to America and the reception we have received in a hegemonic situation."⁴³ The logic in this statement seems to imply that Europeans came voluntarily, Africans did not. Europeans were assimilated rather easily into their new environment, largely due to the fact

⁴¹Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*, p. 47.

⁴²Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*, p. 18.

⁴³Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*, p. 41.

that they remained within the same European cultural context. In contrast, Africans came from a different cultural context and their 'Africanness' was met with great resistance on the part their white overseers and later fellow citizens. That Africanness was measured in, among other things, language, dress, religion, and politics. The slave was forced to adopt the white man's name, dress, adopt Christianity, and accept their lot as slave in American society. According to Asante, this set the stage for two divergent forms of development within an American context: one hegemonic, one oppositional.

In *The Afrocentric Idea*, Asante measures the differences between African American and European Americans in rhetorical style and rhetorical condition, which determined and are reflective of physical conditions. The rhetorical style of African Americans is marked by a particular rhythm and styling, indirection, and improvisation.⁴⁴ Its roots can be traced back through the multitude of black orators. African American rhetoric is marked by particular styles that distinguish it from European modes of rhetoric and link it to its cultural center. The rhetorical language of African Americans is Ebonics and its roots are African. It is described as "a creative enterprise, out of the material of interrelationships and the energies of the African ancestral past."⁴⁵

An African predisposition towards harmony, both between individuals and between the individual and nature, is asserted: "In African philosophy there is a commitment to harmony that some might call spirituality. It is the manifest essence of a search for resolution of cultural and human problems. This essence may be present in poetry, music, or dance."⁴⁶ This same sense of harmony extends to the African American.

⁴⁴Molefi Kete Asante. *The Afrocentric Idea*, pp. 38-51.

⁴⁵Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 57.

⁴⁶Molefi Kete Asante. *Afrocentricity*, p. 172.

The African American view of a wholistic personality, which is the healthy person, is grounded in the African idea of *sudicism*, the spiritual commitment to an ideological view of harmony. In the African American view, the person must be harmonized within the society. It is the quest for harmony that is at the source of all literary, rhetorical, or behavioral actions; the *sudic* ideal, which emphasizes the primacy of the person, can only function if the person seeks individual and collective harmony.⁴⁷

In Afrocentric terms, African American rhetorical condition has been in opposition to Eurocentric discourse which is designed to perpetuate the ideological and material hegemony of European people. Eurocentric rhetoric is characterized as hierarchical. The characteristics of this discourse are: "control over the rhetorical territory through definition, establishment of a self-perpetuating initiation or *rite de passage* , and the stifling of oppositional discourse."⁴⁸ In other words, by controlling the definition and redefinition of terms so that the original idea is lost (e.g. democracy, equality, opportunity), monopolizing the truth, and denying the opposition a voice the dominant discourse have been able to perpetuate its 'power-over' relationship with African American people. Thus, Asante concluded: "[T]he entire social fabric of oppression is dictated by symbols of hierarchy and intellectual theories rooted in Eurocentric viewpoints."⁴⁹

African Americans have developed their own rhetoric in response to their condition. It has been marked by what Asante characterizes as "*An Organic Continuity of Protest*"⁵⁰ which has marked African American discourse since their introduction to the North American continent. At the center of these discussions is slavery, the defining moment of African

⁴⁷Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 185.

⁴⁸Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 27. Italics in original.

⁴⁹Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 30.

⁵⁰Section Title, in Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 118.

American history. In slavery the terms of Black/White relations were set. In its historical legacy Asante noted that resistance was especially evident in the Back-to-Africa movements initiated by various black nationalists of the late nineteenth and twentieth century. A central theme in Asante's Afrocentric discourse regarding African Americans is their relationship to Africa and the strides made to reorient themselves with its center. This movement and the discourse it produced represented a radical critique of an American society at odds with the fundamental concerns of the African American community. It conveyed the sense of the frustration felt by African Americans across history in the face of white racism and represented the realization that freedom from persecution and oppression would come only in a different 'context'.

The Back-to-Africa movements represented the African American commitment to their cultural centers and an attempt to re-center and reclaim that which was lost in the Middle Passage and the subsequent years of enslavement. This emigration back to the center was evident at both the psychological and physical levels.⁵¹ For Asante, "the language, scope, and arguments of the Back-to-Africa Movement were tantamount to crusades for freedom and sanity, underscoring the Africans' essential search for dignity and cultural renewal in a strange land. Those who preached the rhetoric of return were fundamentally celebrating the survival of an African sensibility in the African American."⁵² The leaders of this movement included, among others, Bishop Henry Turner, Marcus Garvey, and Aaron Henry of the Republic of New Africa.⁵³ The underlying sentiment throughout this discourse is the fundamental incompatibility of the organization and orientation of American society with the interests of African Americans.

⁵¹Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 139.

⁵²Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 148.

⁵³Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 150.

Asante quoted Turner: "I would make Africa a place of refuge, because I see no other shelter from the stormy blast, from the red tide of persecution, from the horrors of American prejudice."⁵⁴

Race

Asante acknowledges the difficulty of using "race" to describe human populations. This is the case especially in the context of the United States given the degree to which race places a central role in our understanding and interpretations of political and cultural phenomena. Nevertheless, he does so. His Afrocentric project thus extols a narrative in which culture and race are inextricably interwoven. As regards race he stated:

To begin with we must admit the strategic ambiguity of this term as it is often used. For us [Africalogists], race refers to the progeny of a fairly stable common gene pool which produces people with similar physical characteristics. Of course, by this definition we can quickly see that the defined gene pool may be large or small thus giving the possibility of many races. For our purposes, however, we speak of the African race meaning the gene pool defined by the whole of the African continent including people in every geographical area of the land from Egypt to South Africa, from Senegal to Kenya.⁵⁵

This community is bound by, but not entirely contained within, the continental borders of Africa. Members of the African race also reside in North and South America, across the Asia continent, and Australia. [confirm] The major water barriers have traditionally acted as a sufficient barrier to prevent a great deal of gene pool overflow thereby allowing for a clearly distinguishable community. The Sahara desert which some recognize as a natural border between Arab and Black African communities is not regarded as such in this Afrocentric discourse. He continues:

⁵⁴Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 150.

⁵⁵Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*. p. 17.

The African race stems from a continental African gene pool and includes all of those whose ancestors originated there and who possesses linguistic or cultural qualities and traits associated with the gene pool. Like other definitions of gene pools this one is imprecise. . . . In the present historical epoch, however, African has come to mean one who has physical and cultural characteristics similar to those presently found in some region of the continent.⁵⁶

I would infer from the above statement that his community has roots deeper than mere morphology. Genes are linked to culture. Culture becomes the basis for community. The result is that Asante arrives at a racialized concept of culture. Culture and race are woven together as such:

Race does not determine culture but because of the 'proximity factor' it figures in the formation of certain attributes much like age, another biological factor, conditions certain cultural behaviors. Race functions as a sort of subset of culture in some regard. As a scientific term, however, it lacks validity except in the sense of gene-pools.⁵⁷

The leap from genes to culture to behavior is evident in Asante's Afrocentric project. Within this paradigm, there are genetic compositions specific to racially composed cultural populations that determine specific actions. Asante stated: "Thus, moving from genetically determined behavior to social or cultural behavior is not only possible, there are certain hypotheses that help to explain how it happens. When the genetic trait crosses the 'threshold' it becomes social behavior."⁵⁸ In this sense, he agrees with many of the notions of the sociobiologists, although he is suspicious of the ways in which such arguments have been employed for specifically political and social ends.

⁵⁶Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, p. 18.

⁵⁷Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, p. 147.

⁵⁸Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, p. 184.

My critique of Asante's work centers on his understanding of culture and race and the ways in which it inhibits our understanding of the African and African American experience: He (1) fails to recognize the dynamic nature of culture, and specifically African and African American culture; and (2) holds a view that is particularly problematic and retrogressive in any historical understanding of it as a phenomena.

Culture

On face value, Asante's understanding of culture seems to make sense. It certainly conforms to the popular notion of clearly defined cultures with easily identifiable boundaries. But upon closer examination many of his theoretical assertions fall apart. The underlying cause of these problems lies in his neglect of subtlety, nuance, and dynamism in the study of this subject. Between Africans and African Americans this tension is evident; they are not the same, yet cannot be considered mutually exclusive. With reference to African American culture, the danger lies when one becomes determined to find an extreme; either that they share a clearly distinct culture from that which is African and American, or that they are completely assimilated into the cultural complexes that gave them life. I conclude that it is this tension that Asante fails to consider.

Asante's assertion that there exists an African culture that transcends time and space ignores the very characteristic of culture that makes it so interesting and liberatory; that being its intrinsically dynamic quality. African and African American cultures have developed over many generations in response to a multitude of indigenous and exogenous factors. It is unwise and unreasonable therefore to believe that there a set of clearly recognizable 'organic' African cultural traits that have been, or need to be, preserved *ad infinitum* which manifest themselves in African and African American

culture. African and African American culture have responded to and are products of specific and unique historical conditions. Asante is correct to assert that they can not be understood singularly and totally unrelated. But he fails to understand African and African American cultures as related but distinct, and in which significant and appreciable differences must be recognized. Language is one measure of distinction. English is the first language of most African Americans; most Africans and other Africans in the diaspora cannot make that claim.

It must be recognized that identifying the constitutive elements of any culture are extremely difficult. At the conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists (*Le Congrès des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs*) in Paris in September 1959 this tension came to a head. James Baldwin noted in reference to the debates that took place: "What is culture?. . .In the context of the conference, it was a question which was helplessly at the mercy of another one."⁵⁹ What the participants were forced to recognize was that to define its norms was to also illuminate the diversity and evolution that exists within any cultural complex. The constructions of boundaries certainly organizes but also displaces significant portions of the culture. The irony, though, is that very diversity undermines whatever original unity that was once assumed. One can arrive at certain generalizations, certain cultural norms, but one is also forced to explain the immense variety that may exist and the exceptions to the rule within the culture. To label that diversity or mark such exceptions as decentered or contradictory is inadequate.⁶⁰ It imposes a static quality on culture and denies the richness inherent in all culture that lead to its ultimate death. Melba Joyce Boyd contends: "Culture is not a fixed set of traits, values, or behaviors; nor is it transmitted unchanged from generation to generation;

⁵⁹James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, p. 49.

⁶⁰Asante writes of Christianity and Islam in these terms. *Afrocentricity*, p 2.

nor is it merely a set of principles. Culture is dynamic, always developing, ever changing; as Amilcar Cabral put it, it is the manifestation, on the ideological plane, of the historical reality of a people."⁶¹ It is possible, indeed inevitable, that the historical reality of late twentieth century African Americans, seventeenth century Haitians, and fifteenth century Kikuyu are considerably different, but not entirely recognizable to one another.

There must be an understanding of the degree to which culture continually reorganizes itself internally and in the presence of external factors. Even in the absence of external cultural influences, it is unfathomable that culture would remain static. Barbara Ransby asserted: "Culture is not something fixed, static, and ahistorical. Culture is dynamic and constantly in flux. It is a process. . . . Cultures change and evolve, if they do anything else. Otherwise they atrophy and die."⁶² In a Darwinian sense, the constitutive elements of culture are appropriated and discarded to the extent that serve the particular needs of the user. The effects of time and human innovation necessitate that we take into consideration such evolutions. For example, the technological shift in, say, agriculture may affect a profound change within that culture that may affect the most fundamental of cultural assumptions. Historically less dramatic shifts are probably the norms but the accumulation of such transformations has to be significant such that past looks remarkable different (and I emphasize again that it not be unrecognizable) from the future. Albert Murray's remarks are especially relevant here:

⁶¹Melba Joyce Boyd, "Afro-Centrics, Afro-Elitists, and Afro-Eccentrics," *Race & Reason* (Autumn 1994) vol. 1, no. 1, p. 29.

⁶²Barbara Ransby, "Afrocentrism, Cultural Nationalism, and the Problem with Essentialist Definitions of Race, Gender, and Sexuality," *Race & Reason* (Autumn 1994) vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 32.

Culture of its very essence is a dynamic, ever accommodating, ever accumulating, ever assimilating environmental phenomenon, whose components (technologies, rituals, and artifacts) are emphasized, de-emphasized, or disregarded primarily in accordance with pragmatic environmental requirements, which of course are both physical and intellectual or spiritual.⁶³

One must also recognize the degree to which its cultural boundaries are fluid, influencing and being influenced by neighboring cultures.

Communities do not exist in vacuums. Even the briefest encounter introduces new elements into a particular culture. Dorman and Jones recognize three general theoretical processes that account for such change. They include diffusion, acculturation, and assimilation.⁶⁴ Diffusion entails the selective borrowing and incorporation of foreign cultural elements. This explains in many ways the diffusion of Islam and Christianity among African peoples. They were certainly exogenous to begin with, but with time and adaptation they were incorporated into the particular African cultures. Through contact with Christian cultures, people of African descent have incorporated certain tenants of these religions and molded and shaped them into their own to serve their particular spiritual needs often resulting in a complex mix of Christianity with the more traditional religions of the people. Voodoo and Santeria are two other examples in which African religious retentions can still be measured. This is the case in spite of Asante's assertion that "Adoption of Islam is as contradictory to the Diasporan Afrocentricity as Christianity has been."⁶⁵

⁶³Albert Murray, *Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture*, (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970), p. 180.

⁶⁴James H. Dorman and Robert R. Jones, *The Afro-American Experience: A Cultural History Through Emancipation*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), pp. 5-7.

⁶⁵Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 2.

Acculturation involves a more massive transformation. In this case the one culture is subsumed within another culture altogether. The subsumed culture does not lose its distinctiveness altogether. But the borrowing of cultural elements from the dominant culture is massive. This is most typical of the African American experience. Acculturation is distinct from assimilation. In assimilation, all cultural distinctiveness vis-à-vis the dominant culture is lost. It is this process that Asante seems to fear most. This process is rare given the degree to which individuals often fight to retain their cultural distinctiveness.

A number of other problems are posed in the examination of culture, especially with reference to time and space. Jacques Alexis presented an interesting question: How does a student of culture understand particular "pockets of culture"⁶⁶ that exist within a particular region and are related, yet quite dissimilar from what is normatively assumed? Such subcultures call into question the very ways in which we understand cultural boundaries and different levels of cultural influence. How does one understand a cultural connection to an ancestor whose very existence was measurably different and whose understanding and world view may have been appreciably different from one's own? For example, pre-industrial Africans had conceptions of time that were markedly different from modern African Americans and were indeed more like those of pre-industrial Europeans. Another concern arises when one considers cultural similarity between cultures with little to no previous contact? Does this somehow speak to a human condition or set of adaptations that transcend cultures and evolutionary paths and precludes a monopoly of any characteristic or path? Neither Africans nor any other group of people can claim a cultural monopoly over any tradition.

⁶⁶James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, p. 50.

Wilson Moses explores this tension between the particular and the universal in African religion. "It is probably correct then to say that there is a Pan-African religion, but it is no more correct than to say that religiosity seems to be a universal human experience and that there are similarities in the way that it manifests itself among all peoples. The religion of black slaves in the United States was similar to both that of West Africans and that of Europeans. These similarities may be attributed to African retentions, syncretic tendencies, and spontaneous parallel evolution."⁶⁷

Indeed, when the Whites and Blacks first met on what would later become the United States, they held very similar views of reality, views that defied distance and lack of interaction between them. Sobol remarked: "In Eugene Genovese's brilliant evaluation of slave values he emphasizes that Afro-Americans held a 'rural prebourgeois and especially preindustrial' work ethic. It is important to recognize that most Southern eighteenth-century Anglo-Americans also held a 'rural, prebourgeois and especially preindustrial' work ethic that paralleled the black ethic in many respects. Interaction between the whites and blacks led to the interpretation of these values systems and to the strengthening of both."⁶⁸ Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult to exactly define the constitutive elements of any particular culture or explain its *unique and clearly distinguishable* evolutionary path with any degree of precision, especially with history in mind.

In the end we are faced with a complex problem of how to define culture at any moment in human history and understanding behind such schemes. Discussion of culture often proceed as if we know what it is, but

⁶⁷Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), p. 28.

⁶⁸Mechal Sobel, *The World They Make Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 64.

often we do not. And in the case of Asante's Afrocentrism it reinforces very traditional understanding of culture which ultimately blinds us to its intricacies. Asante's arguments share much with other discussion of culture, and African American culture in particular, which miss the mark. In many cases such arguments have all but the most fallacious foundations. Indeed they are in many ways Eurocentric. As regards his concept of culture, "its resonance has far out-paced its empirical content, and has thrived as a concept in search of its object."⁶⁹

Africa

The assertion of the idea of an original or organic Africa that transcends time and space is particularly problematic in that Asante's conception of African culture is, first, defined in terms that are in relation to what can be loosely considered European. There was no Africa in the absence of a Europe, no black without white, no black politics or philosophy with white politics or philosophy. In the absence of an experience with Europe or whiteness its foundations and transcendence must be questioned.

The concept of blackness or Africa, and by extension African culture only becomes recognizable in the presence of a boundary, something that could historically and loosely be considered European. In the absence of this boundary or a limit, that being, contact with Europeans, blackness or Africa takes on an entirely different meaning, one that is in stark contrast to more contemporary appreciations. Africans living before European contact surely looked at one another and noted their morphology. This, incidentally, serves as the basis upon which Asante's African community rests and a point on which I will focus later in the chapter.

⁶⁹Adolph Reed, Jr. uses this phrase in reference to the culture of the underclass in "The Underclass as Myth and Symbol: The Poverty of Discourse About Poverty." *Radical America* (January 1992) vol. 24, p. 22. I think it is as appropriate to this discussion of Asante's appreciation of culture.

In the absence of contact with Europeans skin color had an entirely different significance. Other social constructions, such as ethnicity, gender, or language became the markers for difference and distinguished groups from one another. As relates the concept of black nationalism, an expression of Africa political consciousness, Wilson contended: "During the millennia that Africans had been isolated from Europe, there had been no need for such concepts as black nationalism or the unity of all African peoples. African peoples, like their barbarian European counterparts before the Roman Empire, [African people] organized around local cultural loyalties and traditions."⁷⁰

Our identities carry no objective, independent status. They are defined in relation to something foreign and wedded to particular experiences. In the absence of a marker or a symbol that demarcated the limits of one's community, the significance of particular classification schemes such as race or 'African' had an entirely different significance. In the absence of European contact and the experiences of slavery, mercantilism, colonialism, and the proliferation of the multinational corporations, (which in and of themselves serve as a tenuous foundation for community) the significance of African ethnicities, languages, and customs took on an entirely different, and arguably greater, significance. Indeed these factors are still central to the modern African's and African American's appreciation of oneself.

This is not to say that African communities can be considered as autonomous units, totally unrelated to one another. Asante's point is well taken. Samir Amin reminds us: "The image of an ancient, isolated and introverted Africa no longer belongs to this age: isolation -- naturally associated with a so-called 'primitive' character -- only corresponds to an

⁷⁰Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism*, p. 16.

ideological necessity born out of colonial racism."⁷¹ Cultural similarities surely spread across the continent to greater or lesser degrees given the constant interaction that communities had with one another. Commerce and conquest necessitated this fact. Still, an incredible diversity between different African ethnicities must be recognized. There were and are similarities between African communities measured in their economic organization and levels of technological development. But with the similarities we must recognize the significant differences.

The notion of Black Atlantic community is not entirely without value. In many ways their histories are inextricably linked. Cultural and political inspiration surely flows both ways across the Atlantic, just as it flows around the world. But we must acknowledge difference and eschew essentialist impulses.

The assumption that all Africans exist within a narrow cultural matrix originating out of Ancient Kemet, as Asante asserts, ignores the fact that culture is a product of history. It first ignores the degree to which African ethnic communities vary, even from one another.

When Asante argues 'we have one African cultural system . . . we respond to the same rhythms of the universe,' is he referring to the rhythms of the Yoruba, Ibo, Hausa, Kikuyu, Ndebele, or Shona peoples? All these peoples have different linguistic, religious, and political traditions that are equally legitimate parts of Africa's past and present. Moreover, most Africans do not think of themselves as simply Africans. Such a broad and homogenizing categorization is a luxury more easily imposed from afar.⁷²

⁷¹Samir Amin, "Underdevelopment and Dependence in Black America -- Origins and Contemporary Forms," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (1972) vol. 10, no. 4, p. 503.

⁷²Barbara Ransby, "Afrocentrism, Cultural Nationalism, and the Problem with Essentialist Definitions," p. 32.

The same is to be said of European culture or traditions that trace their origins to ancient Greece. The foundations of European culture with reference to philosophy are equally problematic.

They are bound also to have to make choices within Western traditions. Not only is there a considerable difference in the styles of philosophy in France and in Germany, on the one hand, and in the Anglophone world, on the other, but there is in Britain and in North America a wide divergence between the practice -- and the metaphilosophical theory -- of the dominant Anglo-American tradition and the theory and practice of those whose work is conceived as closer to the traditions that remain strong in France and Germany.⁷³

The imposition of such homogeneity imposes and replicates the same white supremacist reasoning. It reduces culture to race and ultimately inhibits our understanding of the variety of African culture.

Beyond the metaphysical basis for community that I critiqued above, even similar forms of economic and technological development are insufficient criteria from which to understand African communities. Geography, (the lack of) technology, and low levels of literacy prohibited the transmission of a great deal of African cultural product between ethnic groups and serve as additional markers for differentiation.

No doubt we can find generalizations at a certain abstract level, which hold true of most of black Africa before European conquest. . . . But if we could have traveled through Africa's many cultures in those years -- from small groups of Bushman hunter-gathers, with their stone-age materials, to the Hausa kingdoms, rich in worked metal -- we should have felt in every place profoundly different impulses, ideas, and forms of life. To speak of an African identity in the nineteenth century -- if an identity is a coalescence of mutually responsive (if sometimes conflicting) modes of conduct, habits of thought, and patterns of evaluations; in short a coherent kind of human social psychology --

⁷³Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 87.

would have been 'to give to every nothing a local habitation and a name.'⁷⁴

Most importantly, the imposition of such homogeneity denies Africans, and indeed all others, the reality of cultural evolution and ignores humans' agency to evolve in ways that are independently and infinitely creative and that contribute to the rich fabric of human experience.

Contemporary continental Africans are living in the legacy of their ancestors heterogeneity. This rule also holds true as one crosses the oceans and considers diasporan cultures. True, similarities do exist. There was no moment in which diasporan Africans lost their Africanness. They remained African due to their resoluteness and the extent to which their new environs allowed. Africanisms are certainly evident throughout western culture but because of the racialized context in which Asante understands them, they take on a greater significance than they deserve and ignore the degree to which diasporan Africans became, in a very real sense, a new people. Asante's paradigm of Afrocentricity imposes a stasis upon African cultural evolution. This is especially true of the Africans who were introduced to an already evolving American culture.

⁷⁴Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House*, p. 174.

CHAPTER 2

AFROCENTRISM MEETS FEMINISM

Asante finds commonalities with feminist discourse at the point which both challenge the particularity of male-centered, Eurocentric discourse. This is expressed in the following statement: "What I seek to do here is to move closer to the possibility of a post-Eurocentric idea where true transcultural analyses become possible; this can be accomplished alongside a post-male ideology as we unlock creative human potential."⁷⁵ On face value this commitment may appear reputable, but it is at this rhetorical point that it stops. There is a decided silence regarding issues of gender throughout much of his project. E. Frances White puts it bluntly: "[H]e has nothing more to say about gender in the entire book [*Afrocentricity*]. It is hard to believe that this gesture toward black feminists [or the particularity of black women's history] needs to be taken seriously."⁷⁶ One chapter specifically deals with women's history and patriarchy in *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*. But here his reflections on issues of gender are ahistorical and conservative.

For Asante, patriarchal oppression is located within a very specific European context associated with levels of industrialization and climate. According to this rationale, the European industrial revolution was the origin of patriarchy and it was from this cite that patriarchal notions pervaded the African American community. He stated: "The fact that Africans in America are ensconced in an industrial society means that the sexist attitudes of this society become a part of the African imagination as well."⁷⁷ Asante asserted that African societies were free from the patriarchal patterns typical

⁷⁵Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, p. 8

⁷⁶E. Frances White, "Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African American Nationalism," *Journal of Women's Study* (Spring 1990) vol. 2, no. 1, p. 88.

⁷⁷Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*, p. 7.

of Europe. "In the past the clear divisions between what a woman should do and what a man should do suggested gender relationships based upon the traditional roles of preindustrial society. African women and men in such societies had clearly defined roles mediated by various rites of passage which were intended to promote the extension of community."⁷⁸

Asante also finds a fundamental distinction between the experiences of white and black women in their different histories rooted in climate. Women of European descent came under the yoke of patriarchal oppression as a result of the inhospitable climate of Europe. If a male was ever to become displeased with her she was threatened with eviction and the possibilities of fending for herself alone in the harsh climate that characterized European winters. The history of European women is described in the following terms:

[I]f males impose force on females, say to force them out of the shelter in the middle of February, the females are essentially on their own. To maintain her shelter a woman might decide to remain indoors under such a situation, but in effect she becomes a slave to male interests for protection and shelter. The idea behind the rule-of-thumb was that a man could beat a woman with a stick no bigger than his thumb. She became by virtue of the conditions of this axiology an object or property, because the highest value was in the acquisition of the object.⁷⁹

On the contrary, African women enjoyed a more favorable climate with more access to natural resources and was thus free from patriarchal oppression. According to Asante: "Women and men had equal access to herbs. Even if a man forced a woman out on her own, she could gather her own yams, cassava, and bananas."⁸⁰ African women were thus more independent and free from the yoke of patriarchy in contrast to their

⁷⁸Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*, p. 8.

⁷⁹Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*, p. 13.

⁸⁰Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*, p. 13.

European sisters. It is in these traditions that can be traced back 10,000 years that explain the different experiences of black and white women and from which the benevolent relations between Afrocentrically-oriented African Americans are explained. The argument ultimately reduces to an ice people/sun people analysis in which climate are the primary determinants between differential experiences between peoples.

Asante is correct to assert that there are important differences between the histories and experiences of white and black women. It is essential that one recognize an African American women's history as distinct in many ways from White women's given the primacy of race in American society. Indeed the assertion that there exists one essential woman's experience has been a major criticism leveled against the feminist movement by Black women and other women of color. The assertion of a singular identity or oppression rooted in gender is fallacious and is indeed an indication of white privilege.

That is, no woman is subject to any form of oppression simply because she is a woman; which forms of oppression she is subject to depend on what 'kind' of woman she is. In a world in which a woman might be subject to racism, classism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, if she is not subject it is because of her race, class, religion, sexual orientation. So it can never be the case that the treatment of a woman has only to do with her gender and nothing to do with her class or race. That she is subject only to sexism tells us a lot about her race and class identity, her being slave or free, and so on.⁸¹

In contradistinction to Asante's historical interpretation of the climatic origins of difference between black and white women, it is useful to trace this distinction to race, racism, and the economic system born of slavery. From these sites it is easier to discern the particularities of each experience and

⁸¹Elizabeth V. Spelman. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), pp. 52-53.

identify how patriarchy operates different across racial lines. As mentioned above, the defining moment in African American history is slavery and it is from here that we can understand more contemporary trends. This is not to discount our African origins. We are certainly living within their legacy. Rather, it is to appreciate them more critically and not automatically afford them liberatory themes. The African American community during slavery was certainly organized differently along gender lines, but it was not free from patriarchy.

There are certainly distinctions to be made between the experiences of black and white women. But they stem from specific historical circumstances rather than climate. Asante's explanation of this divergence ignores a variety of more common sensible explanations of gendered histories and gendered inequality. Indeed, African women inhabited geographic regions that may have not felt the wrath of a frigid Scandinavian winter. But the 'Garden of Eden' myth that Asante ignores many of the considerable power disparities that exist between African and African American men and women and, most obviously, ignores the varied geography of Africa and the extent to which climate was, and still is, a major challenge to the day-to-day existence of many Africans. This fact holds from the tropical Nouabalé-Ndoki rain forest to the parched Namid desert. It would be more reasonable to assume that women sought refuge from and resisted patriarchal oppression in social structures (kinship networks, norms about the roles of women in society, and access to mechanisms of power for example) rather than a thriving banana grove or cassava field.

Under slavery, gender roles were different for black than whites. Slavery was truly a peculiar institution when it came to defining gender roles and hierarchies. It undermined many of the traditional gendered inequalities

that were evident in European American society in general. Collins wrote: "[The] similarity of work coupled with the harshness of racial oppression for all African-Americans suggests that a general equality existed between Black men and women."⁸² Black men were thus unable to assert their patriarchal privilege in many ways like White men within the evolving capitalist political economy. They have never possessed as a community the resources of White men to assert their kind of patriarchal rule. Jacqueline Jones contended: "Without private property, slave men lacked the means to achieve economic superiority over their wives, one of the major sources of inequality in the ('free') sexual order."⁸³ Thus, slave women attained greater levels of freedom vis-à-vis slave men.

Black women were equal to their men in the oppression they suffered; they were their men's social equals within the slave community; and they resisted slavery with a passion equal to their men's. This was one of the greatest ironies of the slave system, for in subjecting women to the most ruthless exploitation conceivable, exploitation knew no sex distinctions, the groundwork was created not only for Black women to assert their equality through their social relations, but also to express it through their acts of resistance.⁸⁴

The difference in the natures of black and white women could be traced to the rise of the Industrial Revolution was also significant. As their labor was replaced by new technologies their role in society in discursive terms was reinvented within their respective communities. Davis noted:

As the ideology of femininity -- a by-product of industrialization -- was popularized and disseminated through the new ladies' magazines and romantic novels, white women came to be seen as inhabitants of a

⁸²Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 49.

⁸³Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 42.

⁸⁴Angela Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 23.

sphere totally severed from the realm of productive work. The cleavage between the home and the public economy, brought on by industrial capitalism, established female inferiority more firmly than ever. 'Woman' became synonymous in the prevailing propaganda with 'mother' and 'housewife,' and both 'mother' and 'housewife' bore the fatal mark of inferiority. But among Black female slaves, this vocabulary was nowhere to be found. The economic arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles incorporated in the new ideology. Male-female relations within the slave community could not, therefore, conform to the dominant ideological pattern.⁸⁵

Collins locates the differences between Black and White women in their work also: "Racially segmented labor markets, gender ideologies in both segmented labor markets and family units, and the overarching capitalist class structure in which Black women's specific race, gender, and social class positions are embedded all structure in Black women's work."⁸⁶ That differentiation was born in economics and perpetuated through discursive and other non-discursive structures evident in American society, not temperature, precipitation, humidity, or barometric pressure. From the beginning, Black women were considered as chattel or "profitable labor-units"⁸⁷ rather than human beings or women. Patricia Hill Collins borrows the term "mule" from Zora Neale Hurston to designate the status of black women in this period.⁸⁸

As chattel they enjoyed less of the material and other benefits that White women enjoyed. They did not enjoy the 'luxury' of womanhood in any legal sense of the term. In the case of *State of Missouri v. Celia*, Celia was convicted of first-degree murder and executed for the killing of her master who had repeatedly raped her. While there were statutes that protected

⁸⁵Angela Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, p. 12.

⁸⁶Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 46

⁸⁷Angela Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, p. 5.

⁸⁸Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 43.

women from sexual violence and recognized their rights to self-defense, these were not recognized in Celia's case. She was not a woman because of her status as a slave.⁸⁹

Ultimately, the master's eye for profit and the maximization of his capital return undermined the strict segregation of black women to the private or women's realm. Jacqueline Jones stated: "Only the profit motive accorded a measure of consistency to the slaveholder's decisions concerning female work assignments; he sought to exploit his 'hands' efficiently, and either invoked or repudiated traditional notions of women's work to suit his own purposes."⁹⁰

Even after slavery, this condition did not fundamentally change. Black women still suffered oppression and exploitation as agricultural workers under the feudal conditions of the Reconstruction South. Northern industrialization did not result in the incorporation of women into industrial sector to the extent it did men or white women. They were relegated largely to domestic and agricultural work. And while the liberalization of hiring practices during the two world wars created certain opportunities, their experiences were still distinct from white women. Race has always played a decisive role in the African American women's experience and provided a decisive factor which necessitated an appreciation of their distinct historical experience.

The pressures of racism and the relative egalitarianism within the black community did not result in true egalitarianism though. There were still gender disparities within the slave community. As Jones pointed out

⁸⁹Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* (1992), vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 257-58.

⁹⁰Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, p. 43.

there were important distinctions made within the slave community between men and women.

[T]hough men might regard women's domestic labor as intrinsically valuable, this type of activity was nevertheless labeled 'women's work' on the assumption that it was the special province of females. In this sense, black women and men performed complementary functions whenever possible within their own 'sphere' of socially defined responsibilities. Yet a husband was not 'equally' willing to wash clothes compared to a mother's 'willingness' to gather firewood in the absence of her spouse. In addition, the formal task of spiritual leader remained a man's job; although women exercised power through a variety of channels, they could not aspire to the title or recognition that accompanied the preacher's role. This twin impulse to honor the hardworking wife and mother on the one hand and relegate 'grannies' to positions of informal influence exclusively would help to shape the internal structure of the freed community after the Civil War.⁹¹

Certain kinds of work were also reserved for men, especially artisan positions which entailed greater skill and received greater status. Coppering and blacksmithing were two such examples. The roots of this differentiation cannot be located within a western industrialized context either, despite Asante's assertion to the opposite. It is inadequate to reduce male slave attitudes to those of the master class. While patriarchy may have operated differently in African and African American communities, it still operated. It is inaccurate to locate patriarchy within a distinctly European context and dismiss Black patriarchy as dislocated. As White pointed out, "This position virtually ignores the development of an independent black culture that shared some values with white Americans but also transformed African values into Afro-American ones."⁹² This trend has been evident in the construction of a utopian African history. Frances Beal pointed out:

⁹¹Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, p. 42

⁹²E. Frances White, "Africa on My Mind," p. 14.

While many Black Studies programs have insisted on the incorporation of African history into the curriculum, the perspective is generally approached on a 'me, too' level: Me, too had great empires; Me, too had great kings. All was rosy and bright until the appearance of the nasty European. . . .

A closer look at African history reveals, however that many African women have also been slaves to African men and many still are. We learn that conditions under colonialism were wretched for women, but also that conditions were oppressive before the European ever arrived in Africa. . . . Many African societies had men with many wives which they purchased for so many heads of cattle and they were sometimes treated no better than beasts of burden. In many African societies today, the woman is but a piece of property of the man.⁹³

Patriarchy, within the African American community, can be measured across time. It is representative of the same patriarchal notions that were perpetuated throughout the larger society and representative of the African American community in general. Black spokesmen such as Martin Delany, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, Amiri Baraka, and Louis Farrakhan all held sexist attitudes. The life of Malcolm X, Asante's "epitome of the great opposition to domination"⁹⁴ represented this point perfectly. Collins pointed out in reference to the larger context: "Taking cues from the dominant gender ideology of his times, Malcolm X's views on women reflected dominant views of white manhood and womanhood applied uncritically to the situation of African Americans. 'All women, by their nature, are fragile and weak: they are attracted to the male in whom they see strength.'⁹⁵ And in the context of African American views on gender, his attitudes must be considered contextually also. "It is important to remember that when it

⁹³Frances M. Beal, "Slave of a Slave No More: Black Women in Struggle." *Black Scholar* (March 1975), vol. 6, no. 6, p. 5.

⁹⁴Molefi Kete Asante. *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*, p. 25.

⁹⁵Patricia Hills Collins, "Learning to Think for Ourselves: Malcolm X's Black Nationalism Reconsidered," in Joe Woods, ed. *Malcolm X In our Own Image*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 74.

comes to gender, Malcolm X's philosophy was virtually indistinguishable from that of his contemporaries, both Black and white. Malcolm X's gender ideology was entirely consistent with the treatment of gender generally in African American social and political thought and activism in the 1950s and 1960s."⁹⁶

Issues of race *and* gender are at the center of concern for African Americans. It is essential that we recognize them as intersecting identities and modes of oppression. The consideration of singular identities is an approach that, as a community, we can ill afford. This is a special concern of Black women that affects them in a programmatic way. Black feminist work has made important contributions to this consideration in their critiques of both black liberation feminists movements. They have realized that while at different moments race or gender may take precedent, they are ultimately inextricably linked. Indeed the consideration of a singular identity is an indication of privilege and has led to the exclusion of African American women within both anti-racist and feminist movements. A gender identity is a result of a race privilege. White women are afforded the luxury of considering gender, largely detached from race issues. Audre Lorde summed: "To imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other."⁹⁷ A similar rule applies to race. A singular racial identity is indicative of a gender privilege, that being male. All African Americans do not suffer the same types of racial oppression. Racism(s) plaque the black community and they are related to the multiple identities that are

⁹⁶Patricia Hills Collins, "Learning to Think for Ourselves," p. 78.

⁹⁷Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*. (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), p. 67.

represented therein. Nowhere in Asante's project is such a nuanced approach offered.

This has profound political consequences around matters of gender, class, and other factors which differentiate the African American community. When matters are couched in such homogenous terms, it is inevitable that matters specific to particular portions of the community will be neglected, that our *histories* will go unrecognized.

First, positing a black collectivity as an organic political agent preempts questions of interest differentiation. If the 'community' operates with a single will and a single agenda, then there is neither need nor basis for evaluating political programs or policies with respect to their impact on differing elements of the black population. Any initiative enjoying conspicuous support from any group of black people can be said plausibly to reflect the communities preference or interest; the metaphorical organicism that drives the 'black community' formulation presumes that what is good for one is good for all.⁹⁸

"Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, superior/inferior."⁹⁹ I would add in this context black/white, European/African, and African American/American. It is essential to problematize the simple dichotomies that nationalist paradigms such as Asante's Afrocentrism rely upon because they ultimately blind us to the many varied forms of oppression that affect the African American community. Such an approach, rather than dividing our community, serves rather to strengthen and broaden commitments to the maintenance and health of all sectors of the African American community with specific

⁹⁸Adolph Reed, Jr. "Demobilization in the New Black Political Regime: Ideological Capitulation and Radical Failure in the Postsegregation Era." in Michael Peter Smith and Joe R. Feagin, eds. *The Bubbling Cauldron: Race, Ethnicity, and the Urban Crisis*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 194.

⁹⁹Audrey Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 114.

reference to concrete public policy initiatives. Adolph Reed maintained: "Contrary to the communitarian reflex on which Afro-American political discourse has pivoted for a generation, stimulation of overt interest-group dynamics -- organized on the basis of neighborhood, class, gender, occupation, or other aspects of social status, as well as a variety of interest groups whose memberships overlapped and other coalitional activity -- could enrich democratic participation by encouraging controversy among black Americans over the concrete, tangible implication of policy issues."¹⁰⁰

To draw upon Lorde again: To imply that all African Americans suffer the same oppression simply because we are African Americans is to lose sight of the many varied tools of racism. It is also to ignore how those tools are used by African Americans without awareness against each other. It is in these ways that Asante subsumes the various cultural, political, and economic conditions of the African and African American community.

Asante' Afrocentric project is largely inattentive to a gendered history other than male, to specific forms of gender oppression, and almost entirely inattentive to the above points. Throughout his project there is a decided silence on the particular histories of African American women. What little analysis he offers leaves one wanting for a more historically rooted, materialist, and anti-essentialist focus.

¹⁰⁰Adolph Reed, Jr. "Demobilization in the New Black Political Regime," p. 202.

CHAPTER 3

AMERICANIZED AFRICAN OR AFRICANIZED AMERICAN: THE PITFALLS OF RACIAL REASONING

In the context of the United States, the relationship between slaves and slave masters was very often intimate. In the Antebellum South slaves and slave masters influenced each other culturally in ways that contributed to an already evolving American culture. The result was that America, and white folks in particular, were Africanized. Africans, in the same process, were Americanized. In the end, the complex character of American society assumed an alternative structure. What evolved was not an imperfect imitation of what could loosely be defined as European or African culture.¹⁰¹ Rather, what evolved was something new. Each looked at one another and saw similarity and closeness that is, even today, still rejected.

Whenever Black lived in eighteenth-century America they affected the collective consciousness, and people in all classes -- the elite, the 'middling sort,' the poor, and the slaves -- shared values. Their world views were *not* identical; they were influenced by the histories of their parents, clans, classes, and races; but they were related to each other in an organic fashion. By the end of the eighteenth century, whites and black shared family, clan and even folk histories could not be separated one from the other. . . .In some aspects the African and the English values reified each other; in other areas unconscious choices were made, and in many cases values from the past of the 'other' group were adopted.¹⁰²

Nowhere in Asante's project is such a nuanced approach taken.

Despite recurring conditions of inequality, sociological factors independent of coercion also lead to cultural change. The nature of the slave

¹⁰¹Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Wings of Ethiopia*, pp. 20-21.

¹⁰²Mechal Sobel, *The World They Make Together*, p. 233.

system, the physical proximity and daily contact between whites, slave holders, non-slave holders, indentured servants, and blacks, both free and in bondage, necessitated this fact. They lived, prayed, worked, and played together as a matter of necessity and choice. Measured in time, the fact that subsequent generations of Africans born in the United States were acculturated was natural phenomena evident wherever there is a movement of peoples between cultures.

In relations between Africans and Americans of European descent in the Antebellum south, the day-to-day interaction of the slaves and slave masters necessitated a complex conversation between cultures that left both irreparably changed. The result was a cultural *mélange* that resulted in new peoples who were contributing to an already evolving American culture. This certainly could be measured in, for example, language. Blassingame noted that: "The most obvious way the slave influenced the evolution of language in the South was by forcing whites to adopt African words when trying to communicate with blacks. Among the words of such African peoples as the Mandingo, Hausa, and Ibo incorporated into English were the following: cooter (turtle), cola, okra, goober and pinder (peanut), yam, gumbo, mumbo-jumbo, juju, buckra (white man), banjo, banboula, hoodoo, okay, and tote."¹⁰³

The southern dialect of speech was also shaped by the slaves. "Through his close association with indentured servants and his master's children, the slave gave the Southern white his drawl."¹⁰⁴ This influence was not contained only to the areas where there was slavery. Ralph Ellison summed: "[American English] is a language that began by merging the

¹⁰³John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 98.

¹⁰⁴John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, p. 98.

sounds of many tongues, brought together in the struggle of diverse regions. And whether it is admitted or not, much of the sound of that language is derived from the timbre of the African voice and the listening habits of the African ear. So there is a *de'z* and *do'z* of slave speech sounding beneath our most polished Harvard accents, and if there is such a thing as a Yale accent, there is a Negro wail in it -- doubtlessly introduced there by Old Yalie John Calhoun, who probably got it from his mammy."¹⁰⁵

A clear distinction needs to be made between acculturation and integration. Moses stated: "Integration usually refers only to the mechanical proximity of black and whites within the same social, political, educational, and economic institutions."¹⁰⁶ The lack of integration of Blacks into American society is evident even today as white racism continues to marginalize African Americans from centers of power. It is in this sense we are living in the legacy of slavery and are blacks truly a distinct population. Even as African Americans fit squarely within America's cultural matrix, they are denied the privileges of citizenship. It is this fact, which has been informed by various understandings of race, that necessitates their group distinctiveness even as they share the same cultural matrix. On the foundation of an African American community with the continent we can state: "It is not culture which binds the people who are of partially African origin now scattered throughout the world, but an identity of passions. We share a hatred for the alienation forced upon us by Europeans during the process of colonization and empire and we are bound by our common suffering more than by our pigmentation."¹⁰⁷ It is the reality of white racism that overarches the oceans and binds them to their African brothers and

¹⁰⁵Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 109. Italics in the original.

¹⁰⁶Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Wings of Ethiopia*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁷Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, (New York: Vintage Books), 1972, p. 263.

sisters. Baldwin's observations at The Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists (Le Congrès des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs) are helpful.

What they held in common was their precarious, their utterly painful relation to the white world. What they held in common was the necessity to remake the world in their own image, to impose their image on the world, and not long be controlled by the vision of the world, and of themselves, held by other people. What, in sum, black men held in common was their ache to come into the world as men. And this ache united people who might otherwise have been divided as to what a man should be.¹⁰⁸

A number of other Africanisms were found within this evolving slave culture which contributed to American culture. Numerous new technologies and techniques were introduced into Southern society by Africans. Rice was planted according to African traditions. The African tradition of cooperative labor was also introduced. Africans brought with them a variety of medicinal skills in curing many diseases. Woven baskets and thatched roofs were other Africanisms common to the southern landscape. Southern cuisine owes its distinctive flavor to the contributions of these Africans who could not endure the blandness of lightly seasoned English dishes.¹⁰⁹

As the generations passed, the slave, who would soon escape their peculiar type of bondage, and the master would look at each other not through a lens that denoted cultural difference, but reflected back upon each an image mirroring his own. This is not to imply that America was by any means a homogenous society. Variety surely existed in racial, ethnic, and geographic terms, to name a few. And again, we cannot ignore the power disparities that exist between communities. But that variety was not necessarily measured in racially informed, cultural terms especially between

¹⁰⁸James Baldwin. *The Price of the Ticket*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁰⁹John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, pp. 101-4.

its white and black citizens. The difference may better be described in more subtle terms such as style or, as Ellison terms it, "subculture." "[I]t is a matter of diversity within unity."¹¹⁰

The various African ethnics were forced to assume a fairly common identity in slavery. The differences between them were largely destroyed, although African ethnicities and ethnic particularities were still recognized for some time, especially in slavery.¹¹¹ At the same time, they grew distant from Africa and were acculturated into American society and, in this sense, shared a common nationality with their white counterparts. They both spoke the same language, worshipped the same god, and understood their realities in much the same way.

Afro-Americans became a 'new people,' in the rhetoric of the nineteenth century. Genetically and culturally speaking, they were amalgamated into a composite of numerous African racial and ethnic groups. They were a new people in another sense, as well. Because of the acculturation they had undergone in two fundamental areas of life, language and religion, they were now no longer simply Africans; they were, like it or not, *black Americans*.¹¹²

They became a distinctly American people.

[T]he American Negro people is North American in origin and has evolved under specifically American conditions: climatic, nutritional, historical, political, and social. It takes its character from the experience of American slavery and the struggle for, and the achievement of, emancipation; from the dynamics of American race and caste discrimination, and from living in a highly industrialized and highly mobile society possessing a relatively high standard of living and an explicitly stated egalitarian concept of freedom. Its spiritual outlook is basically Protestant, its system of kinship is Western, its time and

¹¹⁰Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p. 263.

¹¹¹Joseph E. Holloway, "The Origins of African-American Culture," in Joseph E. Holloway, ed. *Africanisms in American Culture*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 1-18.

¹¹²Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Wings of Ethiopia*, p. 27. Italics added.

historical sense are American (United States), and its secular values are professed, ideally at least, by all of the people of the United States.¹¹³

There is a grand denial of what constitutes American culture and the origins of its roots. Asante is not exempt from this phenomena. There is a clear discrepancy between what 'is American' and what is 'perceived as American'. And these discrepancies can be traced to the power to define what occupies the center and the margins in America life. That being said, America is, *at its heart* , black even if that fact is not commonly recognized. This irony is presented by Ellison:

For it would seem that while Negroes have been undergoing a process of 'Americanization' from a time preceding the birth of this nation -- including the fusing of their blood lines with other non-African strains, there has persisted a stubborn confusion as to their identity. Somehow it was assumed that the Negroes, of all the diverse American peoples, would remain unaffected by the climate, the weather, the political circumstances -- from which not even slaves were exempt -- the social structures, the national manners, the modes of production and the tide of the market, the national ideals, the conflicts of values, the rising and falling of national morale, or the complex give and take of acculturation which was undergone by all others who found their existence within the American democracy.¹¹⁴

To recognize that fact is to engage in a progressive critique of American society. The failure to do so is to reinforce popular misconceptions of what constitutes the mainstream and margins, the dynamic quality of culture, and what constitutes a constantly evolving American society.

Even as African American discourse highlighted the inconsistencies and contradictions evident throughout European American discourse, it still drew on many of the same theoretical assumptions. This is evident

¹¹³Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p. 263.

¹¹⁴Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p. 250.

throughout the discourse which exhibits many of the same liberatory and authoritarian characteristics of a wider American discourse evident in its historical contexts. Throughout African American discourse we find evidence of distinctly Western and American themes. Asante misses this point. He states: "In its secular form, black chauvinism drives, ironically enough, from European racial theory." We find evidence of Herder in Blyden and Crummell. Delany, Curmmell, Griggs and DuBois held racial understandings in line with Gobineau. The transcendentalism of New England radicalism is evident in early black nationalist texts. There is also evidence of Darwinism and Victorianism throughout early black nationalist texts. Christianity and civilization was widely advocated.¹¹⁵ There was a particular Victorian and bourgeois virtue evident in the early feminist movements.¹¹⁶ Garvey "had more affinity for the pomp and tinsel of European imperialism than he did for black African tribal life."¹¹⁷ Black agitators weaved interesting anti-capitalist tenants throughout their discourse that provided insights in to the nature of slavery, capitalism, and imperialism and its effect on blacks.

It is incorrect to assign to a culture, rooted in false notions of biology and genetics, any particular politics in the way Asante does when he defines the essential historical qualities of African American culture. It is first illogical and second rooted in very selective use of events and simplistic interpretations. This is evident in his understanding of an Afrocentric, culturally-generated movement such as the Back-to-Africa movement. Asante's appreciation of these "Afrocentric" movements era as a liberatory movement for people of African descent is problematic in this sense for a

¹¹⁵Wilson Jeremiah Moses. *The Golden Age of Nationalism*, pp. 25-26.

¹¹⁶See chapter 5 entitled "Black Bourgeois Feminism versus Peasant Values," in Wilson Jeremiah Moses. *The Golden Age of Nationalism*. pp. 103-31.

¹¹⁷Wilson Jeremiah Moses. *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, p. 132.

number of reasons. He fails to appreciate the degree to which these actors held very particularly Western attitudes and who in many ways represent the antithesis of Asante's Afrocentric paradigm.

Upon close examination, the rhetoric of early Back-to-Africa advocates did not personify the 'crusades for freedom and sanity, underscoring the Africans' essential search for dignity and cultural renewal in a strange land.' They had not 'preached [a] rhetoric of return [that was] fundamentally celebrating the survival of an African sensibility in the African American' that underscored Asante's Afrocentric appreciation for the Back-to-Africa movements. Much of what its proponents proposed were antithetical to that central to Asante's historical narrative. This movement represented, what its adherents believed were, pragmatic responses to America's white supremacy, not necessarily informed by any Afrocentric sensibility. Indeed, they reiterated many of the common assumptions about race and civilization held at those particular historical moments, that were especially problematic when considering Africa in particular.

The black nationalist impulse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be explained in large part as a practical response to the tide of white American racism rather than a culturally informed liberation movement. American society denied Blacks the rights, protections, and privileges afforded Whites citizens and created a very hostile environment in which to exist. In the absence of hope for equality in the boundaries of the United States, many saw emigration, for example, as their only alternative.

The back-to-Africa black nationalist attitudes toward Africa were problematic in reference to any African essence. Moses noted that these early black nationalist referred to themselves as 'Anglo-Africans.' It was representative of their ambivalent attitudes toward African and American

society. They at once rejected a system that rejected them and embraced many of its central tenants. "[The terms] . . . popularity, especially among black nationalists, indicates the extent to which black Americans identified with the history and culture of Europe and desired to merge their destiny with it."¹¹⁸ Far from embracing attitudes that embraced the value and richness of African societies, their views were conservative and paternalistic in ways very much reflective of American society on the whole. Lewis stated that "all were Victorian imperialists -- 'Afro-Saxons' -- to whom native Africans were religiously and socially 'primitive' and always sexually scandalous."¹¹⁹

Delany and Blyden represent the vanguard of this movement in Asante's Afrocentric discourse. They "establish[ed] the intellectual bases of the Afrocentric reclamation of African history, both on the continent and in the diaspora."¹²⁰ It is ironic that they are worthy of these achievements given their attitudes toward Africa. These men wanted to civilize Africa. They wanted to impose Western institutions and values upon African people. The imposition of Christianity on the natives was a central concern. Delany was contemptuous of African 'barbarism' and their un-Christian ways. In his view British intervention in African was justified, indeed needed, to cure this pathology. Of the entire movement Moses summed:

Westernized Africans were exquisitely conscious of the differences between African societies and the self-confident, civilized, Anglo-Saxon culture. Thus did they begin to advocate African civilization, which embodied a sense of obligation to aid in the uplifting of the continent and its 'backward' peoples as an initial step in the elevation of black people everywhere. If the internal life of the continent could be upgraded, black folk in England and America would experience a corresponding elevation in status. Africa's lack of civilization was not

¹¹⁸Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, p. 32.

¹¹⁹David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B DuBois: Biography of a Race*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), p. 162.

¹²⁰Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet. Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, p. 112.

only a source of sham for the Anglo-Africans, it was used as the justification for the slave trade.¹²¹

Far from a 'return', the ideological thrust of the Back-to-Africa movements represented many contradictions that Asante's analysis almost entirely ignores. This is by no means reason to trivialize the movement. But it is absolutely necessary that we appreciate that we are, in many ways, as influenced by the dominant approaches to the study of Africa and African America as white folks. E. Frances White examined this dilemma: "It is impossible to be unencumbered by this discourse. None of us -- not even African -- can come to the study of Africa without being influenced by its negative image."¹²²

And of these supposed rhythms and historical qualities self-evident among African culture, Asante's paradigm seems unable to grapple with many of the contradictions evident throughout African movements that range between the democratic to the authoritarian. Nor can Afrocentrism make sense of the range of African leadership styles, past and present. What of the historical and modern realities faced by many Africans? What insights do Asante's Afrocentricity highlight for us? Ransby critique is quite appropriate here.

It is easier to view Africans as one monolithic mass, irrespective of class and politics, when one is concerned primarily with the 'rhythms of the universe . . . [and] cosmological sensibilities' rather than the concrete realities of people's day-to-day lives. On the very serious terrain of political struggle, for example, it is very important to understand the difference between Nelson Mandela of South Africa and a Jones Savimbi of Angola. One is a longtime freedom fighter for the liberation of African people; the other is responsible for the massacre of thousands of African people in order to enhance his own

¹²¹Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Golden Age of Nationalism*, p. 21.

¹²²E. Frances White, "Africa on My Mind," p. 78.

power. Both men are African, but they respond to very different rhythms and sensibilities. It is this fuzzy notion of 'race' as some type of innate biological bond that leads us down the slippery slope of judging allies and enemies on the basis of color of their skin and the texture of their hair rather than on the content of their actions.¹²³

It is inadequate and irresponsible to simply ascribe to Mandela an Afrocentric essence while dismissing Savimbi's indiscretions as dislocated or decentered. How would Asante make sense of the politico-military legacy left by Dingizwayo, Zwibe, and Shaka who developed political systems that united and strengthened Zululand even as they invested an immense amount of resources into their war machines? Shaka is renowned for his innovations in weaponry and military tactics.¹²⁴ It seems to clash with Asante's culturally-determined essentialist notion that Africans and African Americans are predisposed towards a harmonious way of life. It would seem that a more carefully crafted analysis that understands that human communities have at different times been disposed towards war or peace and that no one was, or is necessarily prone to be, essentially predisposed towards one end of the harmony/violence spectrum or the other. Asante's Afrocentric paradigm provides us with little guidance in dealing with these tensions.

The Pitfalls of Racial Reasoning

Throughout his Afrocentric project, Asante tries to avoid the difficulties of linking race with culture. He states that he believes in the former while repudiating the latter. But while he speaks of culture, his concept of culture reduces to and serves as a metaphor for a very static,

¹²³Barbara Ransby, "Afrocentrism, Cultural Nationalism, and the Problem with Essentialist Definitions of Race, Gender, and Sexuality," p. 32.

¹²⁴Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. (Washington: Howard University Press, 1982), pp. 128-135.

ahistorical, westernized concept of race. The two become inextricably wedded throughout his discourse.

Race is most understood as a classification scheme based upon the most superficial of morphologies. Contemporary racial classification schemes denote only differences based on only the grossest of human characteristics. Melanin and hair texture are its two main markers and are an inadequate basis upon which to base a classification scheme. If somehow racial classification schemes were to take into consideration other human characteristics such as body chemistry (for example those who possessed the antimalaria gene, lactase, or particular fingerprint patterns), racial classification would differ markedly.¹²⁵ It must be emphasized and re-emphasized: there is no biological basis to race.

Belief in the biological reality of race outranks even astrology, the superstition closest to it in the competition for dupes among the ostensibly educated. . . . Anyone who continues to believe in race as a physical attribute of individuals, despite the now commonplace disclaimers of biologists and geneticists, might as well also believe that Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy are real, and that the earth stands still while the sun moves.¹²⁶

Biologists maintain that within the human community, the degree of genetic variability that exists within races is very similar to that between races. Kwame Anthony Appiah asserted: "Apart from the visible morphological characteristics of skin, hair, and bone, by which we are inclined to assign people to the broadest racial categories -- black, white, yellow -- there are few genetic characteristics to be found in the population of England that are not found in similar proportions in Zaire or in China, and few too (though more)

¹²⁵Jared Diamond, "Race Without Color," *Discover* (November 1994) vol. 15, no. 11, p. 83.

¹²⁶Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review*, (April 1990) vol. 181, p. 96.

are found in Zaire but not in similar proportions in China or in England."¹²⁷ And ironically these visible morphological characteristics in and of themselves do not provide us with a sound basis with which to distinguish people against a European/African racial spectrum, especially in the United States.

Race is the category most often applied to black Americans. Most of us are physically identifiable as descended from 'Negro stock' and are therefore racially distinct from the majority of North Americans, who are 'Caucasian.' However, many Afro-Americans are much closer in physical type to their European than to their African forebears. There is as much contrast of physical types within the Afro-American population as there is contrast between stereotypical Afro-Americans and stereotypical Euro-Americans. If we are to speak of Afro-Americans as a racial group, we should remember that many 'black' Americans are more Caucasian than Negro in terms of the accepted criteria of racial classification developed by physical anthropologists a century ago.¹²⁸

This becomes especially apparent in the United States given the principle of hypo-descent,¹²⁹ or the 'one drop rule'.

The idea that there are clearly identifiable races with distinguishable features is fallacious on a microbiological level. Africa has never remained so isolated so that there has been no transfer of genetic material back and forth between other regions of the world. Indeed this rule holds globally. Human migration has been significant enough to ensure that an ample amount of genetic exchange has taken place across history. Appiah notes: "The classification of people into 'races' would be biologically interesting if both the margins and the migrations had not left behind a genetic trail. But they have, and along the trail are millions of us (the numbers obviously depending on

¹²⁷Kwame Anthony Appiah, *My Father's House*, p. 35.

¹²⁸Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Wings of Ethiopia*, p. 29.

¹²⁹Michael Omi & Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States*, p. 60.

the criteria of classification that are used) who can be fitted into no plausible scheme at all."¹³⁰ In America this is especially evident given the degree to which races have intermixed. Very few Americans can claim that mythical racial purity that many strive so desperately for.

So Asante's 'progeny of a fairly stable common gene pool which produces people with similar physical characteristics. . . defined by the whole of the Africa' provides for only the most ambiguous and unstable understanding of race. Indeed, the rationale behind such claims is retrogressive, predating the findings of those that sought to understand the social and political foundations of race such as Max Weber and Franz Boas. His discourse fails to appreciate the degree to which race is a product of social construction. 'Race isn't' in any biological sense whatsoever.

Asante's Afrocentric paradigm fails to acknowledge that race is a social construct and an area of almost constant contestation. As such, racial communities have not always existed. Michael Omi and Howard Winant state: "Race is indeed a pre-eminently *sociohistorical* concept. Racial categories and the meaning of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded. Racial meanings have varied tremendously over time and between different societies."¹³¹ The concept of race has not been recognized throughout human history but is a product of specific historical circumstances.

Race denotes power and power-over relations between racialized groups. Manning Marable understands it as such: "'Race' is first and foremost, an unequal relationship between social aggregates, characterized by dominant and subordinate forms of social interaction, and reinforced by the intricate patterns of public discourse, power, ownership and privilege within

¹³⁰Kwame Anthony Appiah. *My Father's House*, p. 38.

¹³¹Michael Omi & Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States.*, p. 60. Italics in original.

the economic, social and political institutions of society. They are, in turn, justified and explained by assumed differences in physical and biological characteristics, or in theories of cultural deprivation or intellectual inferiority."¹³² As it was understood that peoples of different morphologies occupied different stations along various hierarchies, race becomes a reality.

The significance of race in the Americas became evident only after slave systems, in justifying their perpetuation, institutionalized it as an ideology. Just as an African culture was not universally recognized, neither was an African/Black race. Barbara Fields reminds us: "Race as a coherent ideology did not spring into being simultaneously with slavery, but took even more time than slavery did to become systematic."¹³³

In the United States, the racial category of 'black' evolved with the consolidation of racial slavery. By the end of the seventeenth century, Africans were rendered 'black' by an ideology of exploitation based of racial logic -- the establishment and maintenance of a 'color line'. This of course did not occur overnight. A period of indentured servitude which was not rooted in racial logic preceded the consolidation of racial slavery. With slavery, however, a racially based understanding of society was set in motion which resulted in the shaping of a specific *racial* identity not only for the slaves but for the European settlers as well. ¹³⁴

Asante recognizes gene pools that are associated with races and the effect they have on 'certain cultural behaviors'. But, there is no clear evidence that race determines one predisposition toward particular behaviors or attitudes. In fact such assumptions underlie much of Western discourse's discussion of race in general, and coincide neatly with underclass discourse that is being used to assault many of the social programs. Asante is not a

¹³²Manning Marable. "Beyond Racial Identity Politics: Toward a Liberation Theory for Multicultural Democracy." *Race & Class* (July-September 1993) vol. 35, no. 1, p. 114.

¹³³Barbara Jeanne Fields. "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," p. 106.

¹³⁴Michael Omi & Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, p. 64.

racist in the conventional sense, given the fact that he does not enjoy a privilege bestowed upon him based on his race. But while time, space, and commitment separate Asante from the racial determinism of Gobineau, Linnaeus, and Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine¹³⁵ his appropriation of much the same racialized logic is evident.

African Americans are at the center of what is America. The blood, sweat, and tears of African Americans are at the foundations of the American economy. They built the Southern agricultural economy, fueled the Industrial Revolution, and are contributing to a blooming technological revolution. And while the terms of their engagement often do not reward them according to their labors and are often not to their own advantage, without them such phenomena would not occur. It is impossible to consider American artistic production without considering African Americans. Jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll would be beyond the scope of anyone's imagination without African Americans. The democratic impulse evident in American politics came largely from African Americans. Indeed African Americans have forced America to subscribe to some of its highest ideals.

It is he who gives creative tension to our struggle for justice and for the elimination of those factors, social and psychological, which make for slums and shaky suburban communities. It is he who insists that we purify the American language by demanding that there be a closer correlation between the meaning of words and reality, between ideal

¹³⁵Henry Louis Gates noted: "What Taine 'called race' was the source of all structures of feeling and thought: to 'track the root of man,' he writes, is 'to consider the race itself . . . the structure of his character and mind, his general processes of thought and feeling, . . . the irregularity and revolutions of his conception, which arrest in him the birth of fair dispositions and harmonious forms, the disdain of appearances, the desire for truth, the attachment for bare and abstract ideas, which develop in him conscience, at the expense of all else.' In race, Taine concludes, was predetermined 'a particularity inseparable from all the motions of his intellect and his heart. Here lie the grand causes, for they are the universal and permanent causes, . . . indestructible, and infallibly supreme.'" in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Editor's Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes." in *'Race,' Writing, and Difference*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 3.

and conduct, our assertions and our actions. Without the black American, something irrepressibly hopeful and creative would go out of the American spirit, and the nation might well succumb to the moral slobbism that has ever threatened its existence from within.¹³⁶

Asante's Afrocentric paradigm extricates African Americans from that history because of his Manichean appreciation of race and culture. It is not in our interests to have this legacy taken from us. While the Middle Passage marked a disruption, to say the least, in many African histories, it did not necessarily represent a break that we need or can mend. No one denies the horror it wrought. But in an absurd way it marked the beginning of the evolutionary path of a peoples that created new possibilities and changed the landscape of this country forever. It would seem now more than ever we need to take ownership of that history and American culture even as we work to reinvent society towards more egalitarian ends. Much of American discourse has annexed America to white folks. American is black, whether or not it wants to admit it or not. African Americans are American in spite of their oppression. These facts are far more progressive than the reiterated notions of supposed separatism that pervades much of American discourse. We must not cede American to them while accepting our own marginalization.

The foundations and culturally specific characteristics of Asante's community leave us wanting for a more nuanced approach to 'who we are.' Rhetorically it speaks to many of the realities of African Americans. But upon close examination, his paradigm draws on only the most crude and vague of analytical tools in which to understand our existence. Asante's Afrocentric approach to 'us' engages in the same faulty reasoning of those he

¹³⁶Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, p. 111.

attempts to refute. Only when we conflate the notions of race and culture and fail to appreciate their historical significance is this possible. Only when we conflate these two notions can we draw such crude distinctions between White and Black Americans. And only having done this can we fail to appreciate the clear distinctions to be made between such concepts as integration, equal opportunity, and acculturation. Ellison concludes:

If we resist for a moment the temptation to view everything having to do with Negro Americans in terms of their racially imposed status, we become aware of the fact that for all the harsh reality of the social and economic injustices visited upon them, these injustices have failed to keep Negroes clear of the cultural mainstream; Negro Americans are in fact one of its major tributaries.¹³⁷

¹³⁷Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, p. 108.

CHAPTER 4

PUBLIC POLICY AND AFROCENTRICITY: THE POLITICS OF DISLOCATION

In this section I would like to examine the implications of an "Afrocentric politics." How, one might ask, does Afrocentricity provide a blueprint for black political agenda? At these junctures we can most clearly understand what Afrocentrism *means* for African Americans and the degree to which it represents a politically progressive platform from which we can address the fundamental challenges to their condition. First, Asante's approach distracts from the political and economic issues that represent the major challenges to African American survival, advancement, and the realization of potential within the community. Asante's rhetorical project entirely distracts from policy discussions. Nowhere are broad-based initiatives proposed to explicitly challenge political and economic structures. The focus is rather on individual initiatives and inner transformation.

I believe there are tensions evident in Asante's discourse around the issues of class, gender, and sexual orientation and have important consequences in the formation of an Afrocentric politics based in this paradigm. The origin of these tensions stems from Asante's nationalist focus and his imposition of a false homogeneity among people of African descent, and more specifically upon African Americans. It neglects the fact that African Americans are in different positions vis-à-vis dominant discourses and structures and denies the possibilities of conflicting intra-communal interests and 'power-over' relations among African Americans which can not be neglected in the construction of a counter-hegemonic or progressive politics. These two conditions are inherent in the simplistic binary vision

that the paradigm possesses which are evident in and in some ways can be traced to Asante's appreciation of racially- and culturally-informed ideas of a homogenous community. In the end, Asante leaves us a conservative project, devoid of a progressive political agenda, from which to address the fundamental concerns of the community.

Race and racism are the fundamental concerns in Asante's paradigm. As he states: "The systematic nationalist position is clear. The fundamental contradiction in American society is *racism*. If there is one fact on which blacks have historically been united, it is the reality of race in American society."¹³⁸ He continued: "It is from racism as the fundamental contradiction that our most pressing political and social issues are derived. Whether we are discussing jobs, education, welfare, or foreign affairs, racism is a factor. Systematic nationalists understand and have always admitted that it is not the *only* contradiction; it is the *primary* contradiction for African Americans."¹³⁹ Granted, it is impossible to consider the African American experience without considering race and racism. But it is equally impossible to consider the African American experience solely in terms of race and racism. This is not to deny its centrality in African American history. Rather, it is to appreciate that it rarely operates singularly, independent of class, gender, and sexual identity factors. And while the statement above implies that Asante realizes that racism is not the 'only' contradiction, his project ultimately betrays just such an appreciation of the ways in which racism(s), as aggregates of various forms of oppressions, affect various segments of the African American community. He fails to speak in great detail of the specific challenges faced by those with 'multiple' or 'intersecting' oppressions speaks

¹³⁸Molefi Kete Asante, "Systematic Nationalism: A Legitimate Strategy for National Selfhood," *Journal of Black Studies* (September 1978), vol. 9, no. 1, p. 116. Italics in original.

¹³⁹Molefi Kete Asante, "Systematic Nationalism," p. 117. Italics in original.

to particular privileges within the African American community, even as one resists Eurocentrism and white racism. Asante understands his identity and oppression in, for the most part, strictly racialized terms.

In the end, Asante neglects almost entirely the structural causes of African American inequality and speaks of Africans and African Americans as a rather homogenous community with one common challenge. The area of contention is race and the paradigm is dependent on terms framed in binary oppositions, in almost exclusive opposition to Eurocentrism. It stops first at attempting to understand our diversity and the racism(s) that afflict us and next fails to appreciate the possible intra-communal contradictions. Of the shortcomings of such an approach in the construction of a progressive political agenda E. Frances White warns us: "The focus on similarities between Africans and African-Americans at the expense of recognizing historical differences can only lead to a crisis once differences are inevitable revealed."¹⁴⁰

Of fundamental concern is the fact that this form of Afrocentrism is in no way wed to any programmatic outline that addresses these fundamental concerns beyond the fact that African Americans need a 'critical corrective to their displaced agency' to regain their cultural terms, which incidentally Asante can not define with any precision. This ultimately coincides with the proliferation of culturally-determinist explanations of poverty. Asante's paradigm ultimately distracts from political or economic contestation and undermines the development of strategies beyond simple self-help remedies which are essentially conservative.

Asante's site of resistance is in rhetoric, the realm of ideas. He asserts that the Eurocentric domination of the rhetorical domain has resulted in the

¹⁴⁰E. Frances White, "Africa on My Mind," p. 85.

domination of the socio-economic domain. The theory has been translated into praxis. In response, Asante attempts to provide the foundation for a rhetoric of resistance that will provide a framework for liberation. "*Our aggressive language must attack, not institutional or process racism but personal racism.*"¹⁴¹ The idea in essence becomes the seed from which an Afrocentric resistance movement will spring. The problem becomes that the idea exists devoid of any power, measured in a concrete and tangible terms. The seed is without soil. But within the soil lies the keys to addressing the structural barrier to African American empowerment. And as Lemelle contemplates: "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?'"¹⁴²

Whites do not rule because they think they rule or they state that they do. Discourse certainly operates to justify, rationalize and perpetuate structures and must be engaged. But it cannot be understood apart from the power and strategy to affect change. White privilege is not so pervasive because whites wished it to be so. It is dependent upon certain structural organizations that helped create and perpetuated its reign. Asante ultimately falls into this analytical trap though. His rationale: the infusion of cultural values, a freeing of the mind, will necessitate the transformation of the African American condition. But again, it neglects almost entirely the mechanisms of domination and control that are exercised daily in the political and economic relations between the black and white community.

In matters pertaining to race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, Afrocentrism provides no framework for social contestation on a public

¹⁴¹Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 35. Italics added.

¹⁴²Sidney J. Lemelle. "The Politics of Cultural Existence," p. 105.

policy level.¹⁴³ His cultural nationalism is essentially apolitical. Within this paradigm we are unable to discern positions of public policy. At both the public and private level, it would seem that we are forced to make a number of important decisions as a matter of practical necessity which have very different consequences for different segments of the black community. It is nowhere evident in the discourse of this Afrocentric paradigm how we are to evaluate such decisions. Beyond position, we are also unable to discern any intelligible strategy that addresses the fundamental challenges to the African American community.

One is forced to ask as a matter of practicality: Does the Democratic or Republican best serve the interests of many in our community? Should we support or oppose NAFTA? Pro-life or Pro-choice? Should the African American community support progrowth or redistributive urban political initiatives? What health care initiatives should we pursue? What type of educational reform measures deserve support? It would seem that each of these decisions has very different consequences to various segments of the Black community. Asante's Afrocentric paradigm provides us with no insights in these matters.

His Afrocentrism operates on a level of abstractness that makes it largely irrelevant to many African Americans. The primary consideration of most African Americans is not 'their displaced African agency', ancient Kemet, Nommo, or Njia,¹⁴⁴ rather it is jobs, education, health care, crime, etc. And access or lack of access to these resources ultimately determines life chances and explains disparate conditions between the black and white community and explains the stratification within the black community.

¹⁴³Sidney J. Lemelle, "The Politics of Cultural Existence," p. 100.

¹⁴⁴The basic tenants of Njia: The Way are outlined in *Afrocentricity*, pp. 109-120.

In his section entitled "The Warrior Dilemma," Asante laments the fact that

we have warriors who have never experienced warfare; we have young men who grow up from generation to generation seeking to engage a real, for-the-people battle with the enemies of Africans, but who have seldom had that chance. We have young men who are warriors in their hearts but who have never been given leadership in the development of objectives. They neither have the proper preparation for battle on the scale that is necessary to achieve success in this society nor the detailed knowledge of the enemies they will be fighting.¹⁴⁵

But nowhere in his project does he provide such preparation or knowledge. There is no sense of where we should draw inspiration for any type of political movement. There are no concrete political or economic framework or initiatives proposed. I would ask Asante: Does Shaka Zulu's military inventiveness and strategy apply to the contemporary struggle of inner-city communities battling the deindustrialization of their communities? Should we pursue the non-violent civil disobedience methods of Martin Luther King? Should we start shipping lines like Marcus Garvey? Of what use is the accomodationalism of Booker T. Washington? Should we continue to support the legal strategies of the NAACP to attack de jure and de facto discriminatory practices? Should we foment a violent uprising like Nat Turner? Should we endorse economic boycotts of institutions that exploit African American and other labor? This Afrocentric paradigm gives us no guide beyond some type of mythical black political agenda. We are ultimately left with incomplete understanding of historical acts of resistance and only vague notions of what paths we should follow.

¹⁴⁵Molefi Kete Asante, "Malcolm X as Cultural Hero," p. 120.

The origins of African and African American affliction can be traced back to Egypt. Asante contends: "The breakdown of our central political organizations from the disintegration of Egypt during the coming of the foreigners all the way to the enslavement of Africans represents one massive slide away from our center."¹⁴⁶ But there is no explanation of the breakdown or of how such a breakdown was sustained across time and space in the history of African peoples. And while he does not adopt a position that openly affirms much of the 'conventional wisdom' on success and failure in American society, he ultimately produces such an analysis. Asante has attempted to negotiate that fine line between structural and cultural explanations or indigenous and exogenous explanations of African American poverty and failed.

Asante's Afrocentrism fails almost entirely to speak to the specific forms of economic or political exploitation. And when he does it resonates with a decidedly conservative tone. A serious problem in Asante's Afrocentrism is his understanding of the origins of problems that plague the African American community. These sources are endogenous rather than exogenous. Essentially, the way black people are, their culture or their lack of cultural centeredness, is the reason why they have attained or failed to realize their rightful position. He does speak briefly about the origins of African and African American dislocation, but his explanation is brief and ambiguous. Ultimately, "The problems are defined as cultural, behavioural and psychological, not as political, economic or structural. In other words -- the problem is *us*. The suggestion is that our behaviour has to change in order for our condition to change...."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 40.

¹⁴⁷Barbara Ransby and Tracye Matthews, "Black Popular Culture and the Transcendence of Patriarchal Illusions," *Race & Class* (1993), vol. 35, no. 1, p. 59. Italics added.

We can understand this same tension in the work of Cornel West. In his discussions of the causes of African American poverty, he is very concerned with the supposed 'nihilistic threat' that is at the core of these communities.

This threat is not simply a matter of relative economic deprivation and political powerlessness -- though economic well-being and political clout are requisites for meaningful black progress. It is primarily a question of speaking to the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America.¹⁴⁸

The roots of this problem are not necessarily external to the community either. Stephen Steinberg argues that West's analysis directs attention away from structural causes of the proliferation of these ghetto pathologies and redirects the focus to the alleged forms that once were able to repel the various threats to their existence. He follows: "Thus for West the question becomes: what has happened to 'the cultural structures that once sustained black life in America' and 'are no longer able to fend off the nihilistic threat?'"¹⁴⁹ Steinberg highlighted West's reminiscent tone: "[he] harkens back to the halcyon days when there was 'a vital community bound by ethical ideals.'"¹⁵⁰ The result is that the problems that now plaque the African American community are presented as entirely internal and able to perpetuate themselves independent of whatever structural effects that may have initially given birth to them.

We can understand the reproduction of a similar rationale in Asante's work. In general terms: "Our problems come when we lost sight of

¹⁴⁸Original in Cornel West, *Race Matters*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), pp. 12-13. Also cited in Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 128.

¹⁴⁹Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back*, p. 129.

¹⁵⁰Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back*, p. 130.

ourselves, accept false doctrines, false gods, mistaken notions of what is truly in our history, and assume an individualistic, antihumanistic, and autocratic posture."¹⁵¹ Asante traces the moment of dislocation in ancient Kemet to Arab intervention in African and the European slavers: "The breakdown of our central political organizations from the disintegration of Egypt during the coming of the foreigners all the way to the enslavement of Africans represents one massive slide away from our center."¹⁵² Thus the need for "a return to the basic principles which have always placed us at the center."¹⁵³ In Asante's view racism is a problem but not in the institutionalized form as defined by Stokley Carmichael and Charles Hamilton.¹⁵⁴ Rather, "personal racism" is the problem and must be the focus of anti-racism efforts. "Scholars must study the psyches of racists, their lifestyles and the value-beliefs systems in order to devise language strategies to deal with reactionary postures."¹⁵⁵

In his discussion of the problem of inner-city youth violence this rationale becomes self-evident. At the beginning of his essay he mentions the external contributors to the problems of violence in these communities such as the influx of firearms and drugs, but he is quick to leave these explanations and shift the focus elsewhere. Asante essentially traces the roots of the problem to a lack of self knowledge or cultural deficiency. "Our children have little understanding of the nature of the capture, the transport, and the enslavement."¹⁵⁶ He continues: "If those young people most susceptible to violence and the committing of violent actions could really read history and see the relationship of Africans to cotton women and children working till

¹⁵¹Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 6.

¹⁵²Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 40.

¹⁵³Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 40.

¹⁵⁴Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 4-6

¹⁵⁵Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 35.

¹⁵⁶Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 122.

'the blood runs from the tips of their fingers' . . . they would treat each cotton shirt or dress as a sacred piece and they would treat each human being with a different kind of respect for human life."¹⁵⁷

In a personal anecdote his flight from structural to cultural explanations of the pathologies that plaques these communities becomes obvious.

A few years ago I observed about ten young men in hot pursuit of one young fellow in the Richard Allen Projects in North Philadelphia. It was about 8 P.M. I stopped my car and started to run after the young men to break up what seemed to be sure violence perpetuated on the potential victim. Thinking I was moving in their direction, I stopped running, walking, and then stopped. What occurred to me was the fact that these young men were not Afrocentric and that it would make no sense to appeal to them on the basis of our African culture or common values, particularly since many of them probably did not believe they were African in the first place. A *breakdown in community values* based on an acceptable and accepted framework has poisoned the wellspring from which we have had spiritual unity in the past.¹⁵⁸

What may have begun as an examination of the external causes of inner-city violence degrades to one that focuses on the cultural causes of such a phenomena and ultimately fails to negotiate the tension between a progressive and essentially conservative viewpoint. Of West's project Steinberg stated:

It takes hairsplitting distinctions that do not bear close scrutiny to maintain that West's view of nihilism is different from the conservative view of ghetto culture as deeply pathological, and as the chief source of the problems that beset African Americans. Despite his frequent caveats, West has succeeded in shifting the focus of blame onto the black community. The affliction is *theirs* --something we shall call 'nihilism'.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 123.

¹⁵⁸Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*, p. 125. Italics added.

¹⁵⁹Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back*, p. 130. Italics in original.

The same criticism could be applied to Asante in a paraphrase:

It takes hairsplitting distinctions that do not bear close scrutiny to maintain that Asante's view of African American cultural malaise is different from the conservative view of ghetto culture as deeply pathological, and as the chief source of the problems that beset African Americans. Despite his frequent caveats, Asante has succeeded in shifting the focus of blame onto the black community. The affliction is *theirs* --something we shall call 'lack of self-knowledge.'¹⁶⁰

There resonates in Asante's Afrocentrism a substance and tone reminiscent of underclass discourse. Liberals and conservatives; blacks and whites; men and women; and academics and policy makers alike have identified with this discourse. Adolph Reed identifies the significance of the underclass in American political life:

Indeed, the 'underclass' idea rests on fuzzy and often very disturbing assumptions about poor people, poverty and the world in which both are reproduced. Those assumptions amount to tacit -- and sometimes explicit -- claims regarding the defective nature of poor people's motivations, moral character and behaviour. They appeal to hoary prejudices of race, gender, and class which give the underclass image instant popularity and verisimilitude even though it is ambiguous and inconsistent on its own terms. In the end, 'underclass' assumptions serve to take the focus away from (costly) demands for responsible government policies, blaming poor people, not societal choices, for another pat phrase, 'persistent poverty.'¹⁶¹

Asante supports this notion throughout his project. In *Njia*, an Afrocentric prescription for healthy leaving, is elaborated the basic framework for success. He contends: "This will reconstruct our families, reorganize our values, and protect our culture." In what Asante call the "The Transcendent

¹⁶⁰Sub-title in Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*. p. 122. Italics in original.

¹⁶¹Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth*, (Boston: Beacon Books, 1989), pp. 21-22.

Process" he presented the quintessential antidote to the dilemma of the underclass:

We [must] move away from the lifestyles of oppression and victimization. We reject consciousness of oppression. We dispense with attitudes of defeatism. We turn our backs on those negative race behaviors that conceal the manliness and womanliness we possess. We condemn those deviation of symbols and actions which hark back to the slave mentality. Like a dazzling comet our new self radiates to all those in our presence; we become new people.¹⁶²

While Asante may not intend this, his discourse jibes well with the liberal and conservative rationale that we can understand class position within the African American population by the degree to which they exhibit anti-social behavior. It reaffirms the common stereotypes of unwed teenage welfare mother, unemployment, and inner-city youth violence as causal explanations for the conditions of their community.

Asante never elaborates on the specifics of these so-called 'lifestyles', 'attitudes of defeatism', or 'negative race behaviors.' In any case, it is uncertain that these habits constitute the basis for or are exclusive to the 'underclass.' Whites and Blacks, across class, share these pathologies. This is by no means to dismiss the significance of, say, alcoholism or teenage pregnancy as important subjects to be examined. Rather, it is to state that one should consider these dynamics in relation to class position and the access to institutional support networks that support individuals who are faced with these circumstances. Out-of-wedlock birth and substance abuse are commonly understood as characteristic of the underclass. But by no means are these problems exclusive to the underclass and can be measured in similar levels across class, race, and gender. Reed asked poignantly as regards

¹⁶²Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 100.

the perception of out-of-wedlock births: "Why does such a birth become pathological when it occurs in the maternity ward in Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx, say, rather than within the pastel walls of an alternative birthing center? If the one woman's decision expresses pathology because she made it in poverty, then we have fallen into a nonsensical tautology: she is poor because she is pathological and pathological because she is poor."¹⁶³ . . .

And as for deviations explained by the 'slave mentality', this concept has no analytical resonance. In the least, it is historically incorrect. At worst, it is the manifestation of the worst type of loss of terms and self-hate that Asante rails against. It would seem that were we to look for inspiration in our African American past in the construction of a liberatory politics, slavery and slave resistance would be the site. Who better than our slave ancestors as a role model for agitation? His understanding of the slave mentality, and the slave as a dehumanized object, is absurd. Ellison responded to a similar point about slave mentality which was suggested by LeRoi Jones.

'A slave,' writes Jones, 'cannot be a man.' . . . [But] isn't it closer to the truth that far from considering themselves only in terms of that abstraction, 'a slave,' the enslaved really thought of themselves as *men* who had been unjustly enslaved. . . . Slavery was a most vicious system and those who endured and survived it a tough people, but it was *not* (and this is important for Negroes to remember for the sake of their own sense of who and what their grandparents were) a state of absolute repression.¹⁶⁴

Far from an enlightened view of history. This view does much to undermine a progressive African American political agenda and has grave political consequences.

¹⁶³Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Underclass as Myth and Symbol," pp. 26-27.

¹⁶⁴Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p. 254. Italics in original.

It first leap frogs an appreciation of an American history, caricatured by victimization, opting rather for a proud and majestic African one, albeit distant and mystical. Paul Gilroy asserts: "The history of plantations and sugar mills supposedly offers little that is valuable when compared to the ornate conceptions of African antiquity against which they are unfavourably compared."¹⁶⁵ The history of slavery gets erased in the following statement: "Our anteriority is only significant because it re-affirms for us that we once organized complex civilizations all over the continent of Africa, we can take those traditions and generate more."¹⁶⁶ This appreciation of slavery as a blight negates the possibilities inherent in the multiple legacies of African and African American politics.

They wish to establish a historical context of black achievement. But they often proceed as if respectable traditions of black heroism exist only outside the United States [or in a relatively limited number of cases]. Yet few glories that they may identify with in an ancestral African are likely to be more directly significant or more immediately applicable than the legacy of courage and devotion to human dignity and freedom that they leave so largely unclaimed at home.¹⁶⁷

This is not to deny that history as political weapon is unimportant either.

Indeed, quite the opposite. Murray continued:

Not that the African past is unimportant. On the contrary, it represents a heritage that merits the most careful and enthusiastic study. But certainly not primarily in the interest of *race* pride, as those who have been overconditioned by the psycho-political folklore of white supremacy insist. And the danger exists that even the slightest emphasis on race pride leads all too easily to what Arthur Schomburg quite accurately labeled 'puerile controversy and petty braggadocio.'¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 189.

¹⁶⁶Molefi Kete Asante. *Afrocentricity*, pp. 106-7

¹⁶⁷Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, pp. 178-79.

¹⁶⁸Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, p. 179.

And of the home legacy, Asante furnishes only ambiguous, removed, and ahistorical images which "float along at a distance somewhat removed from the terrain of real political economy."¹⁶⁹ This enables Washington's accomodationalism to be regarded as "deliberate manipulations of his white audience" and the Atlanta Exposition Speech becomes "the hallmark of [Washington's] genius"¹⁷⁰ despite the widely held beliefs among whites that blacks were not deserving of social equality which only reaffirmed those beliefs at the time.¹⁷¹ Of Garvey's Eurocentric philosophy Asante notes, "In no nation in the world was there a philosophical treatment of oppressed people any more creative than Garveyism."¹⁷² This is despite the fact that Garvey was "authoritarian, elitist, collectivist, racist, and capitalistic."¹⁷³

Asante's Afrocentrism which refocuses the attention on the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that characterize the poor African Americans is problematic, especially understood in a post-Civil Rights Era of retreat from racial justice and a decided shift away from structural explanations of the African American poverty. Indeed it contributes to both. Further, it feeds the liberal realpolitik rationale to avoid racially sensitive political agendas which would otherwise challenge the current racial order by liberals and particularly the Democratic Party. President Clinton can thus breath a sigh of relief and utter: "'Sometimes there are no answers from the outside in. Sometimes, all of the answers have to come from the values and the stirrings and the voices

¹⁶⁹Stuart Alan Clarke, "Black Politics on the Apollo's Stage: The Return of the Handkerchiefs Heads," in Helen Liggett and David C. Perry, eds. *Spatial Practices: Critical Explorations in Social/Spatial Theory*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1995), p. 130.

¹⁷⁰Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 8.

¹⁷¹For an example summary of the popular attitudes of the period see George M. Fredrickson's. *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817 - 1914*, (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1971).

¹⁷²Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 11.

¹⁷³Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, p. 139

that speak to us from within."¹⁷⁴ Economic and political concerns are replaced by cultural or spiritual concerns which effectively free the government and larger community from responsibility for their own citizens. "This is a very dangerous concession in an ideological context defined largely by a logic that, like that in the post-Reconstruction era of the last century, could extend to an almost genocidal expulsion of black citizens toward a bantustanized periphery of society."¹⁷⁵

It also feeds the brand of conservatism that explicitly sees culture (i.e. strong families and family values) as the roots of group success and failure ignoring almost entirely political and economic trends which have historically served to marginalize the African American community. Asante's Afrocentrism seems to jibe well with many of the Republican initiatives that seek at this historical moment to loosen controls on the market from government control, curtail all progressive welfare reform, raise the minimum wage, and ultimately focus on the individual initiative rather than on larger socio-economic factors. So "it is black, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos who are blamed for high rates of crime, and as before is treated as a cultural aberration rather than a symptom of class inequality."¹⁷⁶ The logic ultimately becomes: no reforms are needed until they reform themselves. They are the problem and need to be reformed rather than society. How convenient and tragic. "[S]uch a formula was appealing to the political establishment in Washington, since it did not threaten to tamper with major institutions, and indeed absolved the society at large of responsibility for the plight of black Americans, beyond what was required to help them put their own cultural house in order."¹⁷⁷ Conveniently, taxpayers pay very little and

¹⁷⁴Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back*, p. 132.

¹⁷⁵Adolph Reed, Jr., "Demobilization in the New Black Political Regime," pp. 188-89.

¹⁷⁶Stephen Steinberg, *Ethnic Myth*, p. 117.

¹⁷⁷Stephen Steinberg, *Ethnic Myth*, p. 123.

the race or class status quo goes unthreatened. The solution: a redirected focus.

[W]e should fight for policy changes that will open opportunity structures: support for improving access to jobs, housing, schooling, real drug rehabilitation of the sort available to the relatively well-off. A focus on behavior, after all, leads into blind alleys in policy terms. If we say that poor people are poor because of bad values, we let government off the hook, even though conscious government policy — e.g. in the relation between support for metropolitan real estate speculation and increasing homelessness, malnutrition and infant mortality — is directly implicated in causing poverty.¹⁷⁸

Asante ultimately falls into the trap, and ultimately reifies an entire body of literature that confirms that culture, individual initiative, and personal responsibility ultimately determine success or failure. Implicit in his analysis is that behavior determines status, largely irrespective of race or class dynamics that afford or deny privilege.

Asante's prescription ultimately reduces to a Muhammadian 'knowledge of self' position. But knowledge of culture or the degree to which one returns or exists within their own cultural ethos does not explain success or failure. The relative power of whites cannot be traced to their knowledge of ancient civilizations such as Greece or Rome. Indeed they provide the most inadequate models for contemporary social understanding. Similarly, knowledge, or lack thereof, of ancient Kemet does not explain the stratification within the black community or disparate conditions between the black and the white community. We cannot rely on such metaphysical explanations to explain these trends. "[O]ne should totally and absolutely suspect anything that claims to be a return. One reason is a logical one; there is in fact no such thing as a return. History, and the meticulous interest

¹⁷⁸Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Underclass as Myth and Symbol," p. 38

applied to history, is certainly one of the best defenses against this theme of the return."¹⁷⁹ But, Asante's Afrocentrism encourages just the opposite rationale.

In Asante's rhetoric, there is also the valorization and naturalization of heterosexual relationships between men and women which further fuels his conservatism and demphasis of structural causes of racial inequality.

"[M]aleness and femaleness are the biological and historical counterparts of each other and within the sources of the African tradition absolutely connected to the advancement of the community."¹⁸⁰ This complements the body of popular discourse about naturalized male/female relationship and family values which can be understood in a context in which women, and especially black women, have become scapegoats for public policy makers.

The myth of the natural male/female complementary relationship masks a variety of power-over relationships, particularly patriarchy, which are associated with such arrangements. The organization of the nuclear family may certainly have its benefits. But to accept this as a *fait accompli* is to ignore the contradiction inherent in such structures. This is especially important in the consideration of an African American history where the family has been "a site of resistance,"¹⁸¹ a place of nurturance, and a respite from the white supremacy. Sexism has operated within this sphere nonetheless. Sexism has delegated the burden of maintaining this space to women.

[T]he black family has in its very structure even deeper contradictions. The establishment of the family during slavery, for example, can be viewed both as an act of defiance (as an institution where slaves actively and forcefully created their own space) and an act of

¹⁷⁹Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 250.

¹⁸⁰Molefi Kete Asante, *Malcolm X as Cultural Hero*, p. 9

¹⁸¹bell hooks, *Yearning*, p. 41.

accommodation (as an institution that bound Afro-Americans to the slave system). Historically, the black family has contained an unusual amount of sexual equality, as is demonstrated by women's ability to control their economic life. But sexism reigns nonetheless. By recognizing only the positive aspects of the black family and ignoring the power imbalance that favors men, anti-feminists have been able to criticize feminists as anti-Black.

The black family has evolved into an institution that offers shelter for the black community in the face of political repression and economic depression. Unfortunately black women continue to pay the heaviest toll for keeping this shelter together.¹⁸²

The myth of the male/female union as the ideal relationship complements a body of conservative discourse which locates the nuclear household as the ideal form of familial organization female-headed households at the root of the socio-economic dilemma facing the "underclass." Indeed, Reed points out: "The underclass notion may receive the greatest ideological boost from its gendered imagery and relation to gender politics."¹⁸³ And it receives an added boost when wed to race and aimed at a particular cross-section of society. Barbara Ransby and Tracye Matthews add:

[T]he 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. . . . 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.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸²E. Frances White, "Listening to the Voice of Black Feminism," *Radical America* (March-June 1984) vol. 18, nos. 2 and 3, pp. 19-20.

¹⁸³Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Underclass as Myth and Symbol," p. 33.

¹⁸⁴Barbara Ransby and Tracye Matthews, "Black Popular Culture and the Transcendence of Patriarchal Illusions," in Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, (New York: The New Press, 1995), pp. 527-28.

While Asante does go this far in the above contention, his conservative appreciation of relationships and by extension the ideal family seems to lend credence to such notions.

The straying from the ideal of the male/female complementary relationship has become the context in which to understand social pathologies. Deviance from the ideal is at the root of all problems that plague Black communities. Female-headed households indicate a betrayal of traditional forms of social organizations which have helped sustain communities, even if that historical tradition never existed. But such household are only considered deviant within certain communities, specifically African American or Latino, and poor. Similar rules hold for out-of-wedlock births and teenage pregnancies. When such trends are evident Black or Latino communities such practices it more likely to viewed negatively and become the justification for severe cuts in social programs because of their defective natures. The same rules do not apply in the appreciation of these conditions in White, upper and middle class communities. "Why is a female-headed household an indicator of disorganization and pathology? Does that stigma attach to *all* such households -- even say, a divorced executive who is a custodial mother? If not what are the criteria for assigning it? The short answer is race and class bias inflected through a distinctively gendered view of the world."¹⁸⁵

One is thus forced to consider these phenomenon in relation to structural factors which affect relative levels of wealth and poverty, factors that Asante's Afrocentric paradigm fails to consider. For example, the pernicious effects of gendered labor markets and wage discrimination do not receive any consideration in most underclass discourse and none in Asante's

¹⁸⁵Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Underclass as Myth and Symbol," pp. 33-34.

Afrocentric paradigm. Asante favors male/female complementary relationships because it is assumed that this form of organization has historically served the intrinsic interests of the community. But his analysis provides no context. While this form of familial organization has its merits, "If one-parent households are especially linked to poverty, it is only because a) the segmented labor market depresses women's earning capacity and b) such households are overwhelmingly likely to be headed by women."¹⁸⁶ It is not because these 'biological and historical counterparts' have been separated and are thus unable to fulfill their historical destinies.

A simpler, more direct approach is to point out that the thrust of a progressive, egalitarian policy agenda is to make certain that individuals have access to the resources -- among other things, decent education, health care, a safe environment, a living wage, freedom from discrimination -- that they need to realize their capacities as autonomous members of the society. Under those conditions, the family issue will largely take care of itself. Autonomous individuals can choose whatever domestic arrangements they wish, with whichever specific partners they wish, free from the sting of bigotry or the lash of the market.

The best single 'family policy' would be to end wage discrimination and labor market segmentation by race and gender. Only when women are free, without fear of impoverishment, to order their intimate lives as they choose on an equal basis with men will we have a sense of what a 'natural' family form might be for our society. This is also a key component of the struggle against domestic violence.¹⁸⁷

It is also within this very heterosexual context that Asante also considers homosexual relationships. This deviation, like sexism, can also be traced to Europe. Asante asserts: "Homosexuality is a deviation from Afrocentric thought because it makes the person evaluate his own physical

¹⁸⁶Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Underclass as Myth and Symbol," p. 34.

¹⁸⁷Adolph Reed, Jr., "Kiss the Family Good-Bye," *The Progressive*, (February 1996), vol. 60, no. 2, p. 22.

needs above the teachings of national consciousness." Homosexuality is caricatured in wholly bodily terms and as lustful and libidinous. The Afrocentric response: "[W]e must demonstrate a *real antagonism* toward those gays who are as unconscious as other people."¹⁸⁸

This line of thinking denies a powerful self-affirming impulse that has characterized Black communities in the face of racist and sexist onslaughts. Homosexuality has to be considered as more than the mere bodily or sexual relations between same-sex partners. It embodies a wide range of experiences and relationships which distinctly political, self-affirming, and by extension, community affirming implications. It neglects the extent to which such relationships have contributed to the African American communities capacity to resist various forms of inter- and intra- communal oppression and exploitation. And again, in the context which family values and traditional forms of familial relationships are central in explanations of community health this mode of resistance is lost.

¹⁸⁸Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p. 57. Italics added.

CONCLUSION

The most serious flaw with Asante's project lies in its inability to provide an oppositional lens through which to construct a progressive politics. His project is first apolitical in that there is no sense of strategy or target of political action. Second, there is very little appreciation for the diversity which exists within the African American community politically in terms of class, gender, or sexual orientation.

It is nowhere evident how one could address the most serious and pressing concerns of the African American community such as joblessness, health care, or institutional racism. Such environmental factors are not considered the main impediments to the realization of the community's potential. The major concerns are rather internal: a loss of terms, history, and, ultimately, self. For example, his solution to internecine violence in inner-city communities amounts to an empty plea of "You should know how to act right." It is not clear to what extent factors such as guns, drugs, and lack of economic opportunity play in the above formula.

Asante's arguments exhibit a traditionalism that undermines the liberatory potential of his paradigm and indeed reflect much of the "Eurocentric" or public wisdom on solutions to our societal problems. He shares much with conservatives concerned with personal responsibility, individual initiative, and families and ignore the roles of politics and economics. It seems they would be quite pleased if there was a wholesale embrace of such values by African Americans. Asante ultimately leaves us with a bootstrap politics entirely incapable of addressing any of the fundamental concerns of the African American community beyond our

collective "identity problem" or "low self-esteem" which explain our multiple pathologies.

Asante's project also fails to account for the immense diversity that exists within the African American community on a number of different levels. This precludes any serious consideration of the many ways in which racism(s), as aggregates of multiple forms of oppression, affect the African American community. He imposes a certain uniformity in African Americans relations in relation to the white society. This leaves precious little space for any consideration of the history and challenges faced by the poor and working class, women, or gays and lesbians.

While initially, Asante's projects seems to provide us with a progressive framework within which to appreciate our realities, it ultimately falls far short. He ultimately complements, replicates, and reifies that which he had attempted to undermine. In the end Asante's Afrocentrism share much in common with Eurocentric discourse concerning African and African Americans supposed homogeneity and especially on matters of public policy. This is a practice that we can practically and politically ill-afford.

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