

## Fulani's Tools and Results: Development as Black Empowerment?

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### Abstract:

Standing in front of a mostly white audience at the Second Sex Conference held in New York City on September 29, 1979, the black feminist Audre Lorde offered a searing critique of white feminists for using what she called "the master's tools." Lorde argued that whether self-consciously or not, white feminists were reproducing patriarchal forms of oppression by using old conceptual tools, only now directed toward women who do not fit the dominant straight, white middle-class model of being a woman—that is, "those who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women . . . those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older."<sup>2</sup> Several years later, and building on Lorde's critique, the poet and author Alice Walker proposed the concept of "womanism" as a way of getting at the particular role that women of color can, and should play in the making of "a world in which we can all flourish."<sup>3</sup>

**Keywords:** Leonora Fulani | performance | human development | psychology

### Article:

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

—Audre Lorde<sup>1</sup>

Standing in front of a mostly white audience at the Second Sex Conference held in New York City on September 29, 1979, the black feminist Audre Lorde offered a searing critique of white feminists for using what she called "the master's tools." Lorde argued that whether self-consciously or not, white feminists were reproducing patriarchal forms of oppression by using old conceptual tools, only now directed toward women who do not fit the dominant straight, white middle-class model of being a woman—that is, "those who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women . . . those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older."<sup>2</sup> Several years later, and building on Lorde's critique, the poet and author Alice Walker proposed the concept of "womanism" as a way of getting at the particular role that women of color can, and should play in the making of "a world in which we can all flourish."<sup>3</sup>

*But if the master's tools can't be used to dismantle the master's house, what tools are needed to build "a world in which we can all flourish" (i.e., develop)?*

Alongside black feminist discussions about the role of women in the making of a new world, a different path was being forged—a path that encompassed the progressive perspective of womanism, even if it did not come out of that particular intellectual tradition, but did not hold to the proposition that any one group of people were necessarily in the best position to end oppression/promote the development of all people.<sup>4</sup> This other path was, and continues to be practical: building programs to facilitate *human development* using the most advanced approaches, practices, and breakthroughs in science, philosophy, and community organizing. Since the mid-1980s the African American developmental psychologist, educator, and independent political leader Lenora B. Fulani has been building a series of developmental projects (supplementary educational, therapeutic, and cultural) drawing principally on the methodological and conceptual insights of the philosopher of science Fred Newman and the developmental psychologist Lois Holzman.<sup>5</sup>

Mostly known for her work in the electoral arena—in 1988 becoming the first woman and the first African American on the ballot in all fifty states running for president, and more recently known as an outspoken advocate for nonpartisan reform—Fulani is less known for her longtime work as a leader of a "*development*" movement.<sup>6</sup> Taking Newman and Holzman's insights and discoveries into the black community, she has not only helped to generate new discoveries (namely, the use of "performance" as a powerful developmental tool), but she has directly impacted on the development of tens of thousands of young and older African Americans. At an education panel hosted by the National Action Network in New York City on April 15, 2010, Fulani spoke to a mostly black audience about the importance of learning about and using the various "scientific breakthroughs" in the area of human development. Fulani's poignant and provocative remarks, in which she began by stating that she wanted to "close the *discussion* on the achievement gap" (along with the endless analysis and descriptions of black *underdevelopment*), were received with a standing ovation:

[In] international circles the conversation among educators, social scientists, and intellectuals is not about the consequences of underdevelopment . . . it is about scientific breakthroughs in human development. It's about the work of radical psychologists, such as Lev Vygotsky, who championed the idea that relating to children as "a head taller" than they are, allows them to grow and to learn. It is about the work of unorthodox philosophers, like Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose thoroughgoing re-examination of philosophical assumptions buried philosophy, dramatically turned linguistics, and left psychology in the intensive care unit—where it belongs! It is about the theory and practice of my mentor, Dr. Fred Newman, whose teachings about the developmental powers of performance and the idea that growth is collective, rather than individual, have revolutionized standard approaches to development and helped me and others to create the All Stars Project—America's most successful, most humanistic, and most relevant after-school program.

Fulani continues:

Now, I know what many of my black sisters and brothers are already thinking, "Dr. Fulani—Vygotsky, Wittgenstein, Newman are all *white*. What do their thinking, what do their breakthroughs, what do their science have anything to do with black people?" Well, let me give you my answer as a black educator (and a damned good one!) What I want for our kids is not *black* thinking, I want the *best* thinking. I want the most sophisticated approaches. I want the most advanced theories with the most qualitative practice. That's what I want, and that's what you should want. And that's what I demand for our communities, whether in East New York, or Dakar, or Port-au-Prince, or Beijing, or Rio.<sup>7</sup>

A controversial national political figure, Fulani has spent nearly three decades as a practitioner and builder of programs that challenge conventional approaches to education, therapy, culture, and learning.<sup>8</sup> In building projects independently of the educational, psychological, *and* political establishments, while challenging their approaches and practices (she would say, their bankruptcy—from a developmental perspective), she has faced ongoing criticism and outright attacks.<sup>9</sup> Through independent fundraising (relying on neither government nor foundation support)—that is, raising money directly from thousands of people across the United States instead—she and her colleagues (including hundreds of volunteers) help to ensure the continuation of the projects. The result is that more than ten thousand young people and adults are able to participate annually in one of several of her developmental projects without interruption to those projects because of conflicting political or other interests.

Those involved in Fulani's various projects learn and practice an innovative performatory approach to human development pioneered by Newman, her principal intellectual influence, mentor, and longtime collaborator.<sup>10</sup> The performatory approach rests on an understanding of participants (indeed all people) relating to others and themselves as capable of doing things they do not yet know how to do. As Fulani describes, "It's in *performing as who we aren't* in a social environment—with other human beings who, surprisingly, support us by accepting that we are doing what we don't know how to do—that we make the ordinary and quite miraculous leap from baby talk to the real thing."<sup>11</sup> The developmental approach, therefore, focuses on people self-consciously growing, instead of critiquing (or describing) people being insufficiently developed (as with the dominant practices in psychology and education of diagnosing/labeling people, young and old). Fulani and her colleagues' various projects—the All Stars Talent Show Network, along with the Social Therapy Group, the East Side Institute, the Development School for Youth, Youth Onstage!, Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids, and the Castillo Theatre, among others—are an integral part of her lifelong efforts to help people grow and develop.<sup>12</sup>

Born Lenora Branch on April 25, 1950, in Chester, Pennsylvania, into a working-class black family, Fulani decided at an early age to become a psychologist in order "to help [those in her community] deal with their emotional pain: the humiliation, the anguish, and the self-destructive rage that went with being black and poor and powerless in white America." Fulani was driven to figure out a path out of the emotional destruction she saw around her. She recounts in her autobiographical *The Making of a Fringe Candidate*, with particular candor, the challenges she faced growing up, and the women—beginning with her mother—who supported her to go as far as she could. Other women helped her to go even farther: Phyllis Bolding, "one of my great teachers [was] a brilliant working-class black woman who died of racism and poverty long before her time . . . when I first met Phyllis, I was as yet unable to demand that middle-class

black people not disdain the black poor, or to demand that poor black people provide leadership despite their humiliation. In knowing Phyllis I learned what I needed to do. I will always be deeply thankful to her for that lesson," writes Fulani.<sup>13</sup>

Reflecting on her own history and development, Fulani wrote about how in 1967 when she went to Hofstra University on a scholarship she entered "with high hopes, expecting that in psychology I would find a tool for dealing with and transforming the violence, the family disintegration, the drug and alcohol abuse and the insanity that had destroyed so many people I knew and loved."<sup>14</sup> But what she found in college were tools and methods that were limited and out of sync with who she was and where she came from. "The institution of traditional psychology," Fulani notes, "which did contain a strong liberal and humane tradition, nevertheless embodied all the biases of the rest of our Euro-centric, patriarchal, capitalist society: it was racist, it was sexist, it was anti-poor—not merely in its content but *in its method*, in its very mode of comprehending who human beings are"[emphasis added]. Fulani would draw similar conclusions as Lorde about the limits of the available tools: "With growing dismay," she writes, "I began to understand that psychology, while purporting to be for and about human beings, actually reflected and validated the values, concerns, and point of view of particular human beings: [straight] white, middle class men."<sup>15</sup>

Swept up by the cultural current of the Black Power movement that captured the hearts, minds, and energies of young black men and women across the United States during the late 1960s, Fulani became captivated by the writings of Frantz Fanon. Fanon, the Martinican psychiatrist and revolutionary who treated French soldiers and Algerian rebels while directing the mental ward of a hospital during Algeria's bloody war for independence, later wrote about the "psychology of the oppressed."<sup>16</sup> As Fulani describes, "Here was a black psychiatrist—obviously brilliant, obviously 'political'—who was actually talking about black people! And it seemed to me that he was talking about us as who we really are: the colonized, the oppressed, wretched of the earth who had nothing to lose but our chains. Eagerly, I read everything Fanon had written."<sup>17</sup>

After graduation, and changing her last name to Fulani (adopting the name of a nomadic people in West Africa), reflecting her sense of black pride, she continued her studies at Teacher's College, Columbia University, where she wrote her master's thesis on Fanon and his psychology of the oppressed. She was particularly interested in Fanon's description in *Black Skin, White Masks* and, as she describes, the ways in which "colonized people internalize their oppression, turning the oppressor's contempt and scorn into self-hatred"—as well as his insights in *The Wretched of the Earth*, about how "European psychological concepts and categories could not help the colonized psychotic or neurotic—nor, for that matter, the 'theoretically' emotionally healthy person living under colonial domination."<sup>18</sup>

Fanon's clinically based insights were critical for Fulani in that they spoke about the oppression of *all* people. However, over the course of a number of years, she came to see Fanon's limits. "Fanon's books, in which his passionately held views are set forth in eloquent language burning with righteous anger toward the slavemaster and compassion for the slave, are among the most persuasive political indictments of racism ever written," writes Fulani. "Yet I [eventually came] to believe that Fanon—who continues to be an inspiration for me . . . was profoundly mistaken in

many of his ideas about psychology." She says why: "Although he deeply desired to create a genuine psychology of the oppressed, Fanon himself was unable to produce one. [Ultimately,] his practice was carried out within the confines of . . . the institution of psychology/psychiatry—which did not allow him to go beyond it."<sup>19</sup> Fulani had spent several years working within traditional academic institutions and research centers, holding onto Fanon (quite literally carrying his books). But it was not until she had begun to work outside of the institution of psychology, building nontraditional community-based programs that she arrived at her understanding of Fanon's limits.

After graduating from Columbia, Fulani was hired as a research assistant to the black psychologist Anderson J. Franklin, who asked her to join him at the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition at Rockefeller University, where she took Fanon (not Freud or Piaget) with her. The Rockefeller laboratory seemed like a promising site for the study of nontraditional approaches to human development. Its director, Michael Cole, had created a research method based on his studies in West Africa and Central America in which "the learning skills of non-Western, non-literate people could be identified in the context of their everyday lives." In the United States he was seeking to apply this principal of "ecological validity" with regard to people who were "not assimilated into the mainstream of middle class American cultural, economic, and social life." Fulani's job was to study black children in out-of-school contexts (specifically, city playgrounds) using this theory. She notes, "[At the time] I was convinced that in this cross-cultural approach there was at least the *potential* for creating a black psychology" [emphasis added].<sup>20</sup> Her hope for a new psychology that could be relevant—i.e., of developmental value—to poor and working-class African Americans was short-lived. And soon she would learn of the nonpsychological (indeed antipsychological—i.e., noncognitive, non-individually based) approach to human development that was being pioneered by Newman and the person who would become his chief intellectual collaborator, Lois Holzman.

It was at Rockefeller that Fulani met Holzman, who had recently received her PhD in developmental psychology from Columbia University and was hired by Cole as part of a team of talented young researchers to do innovative context- and culture-specific research in the United States based on the premise that cognitive processes are cultural and social. Cole had been responsible for having Vygotsky's work translated into English, which was then published by Harvard University Press.<sup>21</sup> Holzman would be significantly influenced by the work of Vygotsky through Cole, her mentor at the time. Vygotsky created several developmental concepts based on his work in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and 1930s—in the tumultuous years following that nation's civil war, in which hundreds of thousands of children were orphaned. Today, Vygotsky's best-known and -taught concept in graduate programs in education and psychology in the United States is "the zone of proximal development," in which he describes the social processes through which children develop; his understanding of how development takes place would be in sharp contrast to psychologist Jean Piaget's view of development as taking place in necessary and fixed stages—the view that dominates much of clinical psychology and education today.<sup>22</sup>

Born a generation before Fanon, and in a very different part of the world, Vygotsky nevertheless bore certain similarities to the Martinican: both were Marxists whose lives were steeped in the revolutionary politics of their respective times and places—Vygotsky in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, Fanon in the midst of Martinique's colonial French colonial hold and

Algeria's war for independence. Vygotsky, like Fanon, was equally driven to create a new and relevant psychology—not articulated as for "the wretched of the earth," but the "new human being" as part of building a humanistic socialist society. However, unlike Fanon's humanistic reforms (including desegregating the psychiatric ward he directed and prohibiting the use of straightjackets, helping to transform the authoritarian structure of his hospital into a therapeutic community), Vygotsky's work took place at a time when the institution of psychology had not yet been fully consolidated—as was the case when Fanon was practicing psychiatry in the 1950s. Tragically, both Fanon and Vygotsky died young; Fanon of leukemia at the age of thirty-five, Vygotsky of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-eight.<sup>23</sup>

Vygotsky, whose work was largely suppressed in the Soviet Union after his death, identified the task of creating a new developmental psychology not with adding new content into existing categories but with a search for an appropriate method to study human life. Fulani would write, "Human beings, Vygotsky pointed out, cannot study ourselves in the same way that we study stars and mountains, atoms and quanta, bacteria and dolphins. . . . For [as Marx points out] we are not only shaped by our environments; we are unique in that we also create and recreate the environments that shape us."<sup>24</sup> Marx's dialectical approach would shape Vygotsky, as it would Fulani through Holzman and Newman. As Vygotsky writes in *Mind and Society*, "The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, *the tool and the result* of the study" [emphasis added].<sup>25</sup> For Newman and Holzman nothing short of a developmental method that is both "a tool and result" can be properly applied to the study of human beings and our development.<sup>26</sup>

Holzman and Fulani, coming of age a generation after Fanon, each influenced by the progressive politics of the 1960s, were also looking for a radically humane and relevant psychology. Vygotsky offered a *methodological* direction. But it was not until Holzman introduced Vygotsky to the Stanford University-trained philosopher of science Newman, writes Fulani, that Vygotsky's methodological insights were qualitatively advanced. This would be done through years of work creating on-the-ground programs in poor and working-class communities—that is, among "the wretched of the earth," about whom Fanon so poetically, passionately, and powerfully wrote.

In 1983, after completing her PhD in developmental psychology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, Fulani was offered a research position by Cole, who had since moved his lab to San Diego. She briefly considered the offer, but ultimately declined it. As she writes, "however 'ecologically valid' (and upwardly mobile) it might [have been to take the position], I wasn't really interested in helping to interpret the behavior of black kids in such a way as to prove that they're really just as smart as white kids—which is, when you really look at it, a way to justify racism while seeming to critique it." As Fulani put it, "If you accept that the 'intelligence' of white kids is what counts as intelligence, then you've relied on a racist paradigm, no matter how much you take environmental factors into account in explaining why black kids don't measure up." It was at that point that she decided to work with Newman, who had been joined by Holzman, in further creating their approach to human development. This work, grounded in the ideas of Marx, Vygotsky, and significantly advanced by Newman's insights on both, would transform over time into a "cultural-performatory" approach to human development.

Holzman, building on Newman's unique understanding of Vygotsky as well as his appreciation of the Austrian-British philosopher Wittgenstein's contributions on language play, and, later, the use of performance and theatre, would help shape Fulani's therapeutic and supplementary education programs.

Fulani's intellectual growth and development over the course of three decades may be seen in the transformation of the articulation of her work. In the mid-1980s she offers a politically progressive critique of psychology, with echoes of Fanon, infused with a black cultural nationalism, and combined with a socialist collectivist orientation; two and a half decades later, she expresses a revolutionary approach to human development, drawing on a range of methodological advancements *and* a quarter century of creating on-the-ground programs with tens of thousands of people. An example of her earlier articulation may be seen in her article "Poor Women of Color Do Great Therapy," published in 1988 (the same year she became the first woman and the first African American to get on the ballot in all fifty states running for president). In the piece, Fulani describes her therapy practice among mostly poor and working-class women. She writes:

The Harlem Institute for Social Therapy and Research, located on 125th Street . . . serves, in my opinion, as a model of how to build among the black, Latino, Jewish, lesbian and gay, and other oppressed populations of this country[,] a deeply needed . . . empowering *sense of community* based on the power *of* and love *for* the oppressed. The sense of community is not new to my ancestors. African American historians teach us of African communalism, the collective practice and spirit that dominated the work and lifestyles of our people . . . shaped into a critical tool in their respective fights for freedom and justice.<sup>27</sup>

After several years of operation, Fulani's Harlem Institute, along with other therapy institutes she was affiliated with in poor and working-class communities, were unsustainable. The stigma of therapy was (and continues to be) too great in these communities. The failure of such efforts led Fulani and her colleagues to focus their developmental work on a larger scale via the inner city youth programs that they had already created, and which were growing with great demand. The biggest of these programs, the New York City-based All Stars Talent Show Network, already involved thousands of black and Latino youth each year. Over the next years, the All Stars would grow into the largest developmental after-school program in the nation.

Today, Fulani may be best understood as a *developmentalist*. Her understanding of and commitment to development is not limited to any particular grouping of people. She is the product of a number of traditions—early on, black cultural nationalism and progressive politics; later, Marx, Vygotsky, and Wittgenstein, principally through Newman and Holzman. Holzman, a progressive middle-class Jewish woman, whose academic training not only included developmental psychology at Columbia but linguistics at Brown University, for years kept one foot in academia. She taught at Empire State College in New York and was active in academic organizations, bringing in the work she and Newman were doing, while at the same time building programs outside of academia (she served as director of the Barbara Taylor School, a Vygotskian-based elementary school, for twelve years). By the late 1990s she left her teaching position at Empire to work full-time in advancing the developmental projects she and her

colleagues had created, serving as an international ambassador for the developmental approach and helping to train and collaborate with hundreds of fellow developmental practitioners (including clinical psychologists, therapists, social workers, and artists) around the world (including Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Far East). Newman, on the other hand, a working-class Jew from the Bronx who had received his PhD in analytical philosophy from Stanford University in 1962, had long left academia.<sup>28</sup>

As Fulani recounts, "In 1968 [Newman] gave up on a promising career as a professional philosopher [teaching at City College of New York, among other universities]. He had also been given up on by academia for persisting in giving A's to all of his students in order to help the men stay out of the war in Vietnam (and to make sure that his women students were not discriminated against)."<sup>29</sup> Newman became a community organizer, set on trying to create something that would be of value to people as a whole; in 1970, working as a counselor in a drug rehabilitation center, he observed how his clients were primarily being related to as prisoners who had committed a crime, not as people in emotional pain capable of creating their own growth.<sup>30</sup>

Newman had always been interested in the *activity* of philosophy, as much as philosophy itself. His interest in the activity of philosophy while he was at Stanford during the early 1960s is described in Newman and Holzman's *The End of Knowing*: "Newman, at the time unacquainted with either Marx's conception of practical-critical activity or Soviet activity theory [Vygotsky's legacy], was fascinated by the relationship between doing philosophy and what comes out of the doing."<sup>31</sup> He carried this interest into the community—to the South Bronx and Lower East Side of New York City—looking at the contributions of the leading theoreticians challenging conventional therapy: included among them were the British psychiatrist R. D. Laing (*Sanity, Madness and the Family*), the American psychiatrist Thomas S. Szasz (*The Myth of Mental Illness*), and Fanon.<sup>32</sup> As Dan Friedman writes in *Towards a Postmodern Marxism*, "Laing saw madness as part of the human condition, and believed that people could emerge from severe mental illness with important insights and even become wiser and more grounded as a result. Thomas Szasz took Laing's critique of the traditional attitudes toward mental illness further, arguing that 'mental illness' is a euphemism for behaviors that are disapproved. He believed that psychiatry in particular, but by implication the entire institution of psychology, is a social control system that disguises itself in the costume of science."<sup>33</sup> Newman, whose own academic training at Stanford in the philosophy of science gave him critical ways of looking at psychology, joined several other therapists, activists, and educators to create a nonpsychological therapy—what became "social therapy." The premise of this therapy—the social nature of emotionality—runs counter to the premise of psychology, which is that emotions are produced individually.

Fulani would herself leave academic research, having decided not to pursue the Cole offer, among others that came to her after receiving her doctorate, to train as a social therapist with Newman instead. Despite their meager resources and limited organizational strength at the time, it was apparent to Fulani that in social therapy lay a therapeutic approach relevant to the disempowered. (It was 1983 and Alice Walker had just penned her call for womanism.) Newman, like Vygotsky, had been profoundly influenced by Marx—particularly his dialectical methodology. When he learned of Vygotsky from Holzman, notes Fulani, "he was struck by the



significance of Vygotsky's insight that something could be simultaneously a method and the thing the method is designed to discover."<sup>34</sup>

Newman's innovative understanding and advancement of Vygotsky's own methodological insights was a vital part of the ongoing creation of the social therapeutic practice—the method that would inform the All Stars, among Fulani's other projects. Newman, impacted by Vygotsky's insight, came to understand that "human beings develop by creating the environments where development can take place."<sup>35</sup> Explaining what Newman calls "the practice of method," Fulani writes: "The continuous, qualitative transformation of life activity, of which human beings are uniquely capable, occurs not through the application of a fixed method but through practicing methodology—the constantly transforming practice of method."<sup>36</sup> This practice of method is the social therapeutic/cultural-performatory approach carried out in the programs Fulani would first attempt to build in the South Bronx, in Harlem, Brooklyn, and other areas of New York, and, over the years growing to include a national network of programs, including in Atlanta, Newark, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area.

Theatre and the value of performance became increasingly part of the social therapeutic approach. Beginning in the 1980s, Newman started working in theater and, together with other progressive artists and activists, started the Castillo Theatre, an experimental theatre (now on 42nd Street in New York City). Over the following two decades, he wrote and directed dozens of plays, and even performed as an improvisational comedian. Meanwhile, the way in which both the All Stars and the Castillo Theatre remained independently funded was through "street work" (soliciting money on the street, along with canvassing and telemarketing), which would itself impact on the development of their developmental approach. In the early 1990s, the activity of fundraising became increasingly understood and carried out as "performances" (an example of tool and result methodology), which helped to transform Fulani's approach to both pedagogy and mass organizing—from the All Stars to her work in the electoral arena. These experiences further shaped Newman's understanding of Vygotsky's discoveries about learning and development, underscoring the importance of the activity of performing *offstage*. The activity of performing seemed more apparent in the *on-stage* work of the All Stars or the Castillo Theatre (at a basic level, since there are literally stages, where "performing" is socially understood to take place), but to what extent was performance of value in other social environments? For Fulani, it was critical—a breakthrough tool in human development.

While the All Stars significantly took off in poor and working-class communities, social therapy continued to be practiced, albeit in less poor and working-class settings (but always with the inclusion of a great range of people, in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation). In many ways, social therapy groups, where a therapeutic conversation is carried out each week, are themselves a kind of "emotional performance, in which the group provides an environment for people to express their emotionality in new ways," as described by one recent account.<sup>37</sup> "The social therapy group is . . . an environment in which people who are more, and less, emotionally skilled participate together in the conjoint activity of creating an environment where they can get help with their emotional pain by creating a new emotionality. They don't create the environment for the purpose of getting help in a tool-for-result, means-to-an-end way;

rather, the historical activity of building the group is what we take to be therapeutic," notes Fulani.<sup>38</sup>

As Fulani makes plain, the "building [of] the group" is not about doing so for any one person (or, abstractly, for any particular grouping of people), except those participating in its creation. Here, the radical nature of her work departs from identity-based therapeutic approaches and projects. She writes, "By analogy, we are not seeking to create a [therapy] for a class, however defined: working class people, black people, the wretched of the earth. In our view, to do so would be to capitulate to the existing societal power arrangement which determine identity, regardless of whether that identity is inferior (as in racist theories of intelligence) or superior (as some Black nationalists and some radical feminists suggest). This is the trap that ensnared even so brilliant and dedicated a revolutionary as [Fanon], who defined the oppressed solely in terms of their oppression and even idealized it."<sup>39</sup>

Fulani goes on to challenge another perspective implicit in Fanon's work: "In my opinion, the victim of oppression is *not* in the best position to comprehend what is going on. If that were true, then racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and economic exploitation would have some redeeming social value. Oppressed people would actually be better off than the oppressor, because they would *know* better." "Indeed, 'knowing' isn't the issue at all," says Fulani. "Building a new world . . . a new human being is."<sup>40</sup> Here, Fulani poses a direct challenge to knowing, or epistemology—part of an analysis fully discussed in Newman and Holzman's *The End of Knowing*.

In 2000 Fulani published a powerful critique of modernist epistemology in a chapter entitled "Race, Identity, and Epistemology," appearing in *Postmodern Psychologies*, edited by Holzman and the postmodern theorist of psychology John Morss. In the chapter, Fulani describes "all ways of knowing" as nothing less than "an oppressive and conservatizing force" when it comes to human development. As opposed to doing things ahead of where one is developmentally and/or relating to others in such a way, the activity of knowing (which suffuses psychology in the form of pathological descriptions and prescriptive identities), is counter to the ways in which people actually develop and grow. Profoundly radical in her critique, her challenge to epistemology notably includes "some of the current postmodern alternatives." As she writes, "Challenging truth, reality, and objectivity but leaving *knowing* untouched won't do." She asks, "Don't we have to subject the notion of narrative itself to the same rigorous deconstruction as has been applied to modernism's grand narratives?"<sup>41</sup> She then delves into what this challenge looks like in her work with young people in two of her programs: the All Stars and the Development School for Youth.

The All Stars, founded by Fulani and Newman in 1983, is a developmental youth program that is made possible by grassroots fundraising by mostly adult volunteers. It involves some ten thousand children and teenagers, not including the tens of thousands of others (parents, caretakers, and friends) who are directly or indirectly impacted by the activity of the young people. The young people, primarily from poor and working-class black and Latino communities, produce talent shows in their neighborhoods. The young men and women not only dance, sing, and rap in these shows, but most critically, they take responsibility for producing all aspects of the shows. Everyone in the "auditions" makes it into the show—but not without certain kinds of demands placed on them. The young people work with adults from the All Stars

(often veterans of the program) and from their own communities, and find locations for the shows (usually high school and junior high school auditoriums). They also sell the tickets, stage-manage, usher, emcee, run the lighting and sound boards, and maintain security. Additionally, the young people build the audience for the shows and mentor younger children in the program—an important component of the developmental project. Fulani describes, "In the process [of these activities], these young people not only learn all sorts of technical skills, they also learn to relate to kids from other neighborhoods, to work with adults and to interact with their community's institutions (schools, churches, block associations, etc.). In short, they create an environment in which they can perform as leaders, and most of them, in fact, do."<sup>42</sup> The programs run year-round.

The Development School for Youth, founded in 1997, is a supplementary education program that offers social and internship experiences in different work settings. Unlike the All Stars, the Development School for Youth is a twelve-week program with two cycles each year. Smaller in size than the All Stars, it reaches several hundred young people each year. The program trains young people—using performance—to "enter the workforce, pursue educational opportunities, and face challenges in new ways." As noted previously, both these and Fulani's other projects do not rely on government funding or foundation support, but on the contributions of thousands of people. They also, most critically, do not rely on participants knowing how to do things before doing them. The independent funding of these programs allows for their continuity and integrity in the community and, because of this, gives them their capacity to actively incorporate new ideas and practices—even as they inform the cultural-performatory (non-epistemological) approach that guides them.<sup>43</sup>

The All Stars and Development School for Youth are joined by other programs, such as Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids, which was initiated in 2006 after the police shooting of a young black man, Sean Bell, in Queens, New York. The program involves a series of dialogues and performance-based workshops with police and inner city young people to improve and develop their relationship. In each of these programs, young people are related to as developmentally ahead of themselves. By relating (which is a type of self-conscious "performance") to the young people as capable of carrying out tasks in advance of knowing how to do them, the young people grow, develop—as do the policemen and women.<sup>44</sup>

Fulani's January 2011 report "Let's Pretend: Solving the Educational Crisis in America," co-authored with Newman, boldly makes plain their understanding of the developmental power of relating to people ahead of themselves/ performing ahead of oneself. In the report, they provocatively ask, "What if all the kids currently failing in school pretended to be good learners? What if all the adults—teachers, principals, administrators, parents—played along and pretended that the kids were school achievers, heading for college? What if this national 'ensemble' pretended this was the case day after day, classroom after classroom, school district after school district?" And then they state: "We believe that if such a national 'performance' were created, the education crisis in America would be over."<sup>45</sup> The challenge they pose is as serious as it is profound, challenging the ways in which young black poor and working-class children and adolescents are systematically, institutionally related to in undevelopmental ways (and the way young people relate to themselves, when it comes to school and learning). "Pretending" that young people—in fact, all people—are ahead of themselves, Fulani and Newman state (not

suggest), will help them develop into more effective learners. Such an activity is decidedly antithetical to the common notion of people assuming an identity, which for Fulani is another form of "knowing," and therefore developmentally conservatizing.

In focusing on the activity of creating developmental environments by relating to people as ahead of themselves (or "pretending" as if they are), Fulani questions "the common assumption that socially constructed identity and identity politics were and remain a 'natural' stage in the cultural-political process [of people's development]." She continues, "Coming as I do from a working-class African American family and having become a Marxist after I developed a strong black identity, I find Newman and Holzman's methodological challenges extremely helpful in understanding both the pulls of identity (especially racial identity) and how it is that, more often than not, I successfully resist them in my work, whether that is supporting black and Latino inner city youth to create new performances of themselves or working within the mostly white [independent political movement] to restructure the American political process."<sup>46</sup>

Fulani goes into a full discussion of race, identity, and epistemology:

Understood culturally rather than politically, the nationalism I embraced as a college student is the dominant tradition in the African American community. Nationalist political beliefs—such as the establishment of a separate black state or a return to Africa—are not widely held in the African American community, but a strong nationalist bias is apparent in the widespread belief that African American culture is of great importance and must be expressed in a multitude of ways in daily life. Racism, of course, historically forced the African American community to create its own institutions (e.g. Black colleges and Black churches) and foisted on it a constant awareness of racial identification. [Racial codification of slavery in colonial America would set the stage.] Since the post-integration 1960s, the African American community has purposefully perpetuated its over-identification with race. This kind of cultural nationalism goes beyond knowing one's history and taking pride in it. It entails a set of postures, attitudes and beliefs—for example, that the way to positively change institutions is to increase [the] Black presence in them—as well as language, gestures, dress, forms of music, etc., that have become identified as "behaving Black" and, therefore, in this racially identified context, hip and cool. Parents implicitly and explicitly teach their children this nationalistic model as "the way to be" in the world.<sup>47</sup>

Fulani speaks to this issue as a developmental psychologist, a black woman, and a mother of two. She continues:

The problem with this model . . . is that it's culturally and politically naïve. [Such] postures, attitudes, and norms . . . are less than helpful in navigating the complex network of societal institutions in our multi-cultural society. Ironically, while many black-identified cultural postures and attitudes have been adopted by white Americans to enhance their hipness, and by major clothing manufacturers to market a cultivated hip/black image to both white and black consumers, the [poor and working-class] African American community, by virtue of the self-imposed narrowness of its cultural nationalism, has largely been unable to take advantage of this phenomenon. . . . The

contradiction between the cultural nationalism of the African American community and its desire to see its children educated and succeed in mainstream culture is something most parents have not yet come to terms with.

Fulani draws on the work of the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah in addressing these questions:

Like many scholars, Appiah argues that there is no such thing as race. Going beyond showing that there is no biological evidence for racial differences, he claims that race is not cultural either. The move to identify racial differences as cultural, according to Appiah, falsely suggests that people in one cultural grouping are the same as each other and different from people in other cultural groupings. Racism is then understood as stemming from cultural misunderstandings.

But, as Fulani makes plain, "[r]acism isn't a matter of cultural differences and misunderstandings; it's a matter of political power." For Fulani, the problem with identity is that it "becomes categorical, defining and rigid, signaling association with particular political or social agendas and particular beliefs." She agrees with the psychologist Ken Gergen who, like Appiah, writes persuasively of "the destructive effects of identity politics, as identity-identified interest groups compete with each other for legislative initiatives and social policy on the basis of presumed shared characteristics and on their own behalf." Appiah, writes Fulani, hints at "a different methodological foundation for human social life . . . a life where we are not so narrowly defined, methodologically speaking, but are rather simultaneously 'who we are' *and* 'who we are not.'"48

For Fulani identities are problematic in that they limit one's development. "From an activity-ist perspective, identity is . . . as much a part of the problems of violence, drugs, teen pregnancy and school failure as economic and political factors." She continues, "Our youth projects might be said to be anti-identity—we have no interest in helping young people become possessors of different, more secure and positive identities because we believe that won't help them grow. Instead, we support them to continuously create their development through the creative, emergent activity of performing beyond themselves."<49 For Fulani, assuming an identity (different from a role, in the theatrical sense) is therefore a static, conservative form of life. Identities, in this respect are tools *for* particular results, not tools *and* results, allowing for transformation, viz., development.

While Fulani's All Stars is well known and regarded in inner cities across New York, New Jersey, and in many other parts of the country—with more demands for the program than organizers can meet—it is less known among academics, even in psychology and education. Over the years, however, a number of high-profile black scholars in psychology, education, and African American Studies have publicly discussed and praised the positive, developmental impact of the All Stars Project, Inc. (the umbrella organization for Fulani's various supplementary education programs).

The eminent black psychologist Edmund Gordon wrote an assessment of the All Stars for Columbia University's Institute for Urban and Minority Education, concluding, "While the goal

of the programs is the development of young people, benefits accrue to those who are deliverers of services as well as to those who are the designated beneficiaries, creating a symbiotic relationship between the giver and the receiver."<sup>50</sup> After doing a survey of after-school programs across the nation, Harvard University's Henry Louis Gates Jr. called the All Stars, and specifically the Development School for Youth, the best supplementary education program he had observed firsthand: "Of all the projects that I have examined throughout this country . . . none has had better demonstrable results," reported Gates.<sup>51</sup> Finally, New York University's Derrick Bell discusses the success of the All Stars programs in his *Silent Covenant: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes of Racial Reform*. In the book he notes, "Both [the All Stars and the Development School for Youth], supervised by Dr. Lenora Fulani, are privately funded supplementary-education ventures that serve tens of thousands of inner city kids each year . . . her programs focus on issues of development. . . . They relate to people [as being able] to perform ahead of themselves . . . they are taught how to create performances on stage as a way of learning to perform in life."<sup>52</sup>

For Fulani, following Newman and Holzman's understanding of Vygotsky, learning and development are social rather than individual, as traditional psychology insists. Through performing when we are very young—that is, doing things before we know how to them—we learn to do new things. Toddlers learn to speak through this kind of play and pretending. They do so "naturally"; as adults, we can do so self-consciously, Newman and Holzman point out. Added to the mix of influences on Fulani, here again through Newman and Holzman, is the work of the mid-twentieth-century philosopher Wittgenstein, whose views on language as social activity—a creative process of "making meaning" with others—have been critical to advancing the performance-based (social therapeutic) approach. A description of "The origins of social therapy" by The Social Therapy Group notes, "In Wittgenstein's view, how we talk and the words we choose has an important impact on what we see and are able to create with other people—it can reinforce our alienation and emotional pain, or free us to develop and grow."<sup>53</sup>

As Holzman and clinical community psychologist Rafael Mendez write in *Psychological Investigations*, "A renewed interest in the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and psychologist Lev Vygotsky has played a key role in psychology's emerging concern with process, possibility, and performance" (recall Fulani's statement at the National Action Network education panel on discussions taking place among scholars and developmental practitioners around the world). Holzman and Mendez continue, "Their ideas—Vygotsky's search for a dialectical method to study human activity as social, historical, and cultural, his understanding of child development as 'performing beyond' ourselves, his notion of language completing thinking, and Wittgenstein's argument against private language, his insistence that language is to be understood and experienced as a form of life, his notion of language games—have been both a catalyst for these new concerns and a product of them."<sup>54</sup>

Fulani is herself a product of multiple experiences and intellectual influences, an innovator of new practices, and a disseminator of such influences and approaches—especially among poor and working-class black communities. For Fulani, performance is a valuable (if not essential) developmental tool, with one's willingness to engage in the social activity of performing *who we are not* being critical to emotional growth. "The strength of activity-based youth programs [such as the All Stars]," she writes, "lies in their capacity to reinitiate performance—that capacity to be

who you are and who you are not at the same time. This kind of developmental activity is vital to inner city youth who are trapped in very limited and too often negative social roles at an early age."<sup>55</sup>

While Fulani continues to be mostly known as a political figure, her leadership as a developmentalist—leading a movement for human development involving tens of thousands of young and older people—adds a significant dimension to her biography.

In her autobiography there is a photograph of her pointing to the epitaph on Karl Marx's tombstone: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."<sup>56</sup> For Fulani, changing the world involves the ongoing creation of developmental environments—tools and results—drawing upon the most advanced approaches and insights into human development. No longer using "the master's tools" (race, identity, epistemology) but carrying out performances/pretending/play (an ontological shift, as opposed to an epistemological shift) Fulani's tools and results are indeed part of making a world in which we can all flourish.<sup>57</sup>

### **Omar H. Ali**

Omar H. Ali is an associate professor of African American and Diaspora Studies at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. A historian and ethnographer, his latest areas of research include postmodernism and the use of performance in poor and working-class communities. A former member of the Castillo Theatre artist collective, performing in New York City and Fort-de-France, Martinique, Ali is the author of two books on independent black politics and has served as an editor for the journal *Souls*. He recently wrote the narrative for the Schomburg Center's internationally acclaimed exhibit "The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World." Ali received his PhD in history from Columbia University and has been a Road Scholar for the North Carolina Humanities Council, a Library Scholar at Harvard University, and a Fulbright Scholar in Colombia. He has appeared on CNN, PBS, Al Jazeera, Telemundo, and NPR, among other news networks, to discuss the rising tide of independent voters in the United States and the twin issues of democracy and development.

### **Notes**

1. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.
2. *Ibid.*, 112. As Lorde notes, "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable." Lorde, 110-11.
3. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Press, 1983), xi-xii. Layli Maparyan described womanism as "a social change perspective rooted in black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem-solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people" (Layli Phillips, ed., *The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Century of Womanist Thought* [New York: Routledge, 2006], xx). Womanism offered an inclusive view; as Joy James and Tracy Sharpley-Whiting note, "[Walker used] the term 'womanist' to render the adjective 'black' superfluous for gender-progressive 'women of color,'" recognizing and creating spaces for those women of color seeking to empower "all

- people" (Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, ed., *The Black Feminist Reader* [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000, 5]).
4. Fred Newman and Lois Holzman, "The Practice of Method," in *History is the Cure*, ed. Hugh Polk and Lois Holzman (New York: Practice Press, 1988), 142-172.
  5. Lenora B. Fulani, "Race, Identity, and Epistemology," in *Postmodern Psychologies, Societal Practice, and Political Life*, ed. Lois Holzman and John Morss (New York: Routledge, 2000), 152, 156. For a discussion on the roots of creating the approach to human development practiced by Fulani and her colleagues, see Lois Holzman, *Vygotsky at Work and Play* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 21-44.
  6. See Omar H. Ali, "Lenora Branch Fulani: Challenging the Rules of the Game," in *African Americans and the Presidency: The Road to the White House* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 129-46; Erica Falk, *Women for President: Media Bias in Nine Campaigns* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Richard Carter, "Lenora Fulani, The Real Deal Among Independents," *New York Amsterdam News*(April 12-18, 2001).
  7. Transcription from Lenora B. Fulani presentation at National Action Network education panel (April 15, 2010, New York City); see video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQg7SniidD8>.
  8. Ali, "Lenora Branch Fulani," 129-46.
  9. *Ibid.*, 133; Omar H. Ali, *In the Balance of Power: Independent Black Politics and Third Party Movements in the United States* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 160; Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, and Unequal*, rev. ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 116-20.
  10. Newman passed away on July 3, 2011. For an example of one of their last collaborations and the performatory approach, see Fred Newman and Lenora Fulani, "Let's Pretend: Solving the Educational Crisis in America," All Stars Project, Inc., Special Report, New York (January 2011), 1-9.
  11. Lenora Fulani, "Fanon, Newman, and Class Psychology," East Side Institute lecture, June 1996, 9.
  12. Lois Holzman, who serves as the director of the East Side Institute, a research and training center in the cultural-performatory practice, has estimated that more than five hundred thousand people have been reached by its staff, or participated in its workshops (personal communication, January 20, 2011).  
See [www.eastsideinstitute.org/history.html](http://www.eastsideinstitute.org/history.html) and [www.allstars.org/programs](http://www.allstars.org/programs) for descriptions on programs.
  13. Lenora Fulani, *The Making of a Fringe Candidate, 1992* (New York: Castillo International, 1992), dedication.
  14. Fulani, "Fanon, Newman," 1.
  15. *Ibid.*
  16. For a biographical account of Fanon, see Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of the Oppressed* (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), 15-36; and Lewis Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renee T. White, eds., *Fanon: A Critical Reader*(Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 1-10.
  17. Fulani, "Fanon, Newman," 2.
  18. *Ibid.*, 3-4; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).
  19. Fulani, "Fanon, Newman," 5.



20. Ibid., 6.
21. Lev Vygotsky, *Mind and Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. Michael Cole et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).
22. For biographical information on Vygotsky and a detailed analysis of his developmental concept of the "ZPD," see Fred Newman and Lois Holzman, *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist* (London: Routledge, 1993), 5-9, 52-70. Newman [End Page 49] and Holzman offer a radical reinterpretation of this concept, challenging the dominant ways in which it is written about and taught.
23. Ibid.
24. Fulani, "Fanon, Newman," 9; Marx articulates this concept in the opening of his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* as "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please . . . but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." See David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
25. Lev Vygotsky, *Mind and Society*, 65.
26. See Newman and Holzman, *Lev Vygostky*, 1993.
27. Lenora Fulani, "Poor Women of Color Do Great Therapy," in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Racism and Sexism* (New York: Harrington Press, 1988), 111.
28. See Holzman, *Vygotsky at Work and Play*, 21-44.
29. Fulani, "Fanon, Newman," 11.
30. Newman's history is discussed in his publications with Holzman, including *The End of Knowing* (1997) and *Unscientific Psychology* (1996), and his own *The Myth of Psychology* (1991). For a synopsis, see "A Brief History of the East Side Institute" [www.eastsideinstitute.org/history.html](http://www.eastsideinstitute.org/history.html) (2010)
31. Fred Newman and Lois Holzman, *The End of Knowing: A New Developmental Way of Learning* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16.
32. R. D. Laing and A. Esterson, *Sanity, Madness and the Family: Families of Schizophrenics* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964); Thomas S. Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).
33. Daniel Friedman, *Toward a Postmodern Marxism* (manuscript in progress, November 27, 2010).
34. Fulani, "Fanon, Newman," 13.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 13-14.
37. This description comes from "The origins of social therapy" (The New York City Social Therapy Group, 2011).
38. Fulani, "Fanon, Newman," 14.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 14-15.
41. Lenora Fulani, "Race, Identity, and Epistemology," in *Postmodern Psychologies, Societal Practice, and Political Life*, ed. Lois Holzman and John Morss (New York: Routledge, 2000), 152.
42. Ibid., 158.
43. Ibid., 160.
44. See full description and scope of the program at [www.allstars.org/content/all-stars-talent-show-network](http://www.allstars.org/content/all-stars-talent-show-network).

45. Fred Newman and Lenora Fulani, "Let's Pretend: Solving the Educational Crisis in America," All Stars Project, Inc., Special Report (January 2011), 2. **[End Page 50]**
46. Fulani, "Race, Identity," 152. For an in-depth discussion of class identity in relation to revolutionary transformation, see Fred Newman and Lois Holzman, "All Power to the Developing!," *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* 3 (2003): 8-23.
47. *Ibid.*, 153.
48. *Ibid.*, 155.
49. *Ibid.*, 158.
50. Edmund W. Gordon et al., "Changing the Script for Youth Development," Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teacher's College, Columbia University, June 2003, 16.
51. "Bloomberg, Schumer, Gates Turn out for All Stars," *New York Amsterdam News* (April 29-May 5, 2004).
52. Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes of Racial Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 177-79.
53. See [www.socialtherapygroup.com/about\\_social\\_therapy/origins.html](http://www.socialtherapygroup.com/about_social_therapy/origins.html).
54. Lois Holzman and Rafael Mendez, eds., *Psychological Investigations: A Clinician's Guide to Social Therapy* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), xii-xiii.
55. Fulani, "Race, Identity," 162.
56. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 158; Fulani, *The Making of a Fringe Candidate*, 1992.
57. See Newman and Holzman, *The End of Knowing*, 24-26. I would like to thank Dr. Lois Holzman, Director of the East Side Institute, and Dr. Daniel Friedman, Artistic Director of the Castillo Theatre, for offering valuable—indeed, critical—comments on this article. Additionally, I would like to thank Professor Tara Green, Director of the African American Studies Program at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, for shedding light on aspects of black feminism as I began working on this article, and my dear friend Carrie Sackett for reading through an early draft.