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Now Available: 49.4, Black Performance II: Knowing and Being
October 16, 2019

Black Performance I: Subject and Method collects research that shows how performance can act as an optic and object of study. The authors’ diverse subjects reveal resonances of the past in performance in music and movement, poetry, media, art, museums, memory, and thought. The research in Black Performance II: Knowing and Being further demonstrates the ways performances in various genres contemplate and structure ways of knowing and ways of being as systems entangled in embodiments and critical interactivity. In this, women scholars identify performers’ diverse strategies for making meaning and remaking inherited knowledge. These scholars discover performance structures of Black feminist love in the work of various artists.

The performances reflect on new ways of being as much as the scholars who analyze them. Each performance also forges new ways of being that address how we understand, and perhaps feel, blackness, gender, transnational womanhood, community, sexuality, and history. The communities invoked develop common language and sensibility through aesthetics, speech, and writing. Several articles foreground the ways in which people work through ideas together in an enactment of community recognition. This occurs through relationships to form, through conversation, choreography, and writing. Melissa Blanco Borelli reveals Black transnational artists structure as radical presence through musical performance practices. Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson reveals dancers’ choreographic collaborative work founded on sharing spoken memories and stories as a process of “tenderness.” Shana L. Redmond experiments with collaborative and contrapuntal writing practices between Hansberry and Baldwin as negotiating a terrain of sound. Redmond explores the quotidian elements of sound as form—sound from the neighborhood as much as from music.

At times, the performers shape ideas with their audiences as interlocutor. In Aleksandra Szaniawska’s essay, Janelle Monae narrates queer possibilities via performances that find greater resonance before live and constructed audiences. In Rashida Braggs’s piece, our author as performer, addresses the nature of audiences’ hearing of history. Braggs brings performative ontology to the page to play with text as a conduit between thought, knowledge-making, performance, blackness, the body, music, and history. She recounts a performance she created as an investigation of Sidney Bechet’s performance of Gershwin’s “Summertime,” itself a layered enactment of historical consciousness. Braggs’s endeavor reflects the investigative and pedagogical directions of research as embodied practice.
Artist Delita Martin’s cover to this issue, "If Spirits Danced" poses a possibility echoed by our authors. With a quotidian boldness, the direct gaze of a Black girl in blue calmly engages and challenges. She ventures a hypothesis of lively possibility in her provocative titular "if" alongside an embedded invitation to do so, to dance in spirit and gesture.

For a limited time, read the introduction by guest editor Stephanie Batiste, and “Of Treads and Thunder: The Insurgent Listening of Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin” by Shana L. Redmond, for free.

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Blackness, Birthright, and the Battle for Harlem: Intra-Racial Conflict in Marvel’s Luke Cage Season Two By Nicosia Shakes
August 10, 2018

Since its premiere in 2016, the Marvel series, Luke Cage has used the comic book genre of storytelling to examine the impact of interlocking systems of racial, gender and economic oppression on Black Americans’ relationships to each other. In season one the show focused on the conflict between the heroes, Luke Cage and Detective Misty Knight and the villains, Cornel “Cottonmouth” Stokes, Mariah Dillard née Stokes and Cage’s estranged brother, Willis “Diamondback” Stryker. In season two, American-Jamaican antihero, John “Bushmaster” McIver enters the fray and disrupts what was previously an exclusively Black American battle to dominate Harlem.

Most reviewers have only briefly discussed this season’s subplot around intra-racial Black American-Black Jamaican conflict. However, the ethnic/national conflict in the storyline is one of its most crucial contributions to the series’ ongoing interrogations of Black diasporic experiences. In an interview with Angelica Bastién of Vulture, showrunner, Cheo Hodari Coker stated that he pursued this storyline because he saw it as an opportunity to recognize Jamaican contributions to the development of U.S. Black
popular culture (in particular, hip hop music) and explore different forms of race consciousness among Black Americans and Black Jamaicans. The fact that *Luke Cage* became a popular topic of discussion this summer among Jamaicans, is testament to the importance of exploring these transnational Black connections, including conflicts.

The show has received widespread praise for featuring the most Jamaican characters ever seen on a U.S. television show, as well as criticism from Jamaicans and non-Jamaicans for the clearly uneven accents among the Black American actors who played Jamaicans. Many viewers, like me, enjoyed season two, while agreeing that it would have been stronger aesthetically with better accent work and subtitling that accurately reflected Jamaican language. For others, the accents were completely unrepresentative of Jamaican speech and inexcusable. The discourses around intra-Black conflicts and hierarchies therefore operate within the storyline as well as the space of public opinion about the show’s Jamaican accents and limited casting of Jamaicans.

Critics of *Luke Cage*’s casting decisions have mostly focused on the producers’ oversights, without a larger effort to probe the mostly white-controlled U.S. television industry as a whole. As in the fictional storyline where Black people battle to dominate Harlem, white supremacy looms in the background as the initiator of intra-Black creative hierarchies in U.S. television and film. Some critics of *Luke Cage* have argued that the series has not focused enough on white anti-Black racism. I agree that there is room for stories that more closely examine structural racism in the U.S., such as gentrification in Harlem. However, the series’ current focus on intra-racial conflicts is also crucial to an understanding of anti-Black racism. I therefore want to offer the following insights: First, *Luke Cage* contains important commentary about white supremacy’s fundamental role in the characters’ intra-racial tensions. This is discernible in the backstory of the McIver/Stokes-Dillard feud, which involved the American Stokes’ collusion with white people to betray the Jamaican McIvers. In order to analyze the effects of anti-Black racism, we must not only examine its direct manifestations through white and Black conflicts, but also its latent impact on intra-Black relationships. Second, to engender a deeper conversation about the accent/casting controversy, we should assess the broader context of creative hierarchies in the U.S. television and film industries. This includes examining the historical misrepresentations of Jamaicans/Caribbeans, including by Black Americans. These misrepresentations are the root of the cynicism which many Jamaicans have for American producers. Here, the opinions of Jamaicans in the film and TV industries can add a crucial insight into their positioning within these industries globally. Both the series’ juxtaposing of Black American and Black Jamaican racial experiences; as well as the conversations about flawed accents and casting are important to assessing *Luke Cage*’s contribution to candidly highlighting ethnic/national conflicts among Black people. This is unprecedented on U.S. television. *Luke Cage* season two could therefore serve as a useful popular cultural reference for Black studies’ ongoing project to deconstruct Blackness in all of its manifestations, and question the limits of the discipline’s current emphasis on U.S. Black experiences.[1]

The turf war that defines most of *Luke Cage* season two is very similar to the civil war that takes place in its Marvel movie counterpart, *Black Panther* (2018). In both cases, the intra-racial battle to control physical space and military and socio-economic power indexes wider struggles for Black self-determination that have existed since the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. Harlem is an excellent place in which to explore these contentions given its centrality in Black/African Diasporic history as a main site for internal U.S. and global Black immigration during the twentieth century. Though its historical title, “The Black Mecca” is not often used today, Harlem remains significant to studies of Black diasporic mobilities.
Each of the show's major characters have staked a claim on Harlem in different ways. Following her murder of her cousin, Cottonmouth (Mahershala Ali) in season one, Mariah Dillard née Stokes (Alfre Woodard), has asserted that she is queen of Harlem and is on a mission to "keep Harlem Black," while John "Bushmaster" McIver (Mustafa Shakir) sees the control of Harlem as his birthright, which was stolen by Mariah's family. Detective Misty Knight (Simone Missick) and Luke Cage (Mike Colter) endeavor to keep Harlem safe from the criminals who would destroy it, namely Dillard and McIver. The main personal conflicts are between Dillard, McIver, and Cage, with control of the nightclub, Harlem's Paradise, serving as a prerequisite for control of Harlem.

Bushmaster—a moniker taken from his family's brand of rum—is a U.S.-born, Jamaican-raised don who heads Jamaica's main gang with plans to conquer the Black criminal enterprise in New York as well. Like Cage, he has superhuman abilities of strength and regeneration. He harnesses his power through a fictional herbal mixture called nightshade, and practices the Afro-Brazilian martial art of capoeira. The producers' choices to make McIver Jamaican (and not from an unnamed Caribbean country as in the comics), credit Afro-Caribbean naturopathy as the harnesser of his strength, and designate capoeira as his characteristic fighting genre indicates a conscious engagement with Black culture that is limited in the comics. These creative choices also underscore McIver's assertion of a Black identity that is very reflective of continental African influences in the Americas and a Black radical tradition forged within a Black majority context. As I discuss later, the different forms of Black consciousness articulated by the Jamaican and American characters are key to how their conflicts unfold.

Harlem's Paradise, Bushmaster Rum and the Stokes-Dillard wealth are John McIver's birthright since the Jamaican McIver and American Stokes patriarchs founded the businesses decades ago, before the Stokes family colluded with Irish and Italian gangsters to murder John's parents. McIver is not a classic villain; he mostly kills characters the viewers dislike, and his major objective is to enact vengeance on Dillard. Most accurately, he is the antagonist to Cage's protagonist, and the only character who can beat Cage in a fair fight. Unsurprisingly, he sees an affinity between himself and Cage, uttering more than once, "We cudda been bredren (brothers/friends)," and suggests that they join forces. Cage's humiliation at being bested by McIver and his obsession with distancing himself from him, ultimately leads him to almost strangle his antagonist in the final episode.

Eventually, Dillard is murdered by her own daughter and Cage becomes the new owner of Harlem's Paradise, which she has cunningly willed to him. He is about to meet with the Italian crime family and attempting to reconcile between his need to be Harlem's law-abiding hero and traversing the criminal enterprise that is linked to that place's power hierarchies. Meanwhile, McIver is back in Jamaica recovering from his defeat. His tragic flaw was that he underestimated his outsider status. Though he is American by birth, his Jamaican parentage and upbringing mark him as an alien. This is represented mostly in hilarious comments made by the Black American characters about Jamaicans, but this hilarity is accompanied by a more pernicious animosity. Essentially, McIver and his family become symbols for the othering of Jamaicans by U.S-born and raised Blacks, and in effect un-American Blackness. They also forcefully resist this othering.

In episode ten, the conflict between Jamaican immigrants and native-born Black Americans get articulated in an argument between Paul "Anansi" Mackintosh (Sahr Ngaujah), John McIver's uncle, and Mariah Dillard. Referencing the Stokes family's betrayal of his own, he declares that Black Americans are "lazy" and complicit in white imperialism. This is an insult commonly used by Africans and Caribbeans against Black
Americans. Dillard hits back: “Every Jamaican likes to talk that maroon shit!” and states that the country got “enslaved by the World Bank.” This is essentially a debate about which Black person is more liberated. Caribbeans’ history of Black radicalism was forged through resistance to slavery and British colonialism. Within this Black majority context, self-government is a major source of pride. McIver asserts several times his admiration for Jamaican historical icons like global Black nationalist leader, Marcus Garvey and Ashanti/Jamaican warrior queen, Nanny of the Maroons. The fact that he is incapable of distinguishing between his quest for vengeance on the Stokes-Dillard family and Jamaican anti-colonial activism, underscores that he considers his Black enemies to be tools of the larger white power structure.

Dillard, like Luke Cage and the other Black American characters, assert a Black consciousness borne from survival of direct domination in a white majority country, including slavery, Jim Crow segregation and current manifestations of anti-Black racism. Cage struggles between being a respectable Black man in America and releasing his anger at systemic racism, while Dillard’s experiences with colorism, sexism, and racism become key motivators in her mission to rule Harlem. She has chosen to cooperate with whites in order to accumulate wealth and power while “keeping Harlem Black”. Of course, the characters’ choices are not bound by their different expressions of race consciousness, and Black radicalism in Jamaica and the United States is far more nuanced than what is portrayed on the show. However, the Stokes’ betrayal of the McIvers in collusion with white people, is amplified because of the two families’ different ethnicities/nationalities. Dillard continues this racial betrayal when she conspires with Asian gangsters to frame John McIver for producing a deadly strain of heroin as part of her plan to get rid of him. Similarly, the feuds between McIver’s hero, Marcus Garvey, and other Black leaders went beyond ideology; it was also a contention between a native-born U.S. Black leadership and the influence of a foreigner, though not all of Garvey’s Black detractors were American. The “Garvey Must Go” campaign formed by prominent Black American men in the 1920s and the Black spies that infiltrated the Universal Negro Improvement Association worked parallel to and with the white U.S. government to have him imprisoned then deported – exploiting his foreign status.

Fans will likely sympathize with McIver, and many, including me want the character to return in season three. This might indicate the show’s successful exploration of the intersections of race, ethnicity, and nationality in Black people’s marginalization. However, the producers may not have expected that they would be accused of marginalizing Jamaicans through their casting choices and representations of the accent.

Luke Cage has inadvertently added another dimension to an ongoing debate about creative hierarchies among Black people in the U.S. television and film industries. An example of this is the 2017 controversy following Samuel L. Jackson’s critique of the casting of Black British actor, Daniel Kaluuya as the star of the American film, Get Out (2017), and Hollywood’s purported privileging of Black British actors over Black American ones. Jackson was called out by Kaluuya and others for being ethnocentric. For some commentators, his statement was also oblivious to the representational advantages Black American actors have, and the numerous chances they get to depict African and Caribbean people.

As an American TV show, it follows logically that most of Luke Cage’s actors would be American, and for the scenes filmed in Jamaica, Jamaicans were cast in speaking roles. However, the central Jamaican characters, most supporting roles and limited-speaking roles were played by Americans, and there were obvious inconsistencies in their accents. I disagree with the broad critical position some people have taken in
scrutinizing all of the non-Jamaican actors; and some of these criticisms border on cultural policing.[5] My own opinion is that while some accents were appalling, others like those of the actors playing McIver and his aunt and uncle (Mustafa Shakir, Sahr Ngaujah, and Heather Alicia Simms) were satisfactory or very good. Having had my Jamaican play produced in the U.S. with mostly American actors I know how difficult it is for Americans to sound Jamaican. I have also had to do foreign accents a few times as an actor. It is grueling, which is why the ideal is to cast native speakers.

There were open auditions for the speaking roles, including for the lead Jamaican character, John “Bushmaster” McIver. However, filming takes place in New York where there are many Jamaicans and Jamaican-descended actors, raising questions – particularly regarding the casting of speaking extras like the members of the Brooklyn-based Stylers posse. The presumed oversight generated a Twitter thread between disgruntled viewers, showrunner, Cheo Hodari Coker and Mustafa Shakir, who plays John “Bushmaster” McIver. This thread adds an important dimension to the controversy by displaying how viewers/fans spoke back to the producers and got responses. The viewers asked why the producers did not work harder to develop the accents and/or cast more Jamaicans. In their responses, Coker and Shakir emphasized the positive visibilities that Luke Cage has provided around Jamaica’s history of Black radicalism, including its discussions of historical figures like Nanny of the Maroons and Marcus Garvey. These responses appeared dismissive and were called out as such. Shakir and Coker subsequently apologized for the unintentional offense in their previous responses and emphasized their love and respect for Jamaicans. Consequently, each side seemed to be using different notions of what constituted proper Jamaican representation.

Many shows have been critiqued for flawed accents. However, there are racial-national implications when people of color are being depicted. For a long time, Hollywood and the TV industry have reinforced exotic notions of Caribbean people,[6] which the region’s tourism industry has also reproduced. This exoticism has roots in transatlantic slavery and colonialism, and Europeans’ racist obsession with consuming the Caribbean Other for economic gain, sexual pleasure and entertainment. The development of modern theatre and film throughout the Americas is marked by these racialized legacies that were most clearly manifested in blackface minstrelsy, and carnivalesque and popular theatre traditions that both subverted and reinforced stereotypes. The influences of historical racial caricaturing even appear in some Caribbean plays, films, and TV shows.

Most criticisms of Caribbean exoticism in the media have been directed at Hollywood.[7] However, the TV industry has arguably been more offensive. The random Jamaican characters on U.S. television, including shows produced by Black people, have usually bordered on, or displayed explicit caricaturing. This includes the character, Russell Montego on the Black sitcom, Living Single and the famous parody of Jamaican dancehall artiste, Shabba Ranks on the Wayans’ In Living Color. Jamaica also occasionally emerges as a punchline in standup comedy, like Chris Rock’s Netflix special, Tamborine (2018). The character of Lester Tibideaux on The Cosby Show, played by Jamaican actor/director/writer, Dennis Scott, is an exception to the rule because he was not the butt of the joke and Scott’s real accent added another layer of complexity to the role. Within this historical context, authentic-sounding accents come to serve as criteria on which to measure producers’ interest in the country’s complexities. Even actors who try but fail to develop good accents might be equated unfairly with those who intentionally distort it.
In the above-cited Twitter discussion, Shakir stated that the producers put significant thought into the Jamaican representations including trying not to “play into past stereotypes.” This wasn’t entirely successful, particularly in a scene where McIver misuses what seems to be an obeah ritual. However, in many ways Luke Cage subverts the norm of other American TV shows by creating fascinating Jamaican characters. The character of John McIver, despite the violence he commits, is emotionally layered and this nuance is accentuated by Shakir’s performance. Additionally, the show’s juxtaposition of McIver’s criminality with the respectability of his law-abiding aunt and uncle introduces a story of Jamaican immigrant ingenuity which is not usually visible in mainstream U.S. media. Coker is correct that the show also provides a glimpse into Jamaican history, with which most Americans are unfamiliar. Luke Cage also engages Jamaican language. The Jamaican characters’ code-switching between English and Patwa and use of distinctly Jamaican/Caribbean terms, indicates to me that the producers aimed to connect affectively with Jamaican/Caribbean viewers. But these transnational connections are fraught with tensions, buoyed by Americans’ relative cultural, economic and other privileges in global mass media. If they further explore the Jamaican element of the storyline in season three, this might provide an opportunity for Luke Cage’s producers to engage more profoundly with Jamaica, including through accent work and casting.

With the aim of obtaining a Jamaican actor’s perspective on the accent/ casting controversy, I spoke with Karl O’Brien Williams, a New York-based Jamaican actor and playwright who began his career in Jamaican theatre and film. Williams cannot represent the entire Jamaican acting community in the U.S., but his experiential insights are important. He didn’t audition for any of the roles in Luke Cage because he had another job. He is also unperturbed by the show’s accent/casting issues, because the Jamaican accent is hard to master, and he thinks by fixating on it critics risk reducing Jamaicaness to speech. We discussed structural factors that determine Jamaican actors’ visibilities globally, including casting networks, actors’ unions and color/racial typecasting; and the need for more opportunities for Caribbean writers, producers and casting agents in regional and global film and TV industries. He also stated that in the white-controlled Marvel Cinematic Universe, Cheo Coker may not be as powerful as his critics believe him to be. The conflict about creative authority is therefore fundamentally a clash about which Black people have the most real or imagined proximity to predominantly white-controlled power structures. It is the root of the McIver/Stokes feud in Luke Cage and of ongoing intra-racial ethnic/national/economic tensions throughout the world.

The previously discussed argument between Luke Cage’s characters, Mariah Dillard and Paul Mackintosh offers a glimpse into how unpacking ethnic/national conflicts, instead of ignoring them, can ultimately enable a more penetrating view of white supremacy as a global superstructure. When Dillard disparages Jamaica’s anti-colonial project in response to Mackintosh’s disparaging of America’s racial integration project it is primarily a retort to his efforts to shame her. However, at its core the insult asserts that no Black community/ethnicity is immune to white hegemony. As I write this, Jamaicans and other Caribbean people are confronting the rapid privatization of our beaches and sale of beachfront property to European hoteliers; in cities worldwide, gentrification is displacing mostly people of color; and the abuse of Black people in penal systems is globally normalized. There are emotional, psychic, and material stakes involved in a transnational understanding of Black experiences. This is why our intellectual project within Black studies to deconstruct intra-racial ethnic/ national conflicts and hierarchies is so urgent.

Notes
[1] As part of this project, the 4th Symposium of the Dakar Institute of African Studies held in Senegal this year, had as its first objective, the need to “consider the limits of the U.S.-centered Black studies model” and its geographic, and epistemological constraints.

[2] Misty Knight (Simone Missick) has outgrown the series in my opinion and needs her own show. Not only do we need a Black woman protagonist in a superhero TV show, she is one of the most compelling characters and often upstages Cage. The writers are obviously aware of this and poked fun of it in a hilarious dialogue between the two characters in one episode where they debated who was whose sidekick.

[3] I am aware that Bushmaster is the name of a type of gun, and has connotations within the rudeboy/gangster culture of the late 1970s to early 1980s in Jamaica. However, I don’t know whether this influenced the moniker, Bushmaster, which originated in the comics.

[4] They also do this through the character of Tilda Johnson, Mariah Dillard’s estranged daughter and owner of a herbal pharmacy.

[5] One of these is the notion that it is implausible for McIver to be a capoeira practitioner, which is of African/Brazilian origin, and that this is an indication of the producers’ lack of research into Jamaican culture. This undermines the work of the capoeira community in Jamaica and the character’s trait as a man who consciously grounds himself in transnational Black culture.


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Filed Under: Uncategorized

Black Liberation and the Abolition of the Prison Industrial Complex: An Interview with Rachel Herzing

September 6, 2016

This interview originally appeared in the independent, open-access journal Propter Nos.

True Leap Press (TLP): Hi Rachel, thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview. We are excited to have you as a contributor in this inaugural edition of Propter Nos. Our publishing collective thinks the specific timing of this issue is important to highlight, as it is set to be released in the closing days of Black August. Could you possibly explain what Black August is for our readers, and why it is so important for people to recognize today?
Rachel: Black August is a call for reflection, study, and action to promote Black liberation. Its roots go back to California prisons in the 1970s, during a period of sustained struggle and resistance against racialized violence against Black imprisoned people, especially those calling for Black liberation and challenging state power. Ignited by the deaths of Jonathan and George Jackson in August 1970 and August 1971, and honoring others who gave their lives including Khatari Gualden, William Christmas and James McClain, a group of imprisoned people came together to develop a means of honoring that sacrifice and promoting Black liberation. While August is significant because of the deaths of the Jackson brothers, it is also a month with many other significant moments in Black history in the United States including the formation of the Underground Railroad, Nat Turner’s rebellion, the March on Washington, and the Watts uprising, to name just a few. So there was an idea that this could be a time that imprisoned people in the California prison system could use for reflection, study, and to think about how to strengthen their struggles. During the month, people wouldn’t use radios or television, would fast between sun up and sun down, and practice other measures of self-discipline. Eventually the commemorations during that month were taken up outside of prisons, too. Malcolm X Grassroots Movement became the stewards of the commemoration outside prisons, although many people honor and celebrate this legacy and the roots of the practice. Black August is important to commemorate (and I hope that the variety of ways that people commemorate that legacy can be nurtured and encouraged), in part, because it connects imprisoned organizers and revolutionaries with communities outside of prisons that are struggling for similar things. It's often the case that imprisoned communities are meant to be invisible, and essentially cut off from non-imprisoned communities, especially communities of struggle. I think that is an important reason to reflect, as well as to study and honor the sacrifices Black revolutionaries have made over centuries and recommit ourselves to the struggle. Black August provides one important vehicle for doing that.

TLP: On this note, how did the contemporary prison and policing abolition movement emerge? What are some of the major theoretical and historical connections existing between abolitionism in its current iterations and these earlier articulations of the Black/Prisoner liberation struggle just mentioned?

Rachel: Well I think the periodization probably depends on who you talk to. So since you’re talking to me, you're going to get something pretty specific [laughter]. I think it also depends on what you mean by “contemporary.” In my mind, there is a long through line of people fighting particularly for the abolition of imprisonment that goes back to Eastern State Penitentiary, which was the first modern day US prison. That was in Philadelphia, 1829. Almost immediately, the Quakers, who played a role in building this institution to encourage reflection, understood that this was a mistake. And Quakers ever since that time have been on the frontline of advocating for the abolition of imprisonment. So there is that old-timey version of it, which links back to the development and the build up of penitentiaries as institutions of containment and human control.

If you jump ahead to the 1970s and 1980s, you begin to see organizations that are fighting for a moratorium on prison construction, but also groups advocating actively for the abolition of imprisonment. For instance, there is a book that came out during this period called *Instead of Prisons*, originally published in 1976, by a group called Prison Research Education Action Project (PREAP). At that time, they were looking at a national prison population that was 250,000. They thought surely this is a tipping point, we need to take action now. And so, as we know, the imprisoned population in the US is now nearly 2.3 million. So this struggle dates back, then, to the seventies and eighties, and became somewhat quieter in certain periods, but never completely went away.
1998 is another important year: the founding Critical Resistance (CR) conference was held in Berkeley that year. That conference did some work to reinvigorate the concept of abolition, and not just as a thing to organize around intellectually, but to organize campaigns and projects around, as well. It also introduced the concept of the prison industrial complex (PIC) into a more popular consciousness. While that conference didn’t form some kind of modern abolitionist movement, it did reignite an energy that may have been less prominent or less active just prior to it. That conference was still very focused on imprisonment and it wasn’t until 2001, when Critical Resistance East happened that there was a really strong attention toward thinking about the abolition of the prison industrial complex as a whole. That was kind of at the forefront of what that conference was all about.

I think today, and since becoming an organization in 2001, CR plays a particular role in advocating for the abolition of the entire system—of the entire prison industrial complex—rather than just being a prison abolition organization. CR was really at the forefront in the early 2000s as an organization advocating for the abolition of policing, too. Nowadays you hear a lot more people talking about policing itself as something to fight, as opposed to resisting its function within the PIC or even just its relation to imprisonment. It is more common these days for people to think about ways to live without some idea that law enforcement is a kind of natural feature of our world.

So I think there is a through line there from early Quaker opposition to imprisonment to the contemporary movement for PIC abolition. And like all movements, there are some ebbs and flows to it, but those are some of the key markers that I would use to talk about its development.

TLP: What exactly brought you into the abolitionist movement? Do you identify as an abolitionist, or is this one aspect of a larger, overarching framework which informs your praxis?

Rachel: I think it is both. I definitely identify as a prison industrial complex abolitionist. I do that work because I believe in the liberation of Black people and I think that it is one of the foremost ways to see that broader goal fulfilled. Without the abolitionist movement and without a commitment to ending mass criminalization, containment, and death of Black people, I don’t think Black liberation is possible in the United States—or elsewhere, frankly. So I come to this work as a survivor of sexual harm and law enforcement harm who doesn’t believe the PIC makes me any safer, and as somebody who is committed to the liberation of Black people.

TLP: You alluded earlier to the differences between a politics of gradualist police and prison reform and a prison-industrial-complex abolitionist praxis. What are your thoughts on framing political struggle in terms of either “abolition” or “reform”? Are there not limitations to framing the conversation in this way?

Rachel: I don’t think it’s very useful to position those as binaries. I think it’s more about different end games. Back in the early 2000s, Critical Resistance started using a framework that a lot of people are using now, and almost never credit CR by the way (which I hope just means it has permeated the common sense and not that people simply don’t credit CR [laughter]). We started saying that the distinction between abolitionists and reformers (or people who either have abolition as their end goal or reform as their end goal) is that reformers tend to see the system as broken—something that can be fixed with some tweaks or some changes. Whereas abolitionists think that the system works really well. They think that the PIC is completely efficient in containing, controlling, killing, and disappearing the people that it is meant to. Even if it
I have never understood or participated in moves toward abolition that didn’t take steps of some sort. A reform is just a change, right? So there can be negative reforms and there can be positive reforms. You can make a change that entrenches the system, improves its ability to function, increases its legitimacy, so: a non-abolitionist goal. Or, you can take an incremental step that steals some of the PIC’s power, makes it more difficult to function in the future, or decreases its legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

I think the false distinction between reform and abolition assumes that there is some kind of pure vision that doesn’t require strategy or incremental moves. If it is possible to get everybody to open all prison doors wide today, fantastic! If it is not, then what can we do to chip away, chip away, chip away so that the PIC doesn’t have the ability to continually increase its power or deepen its reach and hold on our lives?

TLP: What do you see being the most significant overlaps between: the past two decades of abolitionist organizing, “Black Lives Matter,” and the movement for Black lives in its current phase? I know it’s a messy question, because there are folks at the forefront who are situated both ideologically and physically at the intersections between each. Maybe a better way to phrase it is: do you see any tensions or contradictions between the abolitionist work that has unfolded over the past two decades and the emergent Black-led political forms taking shape today?

Rachel: First off, I want to be very clear: I cannot speak for Black Lives Matter. I’m not a member of Black Lives Matter, I’m not involved in that organization, and do not have the ability to speak on their strategy or form. But I know there is a distinction between them and the Movement for Black Lives, which is a network of nearly sixty Black-led organizations across the US that came together to meet first in Cleveland, and then out of that, have continued to work together. And Black Lives Matter is one of those organizations. The Movement for Black Lives recently released this policy platform, titled A Vision for Black Lives, with more than thirty policy pieces in it.

I guess I would say a few things to this question: First, I think that what we are seeing emerge today—what I would loosely call a Black protest movement, which includes a lot of these organizations and formations just mentioned—would have actually been impossible to come out in the way that is has (to have the foundation to stand on and to have people move in the way that they have) if there hadn’t been growing movements against imprisonment and policing in the United States over the previous two decades. I don’t know if there is a single set of politics within Black Lives Matter (and I know it’s not true within the Movement for Black Lives) that compels an abolitionist orientation towards their work. I think there are some people who lean that way and I think there are some people who lean other ways and I think there are a variety of political perspectives and orientations that I’ve seen emerge from this broader network. I guess, at various points, I’ve been surprised that so little attention has been paid to the decades of work (well actually centuries of work, but recent decades in particular) done by Black people and Black organizations to fight the violence of policing in the United States; especially when the protest movement jumped off. I understand that people participating in that protest were fueled in no small part by outrage and in just complete disbelief at the scale and scope of the violence, and that people are being activated and
drawn out for the first time. There are some who felt compelled to action right away and weren’t necessarily connected to those other organizations or movements.

I think as the past two years have unfolded I’ve seen, particularly in the Movement for Black Lives, some of that leadership and some of those organizations doing good study, thinking about other Black liberationist platforms, thinking about the histories of Black struggle around a variety of other issues and really broadening their understanding of the violence facing Black people. That is, not only issues surrounding the prison industrial complex, but also the economic, social, and political features of it. I don’t know that there is a direct relationship between the previous decades of work—and again, I mean prior work along the spectrum from abolitionist to moderate reform—and these new Black protest formations. I think there is probably overlap of people, probably some overlap of thinking, and probably some overlap of strategy. But I don’t know if they are in direct relationship to each other. I would say that while there can be no doubt that Black Lives Matter has had unprecedented cultural significance and impact on US popular culture (on US media and the cultural life of people in the states and globally), it is less clear to me what the organizing impact will be. And in a place like Oakland where I live, there are strong organizations with decades of strong organizing going back to the Panthers and before that set the stage differently than what might be true for other places that have a different history. So I think the longer term impacts of this most recent activism on the power of the prison industrial complex over Black lives (and the lives of people of color and Indigenous people more generally) has yet to be seen. That said, I think there has been a change in the conversation. I think there is no doubt that there is a really significant cultural impact, even though some of it is still in the making.

TLP: How do you understand the prisoner hunger strikes and other prisoner-led activisms that have occurred over the past decade in relationship to such mobilizations against policing and criminalization in the so-called “free world”?

Rachel: I think it depends on how you define mobilizations in the free world. I think there is a strong movement outside of prisons and jails. Sometimes it gets more attention and sometimes it gets less attention, but I think it has sustained. I don’t necessarily think that is the same thing as this Black protest strain. Again, there are overlapping people and overlapping players and that sort of thing, but I have yet to see (which again, isn’t to say that it couldn’t happen) an engagement or activism beyond direct action that has meaningfully connected to more sustained organizing around imprisonment.

So I’m not sure that it’s fair necessarily to say “they’re not doing a good job,” because I’m not sure that’s their goal, right? I think the goal is a much more media focused one. With that being said, I think there is what I would call (and this is me showing my age and crabbiness about social media) an overreliance on social media which has meant that a lot of people are just left out. I personally have the luxury to make choices about being on social media or not and the choice to opt out of certain types of feeds of information and conversations. But there are many people who are living in cages who don’t have access to social media. And even for those who do, they might not have access to it in the same real-time that people living outside of cages do. A lot of that organizing, a lot of that conversation happens over Twitter, happens via Facebook, happens via Instagram. So there are potentially millions of people who don’t have a voice in the conversation. Which is not to say that all imprisoned people are not finding ways to participate. There are many who are finding ways to engage. It’s complicated to organize with imprisoned people and there are all kinds of structural and institutional barriers to doing that. Like I was saying, the system is set up to make people who live in
cages invisible and disappeared. So it’s not without all kinds of challenges. And again, I don’t know necessarily if that’s their intention or that’s what the mobilizations against policing are set up to do.

But to return to the movement that is meant to do that and is engaged in all of that: the 2011 and 2013 prisoner-led hunger strikes in California really re-energized the movement outside of prisons and jails and activated a lot of people. The strikes gave an injection of energy. Part of that was the inspiration of the leadership of people who are imprisoned in solitary confinement, living under the most excruciating conditions that human beings can imagine. They managed to study together, build bridges across the racial divides that are perpetually stoked by the prison regimes, and were able to engage people outside of cages to take up this call to end indefinite solitary confinement—to get people in conditions that they could actually live and fight from. The work of people imprisoned inside of Pelican Bay, Corcoran, High Desert, Folsom . . . wherever they are living and working, really, was a shot in the arm for the outside movement. And I think that’s sustained and spread. California isn’t the only place, and California wasn’t the first place. You also see Alabama, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Washington, and others. In these places you see imprisoned people using this last resort, their own bodies, to highlight just how excruciating and torturous these conditions actually are.

Pieces like the agreement to End Hostilities that came out of the California prison system and was then taken up by other communities across the state and nationally is an important organizing tool. It refocuses attention to the fact that people are always struggling inside. There are also imprisoned people who are behind the elimination of the use of sterilization on people in women’s prisons, working to increase visitation or organizing against prison and jail expansion or construction. Imprisoned organizers are important players in all of these campaigns and many more.

TLP: So, to shift gears a bit, how do you suggest we think about the relationship between struggles against the aforementioned aspects of state-condoned racist domestic warfare within US borders and the numerous declared and undeclared imperialist wars abroad?

Rachel: There can be no doubt that there is a direct relationship between war-making at home and war-making abroad. While I do not use the word “war” lightly in the domestic context (and I know its articulations are different here than in theaters of combat in places like Afghanistan or Iraq), I do think that it is an appropriate term to use regarding the genocidal practices at home—going back to the first attempts to exterminate Indigenous people from this land, to the ongoing structural and actual physical violence used to eliminate peoples’ access and opportunity to have meaningful, healthy lives. There are some concrete overlaps. There are overlapping technologies, for instance. The weaponized drone that was recently used to kill Micah Johnson in Dallas has been used in Iraq; surveillance technologies once tested out in such theaters of war are used regularly by domestic law enforcement; data collection methods used there are also used here; etc.

I think it is oversimplified to just say: “Oh, well did you know the military is giving extra equipment to law enforcement?” That’s true and that’s a scandal. But that is merely a sliver of where the overlap of interests and warfare practices is happening. The people who are designing war to take place in spaces outside of the United States are influencing the tactics of law enforcement here in the United States. I think you can look at the borders as one of those places where that stuff coalesces strongly. However this is also happening in cities, in counties, and rural areas across the country. There’s also
One way this has played out dramatically is with the creation and growth of the Department of Homeland Security since September 11th and the fear-mongering around terrorism that’s used to clamp down on the domestic setting. One small example of this that we have been fighting in Oakland is a program called Urban Shield. It is 48 hours of war games simulations and trainings for SWAT and other special law enforcement forces. The scenarios are incredibly racist, really sensationalized, and millions upon millions of dollars of my county’s money go into these war game competitions. Simultaneously, they hold a trade expo, so you can go and get the latest night-vision goggles, the newest guns, the latest tracking softwares or stingray technology, or robots and drones. In terms of its cultural impact, in this period of increased public attention on the policing of protest you’ll also see things like t-shirts with things like images of protesters in cross-hairs for sale at these tradeshows.

TLP: While we are on this topic of repression, counterinsurgency warfare, and police spying, could you speak a little bit on the politics of movement security? I don’t mean this as a reiteration of criminological notions of security and securitization. I simply mean, are there certain principles, organizing strategies, or ways of collectivizing political labor that you suggest be embraced, at both organizational and larger popular levels, which can stave off intrusion from the state or the counterrevolutionary aspirations of liberal civil society?

Rachel: This is definitely not my area of expertise [laughter], but I’ll tell you what I think [more laughter]. I think organizers should always operate on the assumption that they’re being watched, that their communication is being monitored, and that they likely will encounter people intent on provoking people and sharing information to discredit and disrupt organizing, particularly organizing that challenges state power. That said, I think being smart and cognizant of that is different than being paralyzed and paranoid.

My sense is that strong organizations are a good line of self-defense. Strong organizations, strong coalitions, and strong networks. Trying to go it alone, as individuals or as a handful of people is always more risky than being connected to an organizing infrastructure and a base. But people make different choices about what their tactics require and what they think is strategic. I feel quite certain that when things get more powerful they get more closely monitored. That balance between moving forward toward political goals and using common sense caution is really important. I think calling out and not cooperating with law enforcement always makes really good sense to me [laughter]. Calling out visits by law enforcement, not cooperating, and then letting people know that it’s happening—those kinds of things are extremely important. Having consistency in how people get to enter spaces, when people get to participate in decision-making, those basic organizing guidelines used by many organizations for a long time, is also important.

TLP: So in the spirit of Black August, we have pulled three quotes from her autobiography that we hope to solicit your opinion on. The first is as follows:

I have never really understood exactly what a “liberal” is, though, since I have heard “liberals” express every conceivable opinion on every conceivable subject. As far as I can tell, you have extreme right, who are
fascist, racist capitalist dogs like Ronald Reagan, who come right out and let you know where they’re coming from. And on the opposite end, you have the left, who are supposed to be committed to justice, equality, and human rights. And somewhere in between these two points is the liberal. As far as I’m concerned, “liberal” is the most meaningless word in the dictionary. History has shown me that as long as some white middle-class people can live high on the hog, take vacations to Europe, send their children to private schools, and reap the benefits of their white skin privileges, then they are “liberals.” But when times get hard and money gets tight they pull off that liberal mask and you think you’re talking to Adolph Hitler. They feel sorry for the so-called underprivileged just as along as they can maintain their own privileges.

What comes to mind after hearing this quote?

Rachel: I think it’s an interesting point. In the movement against the prison industrial complex we have struggled a lot with ... umm ... liberals [laughter]— some of the most stalwart reformers where reform is their end game. I also think there is some interesting wiggle room there. What is necessary to fulfill their commitment to justice, and equality, and human rights? I mean, if there is a kernel of that there, then part of our work as organizers is to amplify our shared interests, to compel them in that direction, and also to make that compelling. That doesn’t mean we always succeed or that their class interests, racial benefits, gender benefits or other sources of power they want to protect might not ultimately play them one way or the other. But thinking about where can we exploit that kernel of shared interest is interesting to me here, rather than just giving up and writing them off entirely. Of course we need to be cautious of what they are recommending and what they think is “practical” or “pragmatic.” But it’s our job now to push on that and to make other suggestions.

TLP: Here is the second quote:

Constructive criticism and self-criticism are extremely important for any revolutionary organization. Without them, people tend to drown in their mistakes, and not learn from them.

Rachel: Yes. I couldn’t agree more [laughter]. So yes, what Assata said [more laughter]. I worry a little bit, in this period, about a lack of intellectual rigor and lack of discipline, as well as accusations of working “too slowly” or “not understanding” the sense of urgency. You know, we saw this similarly around the rise of the anti-globalization movement which I also think is a direct antecedent of what we are seeing in terms of Black protest today. Similarly, I would say that about Occupy. I would call that a direct antecedent. I don’t think we would be seeing what we are seeing now without those previous movements.

TLP: Like a tactical antecedent? Or something more ideological?

Rachel: I think both. But I don’t mean a one-to-one overlap, or like: this led directly to this. But more in terms of some of the orientations towards organizing and the ideological parallels. So definitely not a one-to-one, but I think influenced by quite certainly.
I think in these moments where there is a heightened investment in direct action as the primary way to move, the pacing and the urgency and all that is required to keep up the pace sometimes makes it challenging to engage people in longer term planning, or study, or assessment. Because people are really feeling like there is no time to do that. That said, if you don’t engage with decades of previous organizing, if you don’t engage with where you are falling down, then you will make the same mistakes over and over. You will make mistakes made a month ago. You will make mistakes that were made ten years ago. You might make those anyways, but they might be more productive mistakes if you’ve made a commitment to studying movement history. The last thing I’ll say about this is that it’s also fucking hard. Nobody wants to confront the stuff they’ve messed up on, or the things they think they’ve done wrong, not to mention talk about their vulnerabilities. I think that what Assata is describing is very different than a callout culture that’s like “you’re fucked” or “let me just describe all the ways that you’ve messed up.” I think what she’s talking about is a disciplined assessment and reflection within organizational settings on where we need to improve, where we need to tighten up, and where we need to be stronger and smarter.

**TLP:** This point on the pace and tempo of struggle is so crucial! I am glad you mention it. There truly is, as you say, this kind of militant presentism (and ahistoricity) unique to the so-called “Left” that is as troubling for movement-builders as the gradualist impulse of liberal antiracist reform. This point also makes for a good transition into our final quote from Shakur, which goes as follows:

> Just because you believe in self-defense doesn’t mean you let yourself be sucked into defending yourself on the enemy’s terms. One of the [Black Panther] party’s major weaknesses, I thought, was the failure to clearly differentiate between aboveground political struggle and underground, clandestine military struggle.

**Rachel:** I believe in self-defense. I think that self-defense and self-determination are really key concepts if Black people want to get free. But also for all people who want to be free. In my mind, there is a certain romanticism of a very fixed and narrow conception of self-defense that I think actually comes from, well . . . actually . . . reading Assata, for instance [laughter]. And that is not to criticize her or people who read her. It’s more to say, what does self-defense look like in 2016, versus in 1969 or 1973? In my mind, self-defense requires an understanding of shared fate. It requires an understanding of how what happens in El Salvador or what happens in Palestine or what happens in the Philippines impacts my ability to fight for my own liberation. Some of that has to do with the nature of US imperialism. Some of that also has to do with what we have learned, over many decades, about the power of internationalism generally, and Third World solidarity in particular.

What is required from our organizations or movements in relationship with these sectors internationally needs to be a determining force in how we shift power. Building a sense of how we defend our own abilities to live healthy, meaningful, powerful lives in relationship to people in similar conditions around the globe is a way of thinking about self-defense that I am interested in exploring further. That includes how we fight US imperialism, or how we fight for food security, or how we fight against large-scale gentrification and the march of capitalism. Toward that end, I think this idea of not being sucked into defending ourselves on the enemy’s terms is important. Building these networks I’ve been describing is one way of determining our own course. It allows us to be proactive instead of only defensive. It allows us to say: “this is what we want to
build." In a lot of ways an abolitionist vision is an example of this kind of proactive vision. It's not just: "I want to eliminate imprisonment" or "I want to eliminate the cops." It really is an affirmative ideology and practice. Affirmatively, this is the world I want to live in, therefore I need to take these steps to create the conditions that make that world possible.

The download link for the full issue can be found here.

Rachel Herzing lives and works in Oakland, CA, where she fights the violence of policing and imprisonment. She is a co-founder of Critical Resistance, a national grassroots organization dedicated to abolishing the prison industrial complex and the Co-Director of the StoryTelling & Organizing Project, a community resource sharing stories of interventions to interpersonal harm that do not rely on policing, imprisonment, or traditional social services. The following interview was conducted by the True Leap Publishing Collective.

Filed Under: Uncategorized

#BlackLivesMatter, Labor Unions, & Presidential Politics: A TBS Conversation With Adolph Reed, Part 2. By Jonathan Fenderson, TBS Associate Editor

August 26, 2016

In part two of our conversation with Adolph Reed, we discuss everything from #BlackLivesMatter, policing and labor unions to Black Studies and presidential politics. As expected, Reed delivers more of his devastating criticism, while advocating for a renewed commitment to union organizing as the only way forward.

Fenderson (JF): I want to stick with you on this question about neoliberalism, race and democracy and get your take on #BlackLivesMatter’s relationship to the Democratic candidates and the disruption that happened at the July 2015 Netroots Nation Conference. You said that you felt like the disruption suggested that the movement had some leverage or that it was, like what Bruce Dixon argued, leveraging itself for the authority within the Democratic Party and its neoliberal corporate political agenda.[1] How do you make sense of the presence and value or possible absences within Black Lives Matter, in general, vis-a-vis your idea of the kind of fraternal twins of Black authenticity and neoliberalism.

Adolph Reed (AR): Well, I’m going to say two things just to be clear. One is that when I saw Bruce’s argument, I wrote him immediately and thanked him for making it in public because I think he’s absolutely right. The other thing is I started to get involved around the edges of the Sanders campaign, and eventually became much more involved than around the edges. My main connection is through the Labor for Bernie thing but, to be clear, I’m not going to respond to this as an operative of the Sanders campaign.

JF: Okay.

AR: I don’t think much of Black Lives Matter, frankly. I’ve thought of it on the more positive end as a sort of Black Occupy Movement. At the other end of the continuum, I don’t like the politics of the people who have put themselves forward to speak in the name of Black Lives Matter. I don’t think there’s a movement there. I think there are
episodic protests, and I think there are people who don’t even necessarily consider themselves to be hustlers but who have come to adulthood and to form a sense of themselves in the neoliberal environment, in which Black political discourse suffers from lack of careful and rigorous analysis.

So I’ve been struck, for instance, that Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors—I’m not so sure about Opal Tometi, but I think that she’s done it on other occasions, too—have seemed to, consciously or not, understand advancing a political cause as identical with advancing an individual brand. I saw an interview with Garza where she was insisting that it’s important for people not to change a hashtag. Her explanation to why it was important was incoherent, but you could track it back to the claim that these three women are the three people who started #BlackLivesMatter. That construct just says to me that there’s a fundamental misunderstanding of politics. Like, who started the Black Power movement? Who started the Civil Rights Movement? Who started the CIO? Who started the Underground Railroad? Who started the Montgomery Bus Boycott?

I was on a panel in Chicago a few months ago where this came up, and I made the point that it’s in the nature of a 21-year-old to be stupid. I was stupid and took myself too seriously when I was 21, just like 21-year-olds do now. But the difference was that there were older activists around who were rooted in political work, and we understood we needed to learn from them. Actually the people who we’re talking about who are sort of claiming the mantle of Black Lives Matter aren’t 21-year-olds. Some of them are pushing 35. Someone like McKesson is a Teach For America [TFA] pimp; and is a proud TFA pimp. I’m not on Twitter, but people have sent me stuff that he’s tweeted. At one point a couple weeks ago he said some bullshit about how moments of social change can produce great innovations, and the two examples that he offered were the [Black] Panthers’ free breakfast program and charter schools.

One of the things that I’ve noticed for a long time as part of the atrophy of politics, is its become impolite to ask people what they represent and who they are actually speaking for. For me, that’s one of the most important things about the trade union movement. When somebody starts talking, you always know “who” and how many “whos” they actually have as a real constituency.

What I’ve been increasingly struck by with #BlackLivesMatter is that there’s no connection whatsoever. Their constituency is all about getting on TV. I did think, a couple things actually, [initially about] the moves against Sanders. One is it makes sense to go after Sanders because he’s the one whose politics would actually be closest to you and the one most likely to listen. The other thought was that they’re agents of the Clinton campaign, and I think there’s some of both things going on.

JF: I want to pick up on this point you were making about labor unions because obviously we’re in a climate where labor unions are always on the defensive and under attack. But at the same time, we’re in a climate where people are having these deep questions about policing, police violence and state violence. You also have this tension between Black elected officials and police unions. For example, Mayor Rawlings-Blake decides she’s not going to run for reelection, so it seems to me like there’s this tension between the Black political class and police unions. So I’m wondering how do those of us who are invested in labor wrestle with this question about the police unions. Of all the unions, the police unions are the only ones who have not been taking major hits. Their power has continued to amass during this neoliberal era while most unions are fighting for their lives in some way. So I’m wondering how we wrestle with this whole issue of police unions.
AR: Well, yeah, that’s a good question. I’d say first of all, in a lot of places police unions and firefighters have been taking hits. It’s funny; I got arrested in Atlantic City in the summer at a demonstration. Of course, the cops didn’t want to arrest us, but the Atlantic City Police Union is in their own contract negotiations, and the city is trying to take from them. The same with firefighters, who in a lot of states, by and large, have been on the cutting-edge of progressive politics. People who run police unions are fucked up in a lot of places, but I always say that it’s better to have a bad union than to have no union.

I think the challenge is to try to alter the culture of those police unions, and one way to alter the culture of the police unions is to alter the approach to policing that has become dominant in the last 40 years or so. Going to community policing models would be a big move in the right direction. To move as far away from that occupying army high-tech model that the LAPD pioneered, and is now the norm. Also to diversify police forces obviously has something to do with it, but it is not an answer. If you look at these killings it is just about as unlikely that Black and Latino cops will be found guilty as it is for white cops. In that sense, cop is a race basically. Fight the union when the union needs to be fought, but fight the union over the right things. Any union, and especially a union that’s a guild, is going to have as a default position the protection of its members. But the International Brotherhood of Electric Workers would not protect some incompetent electrician who causes a house fire. There needs to be an internal reform in police unions. That’s the only way it’s going to come, frankly, with a commitment to altering how the police function is interpreted and understood. That, obviously, has to mean real civilian control of police.

JF: One of the things that has unfolded here in Ferguson and St. Louis, and a lot of people don’t know this, is the base for a lot of the activity around Ferguson was stemming from the striking fast food workers in the Fight for $15 with SEIU.

AR: Ah, okay.

JF: In St. Louis, they were actually in many ways the people who were out there first and most frequently.

AR: Wow. That’s interesting. You sure as hell wouldn’t know that from the coverage, would you?

JF: Yeah, so my question to you is about the Fight for 15. I know you’ve written about living wages, particularly in Class Notes, and labor organizing has always been a central part of your political agenda, so what’s your take on the Fight for $15 and the fast food workers? Now they’re, I think, expanding it to other low-wage workers.

AR: Right. Yeah. Well, I’m not opposed to any of that. To be honest, my sense is that there’s—like with the Walmart campaign—there’s a fair amount of smoke and mirrors around the fast food campaign. The Fight for 15 is…yeah. I can’t oppose it, right?

JF: Right.

AR: And it would be a good thing to win.

JF: Let me add a caveat, too.

AR: Yeah.
JF: I'm asking this to you also based on knowing your experiences at UNC in the food worker strike.

AR: Right. Well, yeah, and I think that's important. It's funny, I went back to UNC in the mid '90s to give a talk, and the same fight was still going on. Look, all workers need representation and need a voice at work. What a lot of people, especially young people, don't get is that unless you're covered by a union contract, the only rights that you have on the job are rights against discrimination. But enforcement of anti-discrimination law is so weak at this point that you may as well say that the only rights that you have on the job are connected with a union contract. Students sometimes get freaked out when they hear that the boss can just fire you because he didn't like the way you look. He doesn't have to have a reason. That's what at-will employment means. In that sense, I certainly support those initiatives. I think the little bit of hesitation that you hear in my voice is that I'm not completely comfortable with a political approach that focuses activism on raising the standard of the really, really fucked-over workers up to the floor of the customarily not-quite-so-fucked-over. But I'm not saying that I would oppose it. This might help me make the point. When I did that article in Harper's year ago, I had a back-and-forth with Harold Meyerson in The American Prospect about it. What struck me about that was he was pressing the Fight for 15 and the fast food stuff as a way of making an argument that the Democratic Party had somehow changed radically behind my back since 2010. It's just striking to me.

In a way, you can look at this as accepting a large-scale politics that has the impact of driving down the ceiling of working people’s expectations. And what we get in exchange for that is a commitment to patch up and maybe raise the floor a little bit. And for me the point is to figure out how to try to build a broad base. Starting out with and focusing on improving the circumstances of the worst off, while it's a good and important thing to do, it's kind of more like social work than it is like politics because you don't get from there to building the broader base.

Now, I know there's this ACORN/SEIU understanding of organizing. I think Frances Fox Piven believes this too, that fighting for the little things will somehow magically convert into the fights for the big things. I just don't think it works that way, and I think the evidence is on my side. Nonetheless, I support those campaigns. I'm not going to criticize them. I do remember, though, about the Walmart campaign, there's a guy, a long-time trade union activist who was a very sharp guy. I think he's working for the West Coast Longshoremen, now the ILWU, who wrote a really interesting document about this that made the point. The Walmart campaign has gotten nowhere because it's all flashy SEIU kind of public relations stuff. He suggested that they would probably have gotten more, not just bang for the buck, but more impact, if they'd targeted trying to organize a medium-sized regional supermarket chain, but that would not have been flashy in the same way as the Walmart campaign.

I guess the punch-line for me would be the efforts that have or pursue an institutional traction are going to be what will help us develop the kind of movement that we need to be able to do this stuff in a more systematic way.

JF: Let me shift to ask you a question as a political scientist, in the middle of election season. How do you understand these polls? Do they have meaning, or are they just simply fodder for 24-hour news stations?

AR: I don't think they mean very much, except in the self-fulfilling prophecy sense, right. If you have good poll numbers it helps you raise money. It helps you to get volunteers, so it's better to have the good poll numbers. I don't think anything polls means anything,
frankly. One thing I have been talking about—in fact, I talked to a local about this when I
was down in New Orleans—is the logic of an election campaign and the logic of a
movement-building organizing campaign are, in important ways, exactly opposite of
each other.

At the trivial level, when you are working in an election campaign, door-knocking is a
practice where you want to drop the literature and move as quickly as you can to the
next building. So if the old lady comes to the door and wants to invite you in and give
you tea and cookies and talk about her grand babies, you absolutely don’t want that to
happen. But in an organizing drive, that is exactly what you want to happen, because it
is all about building deep connections with people.

That also applies to how you think about the message. In an election campaign, once
you file, the most important objective is to get as many votes as you can. It doesn’t
even matter whether it is a protest campaign. The objective is still to get as many votes
as you can. What that means is that the pressure is to appeal as widely as you possibly
can, to connect with people on evanescent levels that don’t go into too much detail
about the program, which is the kiss of death, especially if you are an insurgent
candidacy.

With an organizing campaign you want to do exactly the opposite. You want to build
relationships, explain the worldview that your effort is connected with and have a back-
and-forth with people. What happens in efforts like the Jesús “Chuy” García mayoral
campaign [in Chicago] and to some extent the Bernie Sanders campaign is that those
two approaches and sets of objectives co-exist and can bump heads.

What appealed to me about the Sanders campaign in general is that I obviously like the
stuff that he is saying and what he stands for, but what got me especially interested in it
to the point of thinking that I needed to get involved with it in some way is that it became
a vehicle for bringing together the people in the labor movement, people with standing
and who represent stuff in the labor movement who are themselves ready to try to,
once again, push in a direction of creating some independent working class politics.

There is a Labor Party connection. You probably already may have seen that National
Nurses United endorsed Sanders. I mean they were part of the Labor Party. The
president of the Amalgamated Transit Union is on board. He was a Labor Party guy
before he was president. Mark Dimonstein who is the president of the American Postal
Workers Union is also a Labor Party activist. There are enough people around with that
sort of commitment to building a working class politics.

The Labor for Bernie thing is bringing it together. There is a list of more than 30,000
trade unionists who have signed up for Labor for Bernie. No matter what happens in the
campaign that is a base we can go back to. That’s what got me into it. I have always
been an “in for a penny, in for a pound” kind of guy. I’ve never been the sort to join an
organization at the top. I’ve always thought that standing and voice in an organization or
an undertaking ought to be a direct function of the work that you do.

JF: This is interesting because I wanted to ask you about Donald Trump, and how he
continues to tap into this interesting base. Some people would argue that he’s tapping
into a right-wing populism in some ways. Somebody like a Ronald Walters would say,
Trump is tapping into a sentiment of white nationalism. I know you are particularly
surgical when it comes to dissecting Black intra-racial politics. I am wondering how you
read the same kind of critique when it comes to the white working class and race or
how you interpret this energy around the white working class.
AR: In the first place, I don’t actually know how Trump’s popular support breaks down. I know that he is definitely trying to make appeals that sound populist. I suspect that his base of support or his core base of support is the social base of fascism. That is like the downwardly mobile middle classes, basically, and people who are concerned with maintaining a sense of social respectability or whatnot. There is no shortage of people who will be susceptible to scapegoating. That’s true of the working class, that’s true in the Black working class, it’s true in the working class as much as it is anywhere else, because that is the nature of politics that people have come up in.

This is another reason that I think the labor movement is so vitally important, because the challenge, again, is to get an alternative interpretation and alternative message out there. I think there is a percentage or an element within the American society who are fundamentally committed to racism. There is also probably a bigger population that is open to racist arguments but who don’t necessarily set their clocks by being racist. I think it’s strategically important to recognize the difference.

I think the challenge or the objective for us is to build a base that is as broad and deep as we can get without giving up any principles. Especially in left circles that have their roots ultimately on a college campus someplace, there is an inclination to treat “the movement” like a frat. You have to show that you are worthy to belong, by embracing all of the right positions, or the correct positions, on a number of more or less arcane issues. Like not calling a transgender person, “tranny,” for instance, or not to use “Indian,” when the proper usage is “Native American.” To me that has always seemed like a “palace politics,” at most.

A lot of people expect a movement to look in its embryonic stages how it would look once its fully formed. But part of politics is bringing people along and altering people’s views through the solidarity of participating in a common struggle. In that sense, I see the importance of trying to find ways to appeal to people who have [different] views on any number of issues. There’s a need to find the points of solidarity and use the solidarity as a foundation for expanding a relationship to bring people along on these other backward views. Does that make sense?

JF: That makes perfect sense. That’s the nature of mobilizing people politically; finding the point of solidarity where you can move them to your side.

Let me shift the conversation to academia and Black studies. There is an emergence of cultural studies in the U.S. academy, which has arguably shifted from a discourse around Blacks to more abstract conversations about race and representation. Due to this we have witnessed a proliferation of attempts to engage or theorize race politics in cultures in ways that may delink the issues from the specifics of Black life. You are somebody who has always talked about material politics and race, so I am wondering what you make of this new academic discourse.

AR: That’s a good question, too. You know, going way back, some of us had the suspicion back in the 70’s that the turn to Pan African studies was a way for, I know this is going to sound tribal, a way for Africans and West Indians to get the Black studies jobs without having to know anything about the United States. I think there is an element of that going on in Cultural Studies too. Mainly Brits. So now you don’t need to know anything about the Black American experience. It’s like you’ve got a one size fits all kind of explanation. I have also been struck by the shift in the focal point of who Black Studies scholars think they are in conversation with.
I have been struck for quite some time now as well about the fact that so much of the scholarship in Black Studies hinges on a small handful of moves, that have to do with showing that Black people resisted and had autonomy, family and community. This is the reason that I have been finding it much more helpful to read stuff that was written in the 50’s and 60’s and 70’s because it was less likely to be connected to this pro forma, by the numbers interpretation. Because my question about that is “How about if you just assume that slaves resisted and sharecroppers resisted, under the principle that where there is oppression people will find ways to resist somehow. Or rather, how does the scholarly discussion look if you determine that you don’t need to prove the existence of group resistance anymore? That [also] opens up the other problem of what counts as resistance and what does not, and that’s what gets you to the cultural studies issues.

Or [how does the scholarly discussion look if we] don’t need to prove that Black people sought autonomy. Because in the first place, it’s not clear if they did. You are turning the population into a ventriloquist’s dummy, people sought a lot of stuff and autonomy is an abstraction, [as is] family or community. So there is a question as well, “Why does all of the scholarship keep trading on the same theme over and over and over?” One answer is, they do it because they do it. It’s like a bandwagon effect and it’s easier than thinking. It also stems from the sense that we are still somehow fighting against the Stanley Elkins “sambo” thesis, which is reactive among other things, and no reputable historian has retailed the Elkins thesis in nearly half a century.[3] The sexuality stuff gets stirred in and this other stuff gets stirred in so there is this element of giving props to previously unrecognized Black people who did important stuff that we should stop to honor. It’s like an awards convention. Again, the focus isn’t on trying to deepen knowledge and understanding of the complexities of the Black American life as it has evolved, in relation to its evolving context in the last few centuries.

I definitely think that the cultural studies turn is bullshit. I’ll just be blunt with it. I just think it is absolutely bullshit.

JF: It’s interesting too because I think that there’s this way that identity politics are a central part of this kind of cultural studies turn. The logic of let’s find the most marginalized aspect of one’s identity and raise it up is emerging in the scholarship in the same way that you see it emerging in the political discourse.

AR: I think that is absolutely right. I think it is the same because the practices are the same. That’s what drives me absolutely bonkers. Increasingly it seems that the people who are doing this stuff in the academy or in the academy pretending to be elsewhere understand that to be politics. In the same way that Alicia Garza and those others understand political action and self-promotion as being identical. I don’t think they are capable of seeing any difference. In that sense you talk about the cultural triumphs of liberalism. If everything is display of the self, then from one perspective that just seems like the neo-liberal utopia. I think you are right. I don’t think there is any difference.

I think intersectionality is part of it, too. Ken Warren, an English professor at the University of Chicago, told me that he is pointing out at the beginning of his grad courses that he doesn’t want to hear anyone talking about intersectionality because there is no such thing. And he’s right about that. There is no such thing. It’s another one of those alternatives to explanation that sounds like it makes sense at a level of abstraction that is high enough that you don’t have to think about what it would mean in concrete everyday practice. At that level it just sounds like a version of schizophrenia.

I think I made this argument in a couple of places, maybe in the intro to Class Notes, that the notion emerged as a way of trying to finesse the problem of essentialism in
standpoint theory as people like Patricia Hill Collins articulated it. But it doesn’t resolve the problem, all it does is multiply the number of essentialized identities. It’s kind of like the mixed race notion or the idea of being biracial. Some people have actually advanced—probably not in a while, but when that stuff had its moment in the sun in the 90’s—that this was a way to get beyond racial thinking. No, all you have done is add more races to the mix.

**JF:** Let me shift really quickly, barring Black critics on the right like Shelby Steele and Thomas Sowell, you have been one of the most prominent thinkers, maybe even the only one at your level, to explicitly critique what has been called the racial brokerage model, in much of Black cultural, political, and intellectual work and so at the least your criticism generates a necessary self-consciousness and at most an enduring crisis of representation, yet it is not entirely clear that this critique has been taken on and might in fact constitute an epistemological third rail in Black political and intellectual life, where do you see the Black intellectual or political world in terms of its collectivist assumptions or general self-consciousness of its place and role?

**AR:** It’s a very good and important question. I mean there are other people who are kind of raising that critique. I think I may know most of them. For instance, Ken Warren’s book, *What was African American Literature?*, was very smart. All of us who are doing this kind of work have the same complaint. It’s also an artifact of what the other side, I’ll just say for now, sees as its audience. I cut my spurs in politics in a different kind of tradition, but it seems to me to be a fundamental mark of a lack of seriousness and lack of principle, when you just pretend that the critiques haven’t been made and just keep rehearsing the same lame crap and over again.

In the 70’s I didn’t go see the Black exploitation movies that had the pretensions to be something. Every few months during that period, it would look like some film had come out that had plumbed a new depth for the genre, so I would just go and see one, sometimes with my friend Alex just to get a sense of how much worse the genre had gotten since the last time I looked. I think it bottomed out with something called, “The Black Gestapo,” but that just might be when I got to the point where I got with the Spike Lee movies and said, “Okay, I’ve done enough of this.”

I guess the sum line that I would draw under it is a lot of the stuff that’s going on in the field now is almost openly unserious intellectually. I guess to connect with your question, the chicken-shit aversion to engagement with actual intellectual debate is just … Even with what’s happening to the universities these days, these are still soft jobs that we have and it seems to me the one justification for having them is to do intellectual work with some seriousness. If they can’t do that…Truck pull up and just take them all to the cotton field.


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Filed Under: Uncategorized

Immigration, Ethnicity, & Black Political Futures: A TBS Conversation with Christina Greer & Candis Smith By Chryl Laird and Jonathan Fenderson
April 14, 2016

In 1965, two landmark pieces of legislation were passed that fundamentally changed the state of Black America. Most well known of these two pieces of legislation is the Voting Rights Act, which prohibited racial discrimination in voting and, when properly enforced, ended what was almost a century of systematic disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South. The other, lesser known, piece of legislation that fundamentally altered Black America was the Hart-Celler Act. Named after Democratic Representative Emanuel Celler of New York and Philip Hart, a Democratic Senator of Michigan, the Hart-Celler Act ended the national origins quota system that anchored U.S. Immigration policy since at least 1921. Hart-Celler essentially opened the country’s borders to immigrants from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean. These immigrants ultimately changed the racial makeup of the country, and simultaneously altered the American political landscape. At the same time, within Black communities the growing presence of Black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean has deep implications for the state of Black America.

In this TBS Conversation Christina Greer and Candis Smith discuss the shifting nature of Blackness in the United States. Using Greer’s Black Ethnics: Race, Immigration and the Pursuit of the American Dream (Oxford, 2013) and Smith’s Black Mosaic: the Politics of Pan-Ethnic Diversity (New York University Press, 2014) to anchor the
conversation, the respective authors explore the complex terrain of Black intra-racial politics. What does it mean to be Black in the United States in 2016? How have immigration and ethnicity changed our notions of Black identity in recent times? And what implications do these changes have for Black political futures in the United States?

Chryl Laird: There have been a lot of discussions about the shifting nature of Black America in scholarly circles, and in broader Black counterpublics in the United States.[i] Obviously, both of your respective works are concerned with the ways that these shifts in Black America impact the nature of Black politics. Besides the obvious matter of the growing Black immigrant population, what do you think is the context that provides the spark for these conversations to emerge within the last decade or so?

Christina Greer: I remember there was this constant conversation about Colin Powell when he was being tossed around as a possible presidential nominee or a vice presidential candidate. I noticed the way people spoke about Powell as a political figure, about being a son of Jamaican immigrants, and this excellence that he possessed. He was framed in ways that I didn’t see people talk about Jesse Jackson, necessarily.

Then obviously, this discourse emerges again when Barack Obama gets elected. In my book I argue, if Obama were from Detroit, and his mom was from Duluth, I don’t think that many people would see him as this stellar figure. Especially if his mom was not from Kansas, and his dad was not from Kenya. Even within the continent, there is a different way that people see Blackness and Africanness. Things may be different if he was from the Congo or if he was from Nigeria, or another country that is not necessarily seen in the same light as Kenya. So that is one way that we can look at our political figures.

I was also thinking about the work of Waters, Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Rogers—who is the lead political scientist to kick this discourse off—and I just thought that this conversation was incomplete.[ii] We have had decades of Caribbean migration, but we have also had a solid five decades of African migration. Our work is essentially taking a snapshot in the 21st century and asking, what will it look like for people who do not have the same exit option, or for people who came here for particular financial gain or not, either as refugees or doctors? African immigrants are an incredibly diverse group of people from an incredibly diverse set of countries. Why are political scientists not looking at all three groups—Black American, Caribbean and African? The political science literature had not done that, up until our work. Some economic professors had, but for the most part, everyone was still fascinated with the relationship between Caribbeans and Black Americans.

Candis Smith: Also Christina, this probably comes to your mind in a totally different way than mine because you spent a lot of time in the Northeast, whereas I was basically raised in the South. There you are either Black or you are White. And now perhaps you might be Brown [because of the fairly recent influx of Latinos to a number of Southern cities, like Durham, NC]. As oddly as this might sound, I do not remember if I was aware that there was ethnic diversity among Black people. I think the diversity among Blacks did not really hit me until I got to college. This is something that we both talk about in our books. Going to college, you get a sense of your own identity, and everyone else is working out their identity, too.

At places like Tufts and Duke, you see a lot of children of Black immigrants and Black immigrants, as well. Sociology has been exploring this for decades. It is political scientists who are always a little behind on certain issues. In college, I said, “Oh, wait.
We should learn more about this." Then you learn people have been talking about this, but most of the people who have been talking about it, one, are talking about Caribbeans and two, their focus is in the Northeast, in New York City, specifically. I think there is definitely a need to broaden both the ethnicity standpoint as well as the geographical standpoint of studying ethnicity among Black folks in the US.

**CG:** I think that is a really important point that is relevant even to the forthcoming work of scholars like, Cory Gooding or Derron Wallace.[iii] Both of them are working on interesting geographic locales of Blacks and Caribbeans, but the African piece is still missing. I agree completely with Candis. The Northeast experience is very different than the West Coast experience that Cory Gooding is examining or the London/New York experience that is the focus of Derron Wallace’s work.

When I got to Tufts, I said, “Okay, so there is the Black student association, which is the Pan-African Alliance. There is the Caribbean club. There is the African club.” Then there are these ways the duality plays out, when some students are making sure people know that they are not Black American. Then there is another interesting identity question when you realize that even certain Black people that you just see as Black see you as something different and possibly even something lesser.

Bringing it back to the scholarship, both of us obviously lean heavily on Michael Dawson. He talks about African Americans but offers no definition of who he is referring to.[iv] There is a very large immigrant population, historically and present day, in Chicago, which is the center of his locale.

**CL:** This is a good point. It’s interesting, because you both are bringing up the university experience. That actually was my second question, but I want to give you space here to elaborate even further. Both of your books start with this collegiate experience. What is it about the university space in particular that makes evident the intra-racial diversity of Black America? I recently read Ta-Nehisi Coates’ book, *Between the World and Me*, where he calls Howard University “the Mecca.”[v] It was a place of intra-racial diversity that Coates never experienced before. What is it about the university space, do you think, that really does that for people?

**CG:** First, the college setting is a defined and contained space. Secondly, undergraduate students are at the moment in their life when these questions about identity are becoming really poignant and clear. Going to a school in Boston, a city that is oftentimes inaccurately labeled, as the most racist city—and I say inaccurately because I think all cities are racist—you have a Black versus White dichotomy. On campus your professors are going to make assumptions about Black students. In addition, certain students are able to use their ethnic background—which often translates to a different class background—in ways that can alter their Black status and make them everything but last place. Lani Guinier writes about it in *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy*. [vi] She argues that it’s not that Caribbeans and Africans are stellar students or that they excel better than Black American students, although they are disproportionately represented in, say, the top 25 schools. But, in fact, Black American students are doing just fine in the college setting. Instead, as I point out in the book, we have to pay attention to immigrant selection. When you look at Black Americans, we have A through Z. We have the entire spectrum. When it comes to Caribbeans and Africans, you have select populations that have social networks, financial means, and political connections. They represent only a small subset of the entire group.

Then that group becomes, as I argue, an “elevated minority.” They will never be model minorities like Asians, but they become an elevated minority held up against the
stereotypical, non-hard-working Black person, in a college setting or elsewhere. I think it is an unfair assessment. We are comparing small groups of people who have come here for various reasons; some are incredibly wealthy, some are refugees, and some are somewhere in between, with 10th-generation Black folks who are trying to make it.

CL: I want to follow-up with you Christina, because you brought up the concept that you talk about in the book, “elevated minority status.” Your book, Black Ethnics is built on this idea, which seems to pivot around class and social mobility. Can you explain the concept to us and give us a sense of how class may have impacted or factored into the different conclusions you draw about Black American, African and Afro-Caribbean workers and unions? Are their differences about ideas of work, discrimination, and opportunity actually rooted in points of national/regional origin or is it class that is shaping their respective outlooks?

CG: When defining the elevated minority, I argue that even though Caribbeans and Africans are seen—and possibly see themselves—as a notch above Black Americans, who are perceived to be in last place, Caribbeans and Africans in the U.S. will still never be model minorities. There still exists this dynamic where everyone is trying not to be in the Black category, including Black immigrants. I used the union in my research as a space that controls for class. I did not want to compare cab drivers, doctors, hair braiders, nannies, and tax accountants. I wanted everyone to essentially have the same job.

I hypothesized that Africans would be the most excited to be here, Caribbeans would be in the middle with a “win-some-lose-some” outlook, and then Black Americans would be the least invested in this concept of the American dream.

What I found was, yes, indeed, Africans were the most invested in working hard and doing well. Black Americans were actually in the middle, where on the one hand, you can be a professor, or you can be doing 25 to life over weed charges from when you were 18. Then you had Caribbeans, who were the least invested, because they often argued, “I got here at the same time as somebody from Asia or somebody from Europe. Why are my life chances different? There’s something about this Black skin.”

The class piece is important because everyone, in my study, was controlled for class. Everyone is highly educated, but they have disparate opinions on how they are treated, and also how they see themselves moving through the American system.

CL: Candis, I want to shift to talking conceptually about “diasporic consciousness,” the central theme in your book. We were wondering if you could explain the idea for us, but then also distinguish, in your opinion, the differences between “diasporic consciousness” and “Black consciousness.” Particularly because there are some scholars who might argue that “Black consciousness” has always been diasporic?[vii]

CS: My notion of “diasporic consciousness,” incorporates what Chrissy is talking about. On the one hand, Black folks from all sorts of places recognize that there are intra-racial and ethnic differences among Black people, and their political interests—their concerns that correspond to that particular identity—may be in conflict with someone else in the same racial group but in a different ethnic group. At the same time, you also recognize that within a racialized social system, people see you as Black, and that means something.

On the other hand, I think that some Black immigrants may be considered to be an elevated minority, but this elevated status is still constrained. You are not going to somehow be un-Black. If you are a Black African or a dark-skinned person from the
Caribbean, you cannot work your way out of Blackness. Diasporic consciousness is really just about keeping those two ideas in mind. It's an attempt to encompass the intra-racial differences that have emerged, that may give way to potential conflict. While also recognizing that, even with this intra-racial difference, race and racism still situates people in the same boat. And as a result, how do the different groups behave politically and think politically while balancing these complexities.

CL: That makes sense. And what about the second part of the question, regarding the differences between “diaspora consciousness” and Black consciousness?

CS: I am trying to make a concerted effort to think about the multiplicity of identities that we hold at the same time. Those identities do not always play nice with one another. Sometimes they play well with each other and the interests are similar, and so we think we should do similar things within the political realm. Sometimes they diverge. What happens when, for example, you have #BlackLivesMatter? It does not matter if you’re Amadou Diallo or if you’re Trayvon Martin or if you’re Eric Garner. You’re gone, because you are in a Black body.

On the other hand, we might think about immigration, and African Americans might be pretty ambivalent about immigration. What does immigration mean for African Americans economically, versus someone who is a first or second-generation Black immigrant? It means something totally different. That could be a point of intra-racial conflict. “Diasporic consciousness” is an effort to capture the complexity of ideas and interests that Black people have nowadays.

CL: You are both talking a lot about conflict and coalition, points of tension and solidarity, across the Black populations within the US. Can you talk more about, how African and Caribbean immigrants have altered the nature of Black politics and Black political behavior? Because for example, someone like Adolph Reed may argue that there have always been these political points of conflict and coalition, tension and solidarity within Black American populations.[viii] Do you think there is something uniquely different in the Black politic in the US as a result of Black immigrant populations being present?

CS: That is tricky. It always depends on the time or historical context. We might think about when Cubans first came to Florida. There was a particular moment in time, when Cubans first came to the US, and were separated by race because of Jim Crow laws. That is a particular context when historical conditions dictated if people want to have a coalition or not. At that time ethnic identity was an important identity. Then we see another shift in immigration when immigrant populations shrunk, and no one really cared if you were a Black immigrant or not. You were just Black. That is another particular context. I think it is tricky to say, because it depends on historical contexts. For some reason, Mia Love keeps popping up in my head, as a result of your question.[ix]

CL: From Utah?

CS: Right. There is a particular context where her being the children of Black immigrants means something in our contemporary moment. Maybe 10 years ago or at some other point in time, it would not have meant much. I think there is something to be said about the moment in time and the extent to which having a particular ethnicity is meaningful. In other words, contexts influence the way Black politics in particular goes.

CG: It is dog whistle politics. Because if you are Mexican American and you say, “I’m a child of immigrants,” many people might think, “Ugh, you’re here taking jobs.” If you are
a Black person right now and you say, "I’m the child of immigrants," the response might be, "Oh, see! You are not like those bad Negro protesters in St Louis." All of a sudden, you are immediately in the elevated category of "good Negro."

I think Candis’ point is valid in the sense that when you think about the leadership of Black America, primarily male, from previous decades, many were Carribean, but it was not advantageous to have that as your primary identity. Stokely Carmichael’s not necessarily talking about being Caribbean. Neither were Harry Belafonte, Shirley Chisholm or Sidney Poitier.

When you think about these people who were the voices and the consciousness of Black America, they were immigrants. At the time, it was unnecessary to talk about immigrant identity, because the numbers were smaller. I think we can start these intellectual conversations about the intersections of race and ethnicity. Hopefully we are strong enough to have these conversations without them becoming divisive.

CL: With the last question I want to put both of your work within the contemporary context of race and class politics within this country. As you both know, there are very popular struggles on both the labor and racial fronts. There is the Fight for $15 and a union among striking fast food and low-wage workers, and there is also the #BlackLivesMatter movement against state violence and police brutality. And recently, groups like the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100) in Chicago, the Organization for Black Struggle (OBS) in St. Louis have connected the two fights, arguing that racial justice and economic justice are actually inseparable. Based on your work, how do you see these movements impacting or shaping Black identities in the United States, intra-racial politics, and Black political futures more broadly?

CG: Candis touched on this earlier. I use older names, but I have a small footnote in the book that says, when we think about Abner Louima, and Amadou Diallo, and Rodney King—the three most well known victims of police brutality from the ’90s—police did not stop and say, “Where’s your dad from? Just to make sure before I shoot you.” In those instances, it does not matter what your ethnic background is or where you are from. I think what we have seen is that cops do not care. Your Ghanaian exceptionalism or your Jamaican immigration status cannot protect you against a white-supremacist society. Though some believe their immigrant status could make them separate from Black Americans or different, and more special, and less susceptible. I think people are finding such beliefs do not really play out when tested.

I’m hoping that these movements can actually draw in all Blacks in America, because your voluntary immigrant status cannot shield you from the fact that we’re in a moment right now where Black bodies are under attack.

CS: A couple of things. First, I totally agree with the point Chrissy is making. One of the reasons why I wanted to write this book was to interrogate this idea among Black immigrants and their children, that issues around racism and social (im)mobility stem from culture or hard work. What we see emerge eventually is recognition that there is a racist system at work. If you are a person who recently arrived in the US, it doesn’t take you very long to recognize that there are severe structural constraints on your opportunities. That fact says something about the society.

To the question about labor and race, I think we need a little bit more data. And I’m saying that as I keep in mind some of things that I hear middle-class Black people saying, like, “Oh, well, why do you work at McDonald’s?” Yet at the same time, I think there are some instances when the class divide means almost nothing, like in the face
of police brutality. I’d be interested to know more about if there are more class divisions now on economic issues than before. I don’t know.

CL: Thank you both for talking with us. It was really insightful. You both are doing important work.

Notes


[iii] Cory Gooding is Postdoctoral Fellow at Bowdoin College, who earned his PhD in Political Science at UCLA. Derron Wallace is an Assistant Professor of Education and Sociology at Brandeis University. Both scholars are working on monographs that explore race, ethnicity and intra-racial politics in major metropolitan cities.


[ix] Mia Love is the U.S. Representative for Utah’s fourth congressional district. Born to Haitian parents in Brooklyn New York, she is the first Black female Republican in Congress.

**Christina Greer** is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Fordham University. Her research and teaching focus on American politics, black ethnic politics, quantitative methods, New York City and State politics, campaigns, elections, and public opinion. She is currently conducting research on the history of African Americans who have run for the executive office in the U.S. Dr. Greer received her BA from Tufts University and her PhD in Political Science from Columbia University.

**Chryl Laird**, Assistant Professor of Political Science and African American Studies at Saint Louis University, specializes in American politics, race and ethnic politics, political psychology, and experimental and survey methodology. She received her Ph.D. in Political Science from The Ohio State University. Her research was awarded the Midwest Political Science Association’s Lucius Barker Best Paper Award for Investigating Race and Politics (2011) and the American Political Science Association’s Best Paper Award in the Race and Ethnic Politics section (2014).
Candis Watts Smith is Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She received her PhD from Duke University. Her research interests focuses on American political behavior and Racial and Ethnic Politics. Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to answer research questions, her work has appeared in journals like the Annual Review of Political Science, The Journal of Black Studies, and Politics, Groups & Identities.

Ferguson, the Black Radical Tradition and the Path Forward by Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua
August 26, 2014

Can't you feel it? Feel the temperature dropping? Feel the icy winds blowing? It's winter in America. Spring and fall seem to have enveloped summer. The chill comes sooner and lasts longer. It's winter in America. There's a blizzard coming. The first frost has already fallen, in Ferguson, Missouri, of all places. Ferguson has ripped the veil off. It is now clear for the world to see how the U.S. plans to deal with its black internal colony.

It's getting dark; it's nearly midnight. Yes, repressive episodes will continue to increase in frequency and grow in intensity. It's nearly midnight. However, we should not despair. Enveloped in the darkness, the repressive U.S. regime of racial control has been exposed by the black light of African American youth rebellion and more importantly, through their defiance we can see the silhouette of a new era emerging. Don't fear the dark. Dawn begins at midnight; midnight is “the first minute of a new day.”

I am of course referencing Gil Scott-Heron, the Black radical griot, second-generation political rapper (Langston Hughes and Oscar Brown Jr. first generation) and self-proclaimed “bluesician”. Our children are maturing in Ferguson; they are not only challenging the State, but as importantly, they are also defying the decrepit civil rightsers. A new movement is being born in the darkness of Ferguson, Missouri. The new reality, the new nadir has established the structural conditions for the birth of a new movement.
We need to supply the consciousness. “Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it” according to Frantz Fanon (Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* New York: Grove Press, 1969, 206). Each generation creates new organizations, associations that address the problems they confront, that speak their language; that express their style and articulates their analysis and understanding of the path forward. The NAACP in the early 20th century, the National Negro Congress during the Great Depression, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the 1950s, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in the early 1960s, the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s, etc. This process of generational organizational formation appears to be occurring before our eyes. However, it is the dark of night, so we cannot see clearly, but however dimly, it does seem that in Ferguson, Missouri, Black generation Xers are discovering their mission.

Am I glorifying the looting, burning and indiscriminate shooting? No! Do I condemn it? Do white Americans condemn the actions of the Sons of Liberty? Do I condone it? I neither condemn nor condone it. I recognize it as an expression of working class African American youth, men and women, struggling to find their voice and discovering that actions speak louder than words. The Ferguson rebellion is an inchoate manifestation of the roiling turbulent dark water of African American resistance to white supremacy and capitalist exploitation. Will it become more? Will the young activists become politically conscious and organized? Will the youth whose dogged strength has kept the rebellion alive transform themselves into radicals and their struggle into a battle for power? It’s unclear; therefore, I don’t condemn it. It’s too soon to tell what it means in the flow history. However, professor Ashley Howard reminds us that what’s been called riots are merely the tactics of the most marginal and alienated sectors of Afro-America. Ferguson is inspired by the same conditions and in embryonic form harkens back to Harlem 1935, Los Angeles 1965, Miami 1981 and Los Angeles 1992. At this point it is less destructive. Perhaps, it is a more organized manifestation of African American urban rebellion. Possibly, it signals the maturation of urban working class Black youth.

I know this seems like evasion. The reader is thinking, if you mean to defend it, just do so; stop playing liberal public intellectual word games. I assure you I am not. I don’t condone the looting, burning and shooting because it promotes anarchy, is a losing tactic, and does not flow from a coherent strategy for liberation. However, like it or not, what’s called crime is generally not a question of morality, but rather a question of political economy. As Karl Marx argued, “crime” is often the first confused gestures of an oppressed class or people repudiating the legitimacy of the status quo and creeping toward a more profound resistance. My opposition to looting, burning and indiscriminate shooting is political, not simply moral. My concern is with preserving the lives and health of African Americans and our allies, not with protecting the property of the most predatory sectors of capital–convenience stores, payday lenders, and retail merchants. Despite its contradictions, in the darkness of night in Ferguson, Missouri, a new Black liberation movement may be emerging.

### Shattering Liberal Myths

However contradictory and confused the actions of working class Black youth in Ferguson are exposing a number of myths.

**Myth 1: Reconciliation.** The myth of racial reconciliation is promoted by African American liberals but has its origins in distractions the African National Congress
foisted upon the black South African masses to hide their betrayal to global capitalism. We don’t need racial reconciliation, what we need is the transfer of power and a redistribution of wealth and resources, in a word reparations. The only “conversation on race” that’s worth having, is a discussion about reparations, why, how and when!

Myth 2: Electoral politics. Ferguson is 67 percent African American, 14,297 Blacks live there out of a population of 21,203, yet only one of five city council persons and none of the seven school board members are Black. Appallingly only 12 percent of the population voted in the last election. The town seems ripe for black liberal ethnic pluralist politics. However, there is this hard knot of an inconvenient fact. African Americans’ role in the economy, status in civil society, position in the polity, and representation in the culture has stagnated or regressed at precisely the same moment as the number of Black elected officials has grown to record numbers. Unlike the 1970s and early ‘80s Black elected officials can no longer be depended upon to raise issues of police brutality (http://www.theroot.com/articles/politics/2014/08/ferguson_what_are_black_politicians_doing.html?wpisrc=slipad). This contradiction should disabuse those presenting ethnic pluralist electoral politics as a panacea.

Myth 3: Diversification of the police force. Ferguson has 56 police officers of which only three are Black. This is perhaps more disproportionate than most places but in the U.S. police rarely resemble the people they harass and repress. Moreover, to the extent that African Americans have been incorporated into police forces, in the main the minority of Black officers have “blued” and not in the sense of the blues aesthetic. With notable exceptions, they have adapted and adopted “the blue,” rather than become change agents within its midst.

The Path Forward: What is to be Done

I don’t address the immediate local demands, the Organization for Black Struggle and the Hands Up, Don’t Shoot Coalition have adequately addressed this question (http://obs-onthemove.org/featured/end-the-racist-police-state-in-ferguson-misery-2/). Here I address more longer-term movement building and transformative policy goals.

1. Organization. Whether they form something new, the Hands Up, Don’t Shoot Coalition, the Million Hoodies Movement or flow into and revitalize an existing organization, the youth must organize. In truth, with few exceptions, the Organization for Black Struggle (http://obs-onthemove.org) and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (http://mxgm.org) for instance, it is better that they continue to create new generational organizations as they have been doing.

2. The Black majority of Ferguson must take political power. However, it’s important they not repeat the errors of the past. They need to break with ethnic group pluralism (the idea that through political unity African Americans can acquire comparable power to that of white ethnic groups without changing the United States’ political economy) and liberal individualism (a system based on individual civil rights) and explicitly organize around a position of group rights, fight for a consociational state (racial/ethnic group power sharing) in which African Americans organize for self-determination, participatory democracy, and economic justice. The goal should be to acquire “dual power,” to build a sustainable liberation movement whereby African Americans can make political decisions for themselves, locally and nationally, while simultaneously electing progressive Black and nonblack candidates to local, state and national office. The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, its former leader, Chokwe Lumumba, the late mayor of Jackson and the
Jackson Peoples Assembly have put forward the Jackson Plan as a model for “participatory democracy, solidarity economy, and sustainable development and combine them with progressive community organizing and electoral politics” http://mxgm.org/the-jackson-plan-a-struggle-for-self-determination-participatory-democracy-and-economic-justice/.

3. Ferguson Blacks must take control of the local police. Not only do the police not look like Ferguson’s majority population but they also don’t reside in Ferguson.
1. A civilian review board with subpoena power should be instituted immediately.
2. There must be a local residency requirement for municipal employment.
3. All new hires on the Ferguson police force should be African American until the disparity is corrected.

4. Police should be treated similar to private citizens:
1. Police officers involved in a shooting or a confrontation in which a citizen is harmed should be tested immediately for drug usage.
2. Police officers involved in a shooting should be suspended without pay until the shooting is ruled justifiable. The union should support officer’s accused of using excessive and/or deadly force until a formal ruling is rendered.
3. An officer that observes misconduct and/or the use of excessive force and doesn’t act to prevent or stop it should be charged along with the offending officer.


Conclusion

It’s winter in America. The very prescient Lou Turner warns that the U.S. corporate capitalist are enacting a coup, through the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEX) and U.S. Supreme Court, they are steadily eliminating democratic rights and disfranchising African Americans and Latino/as (Lou Turner, “Corporate Coup D’Etat,” The Black Scholar Vol. 44, No. 1, Spring 2014: 30-46). It’s winter in America.

These are dark times. It is nearly midnight. In a somewhat similar situation, the 1935 Harlem Rebellion, Langston Hughes wrote “Shepherds over Harlem/Their armed watch keep/Lest Harlem stirs in its sleep/And maybe remembers/And remembering forgets/To be peaceful and quiet.” Black youth are stirring. In Ferguson, Missouri, a new generation has awakened and they are LOUD AND DEFIANT! “Midnight is the first minute of a New Day.”

Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua

Senior Editor, The Black Scholar
We, the undersigned, express our solidarity with Dan-el Padilla Peralta, Assistant Professor of Classics at Princeton University, who was recently the target of a racist verbal attack during the conference of the Society for Classical Studies in San Diego. Born in the Dominican Republic, Professor Padilla Peralta is the author of *Undocumented: A Dominican Boy's Odyssey from a Homeless Shelter to the Ivy League*.

During one of the “Future of the Classics” panel, Mary Frances William, a white scholar, stated that professor Padilla Peralta got his job because he is “black,” according to a report by *Inside Higher Ed*. In addition to those vitriolic remarks, the conference “was quite the showcase for the enforcement actions of white supremacy,” according to a post by Padilla Peralta in *Medium*, which recounts another racist incident endured by two students of color at the annual event this year held at the Marriott hotel:

*The day before the panel, Djesika Bel Watson and Stefani Echeverría-Fenn, co-founders of The Sportula and recipients of a WCC award at the annual meeting, were racially profiled by hotel security—possibly at the request of other conference-goers who were unsettled by the presence of brown bodies.*

As students, scholars and activists, we condemn white supremacy and racism and extend our solidarity to both Djesika Bel Watson and Stefani Echeverría-Fenn.

These instances of racist and discriminatory practices in academic spaces are not new. Historically, white supremacists have dominated the Classics field in academia, constructing over time the myth of a so-called civilized and homogeneous ancient Europe by erasing the contributions of Africans, African-descended people, and non-white Europeans.

We call on writers, artists, scholars, scholarly organizations, students, and progressive organizations to express solidarity with Dan-el Padilla Peralta, Djesika Bel Watson, and Stefani Echeverría-Fenn and mobilize against racism in all its forms. Let us turn our discontent into collective action. Our message: Black and Brown academic work matters.
Alexander Gil Fuentes, Digital Scholarship Librarian, Columbia University, USA

Amarilys Estrella, PhD Candidate, Anthropology New York University, USA

Amaury Rodriguez, Independent Scholar, USA

Amy M. King, Associate Professor of English, Director of Graduate Studies, St. John’s University, USA

Ana Liberato, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Kentucky, USA

Anthony Stevens-Acevedo, Historian, Higher Education Assistant (ret.), CUNY, USA

Anwar Uhuru, Assistant Professor of English, Harris Stowe State University, USA

April Yoder, Assistant Professor, History & Global Studies, University of New Haven, USA

Arelis M. Figueroa, Master of Divinity, USA

Cornel West, Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy, Harvard Divinity School, USA

Daniel Huttinot, Activist and Editor, USA

David Marriott, Professor, History of Consciousness, University of California, Santa Cruz, USA

DeLisa Brown-Guc, Graduate Student, The Open University, UK

Denise Paiewonsky, Associate Professor, Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

Dohra Ahmad, Professor of English, St. John’s University, USA

Edwin Rosario Mazara, Host of La Sala and Activist, USA

Elena Machado Sáez, Professor of English, Bucknell University, USA

Elizabeth Manley, Associate Professor of History, Xavier University, USA

Euclides C. Nuel, Activist and Journalist, Dominican Republic

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Erik S. McDuffie, Associate Professor, Department of African American Studies and History, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

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Ginetta Candelario, Professor of Sociology, Smith College, USA

Ivette Romero, Professor, Marist College, USA
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John Keene, Professor and Chair of African American and African Studies, Professor of English, Rutgers University, USA

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Juan J. Ponce-Vázquez, Assistant Professor, University of Alabama, USA

Jubi Arriola-Headley, Graduate Student, University of Miami, USA

Kathleen Lubey, Associate Professor of English, St. John’s University, USA

Laura Bass, PhD Student, English, University of Miami, USA

Laura Chrisman, Professor, University of Washington, USA

Laurie Lambert, Assistant Professor, Fordham University, USA

Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, Associate Professor, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA

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Michèle Voltaire Marcelin, Artist, USA

Miguel Vasquez, PhD Student, English, University of Miami, USA

Mildred D Mata, B.A. in Social Work, Dominican Republic

Natalie P. Byfield, Associate Professor, St. John’s University, USA

Nelson Ricart-Guerrero, Poet, France

Nelson Santana, Editor, Esendon Magazine, USA

Preston Stone, PhD Student, English, University of Miami, USA

Raj Chetty, Assistant Professor of English, St. John’s University, USA
Wilson Harris: An Ontological Promiscuity

August 20, 2018

This article originally appeared in ASAP/Journal.
I’ve always thought that the problem with the literary and cultural politics of the Anglophone world was that we’ve never had an actual, formal surrealist movement. Yes, there are writers and thinkers in the English-speaking world that are verifiably surreal (though not members of the official movement) and many that are described as surrealist, for example the writer who is the focus of this essay, the recently deceased Guyanese novelist, critic, and visionary, Wilson Harris, who passed away in March of this year. And yes, the impact of the Surrealist International was global. As I will discuss, it had a significant impact in the Caribbean, which is partly what justifies discussing Wilson Harris in this context. Though seen as a minor or cult figure, or an example of “art brut,” I’d like to help make clear his standing in a richer tradition of thinking and writing than previously acknowledged. I’d like to also suggest ways that his legacy can and should make a difference.

I’m also not ignoring the final impact and commodification of Surrealism as it made its way first to New York City and then to Hollywood only to become as much a feature of advertising and cinema as it would become a tool of now mundane representations of the human mind. Surrealism as an artistic and literary style, and a mode of psychological inquiry, was present in England as early as 1935 and its influence was felt in American art in the 1940s in advance of the arrival of actual surrealists as refugees from World War II. However, as an open and ongoing critical tendency with specific habits and practices, it hasn’t gone as far politically in English as in other linguistic worlds. This is particularly the case in its fetish for wild juxtapositions and radical combinations meant to jar or shock the viewer/reader into new perceptions of reality, in which differences and oppositions seemed less alien to each other and their hierarchies questioned if not suspended. It is also the case in the movement’s assumption that “reality” was itself constituted by radical juxtapositions and wild combinations—which is to say, as post-structuralist thinkers later would, an endless play of differences. These techniques have become fundamental to artistic and media practice; but the political assumptions behind them have not translated widely. Because it is the surrealist politics of cultural difference that matters here and its implications for power relationships. Though the impact of surrealism on the wider Caribbean or the black world in general is woefully understudied, it is this awareness of poetics and power that will manifest most strongly in the colonial Caribbean, and the broader archipelagic context that introduces Wilson Harris to the Anglophone world.

The surrealist commitment to juxtaposition and difference is best articulated by the movement’s foundational notion of beauty as produced by “the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table,” sourced from Les Chants de Maldoror by Uruguayan-French poet (and innovative plagiarist) Isidore Lucien Ducasse (Compte de Lautréamont). The founders of surrealism would hail him as prophet. This fact of their methodology has been much discussed and researched, but that scrutiny has focused on the relationship between metaphor or metonym (the former suppressive and the latter combinatory, as Jacques Lacan would have it), the role of the unconscious in making object relationships, and the implications of a radical decentering of knowledge that is made possible by juxtaposition and collage. What has been missed are the implications of Lautremont’s definition—of decontextualized mixture—for cultural politics in a world made by colonialism and slavery.

That surrealist founder André Breton would be so inspired by the work of Martinquan poet, Aimé Césaire, presaged the movement’s increasing interest in the broader cultural productions and cosmologies of native and indigenous peoples in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Oceania. This “exotic” material enabled their leveling of cultural value by juxtaposing a seemingly random display of items, images, and artifacts—a process emboldened by new technologies such as photography, film, and to a
lesser extent sound. This reminds us that the surrealists saw race and colonialism as central to their logic and poetics of difference; and they would manifest through these techniques a critique one could legitimately describe as “cross-cultural” (it’s not clear that those neo-surrealist movements in England or those influenced by surrealism in America fully grasped that aspect of the ideology, just as it’s not clear that the generation of Structuralist *bricolage*—from Levi-Strauss to Derrida to Deleuze and Guattari and British Cultural Studies—could make much of the racial implications of this mode of production or see in it alternative methods of social arrangement or definitions of cultural identity).

Race as central to surrealist method may have veered deeply into racial romanticism or romantic racism—examples of this are legion, so much so that it’s no surprise to encounter those who will describe much of the movement as actually *racist*, especially since it was flagrantly primitivist; but anti-colonialism at least was firmly and openly doctrine, as was a desire to problematize the European subject or psyche as the “center” of knowing if not power. Describing the intent of the work as “cross-cultural” is in no way to neglect the fact that it did privilege European subjectivity while attempting to decenter it, and its fascination for non-Western or non-White cultures were manifestly patronizing, paternalistic and from our vantage point cringeworthy.

Aimé Césaire and the Negritude movement of which he was a signal part would share that primitivism and that racial romanticism. It would also not be without a similar degree of cringe when compatriots of his like Léopold Sédar Senghor dug too deeply into an alleged racial essence. Despite his own considerable essentialism, Césaire would seize on cross-cultural juxtaposition as a fully realized anti-colonial poetics from the perspective of the colonized. Juxtaposition or blending or contrast in this work was deployed against the racial modes of knowing and racist social arrangements established by French colonialism and white supremacy.

Forms of Negritude continue to be primary fallback positions for much of the Anglophone black world; but in the Francophone world it would eventually become an obstacle for the generation of Caribbean writers and thinkers after Césaire. This is truly important. The rejection of Negritude needs more attention beyond the Francophone Caribbean because it enabled possibilities we are sorely in need of exploring. Harris himself spoke of such a need when he argued that juxtaposition could or would transform racial essentialism: “the rubbing together which we may visualize between endemic malaise and Surreal vessels of the imagination provides a residue in depth which becomes I think the potential seed and branch and tree of a black creativity beyond negritude to deepen resources of memory and imagination in a plagued humanity.”

The “rubbing together” of Negritude and Surrealism would allow the Caribbean to transform both into something else—a distinct conceptual space that will clear the way for, most notably, an Édouard Glissant in the Francophone world but also a Wilson Harris in the Anglophone. The work of these two writers and critics manifests—or perhaps straddles—both Surrealism and its transcendence; and given that Negritude was a movement rooted also in anti-colonial racial nationalism, both writers would sidestep that as well whilst continually reminding us of its perils.

But to the rejection of Negritude: famously it was manifest in the manifesto, *Éloge de la Créolité* (*In Praise of Creoleness*) by Martinican writer Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphaël Confiant in 1989. It dared challenge Negritude (and Césaire), partly for a racial romanticism that would edify Africa and thereby anchor Caribbean identity in a singular root. In philosophical terms current with the manifesto, Negritude
prioritized an essential being over a far more dynamic becoming. "Africa" became a barrier, and the identity claims necessary for anti-colonial resistance became the burden of political independence, particularly in composite societies in the New World.

The race-consciousness of Negritude may have emerged from dehumanization, racial violence, and the deracination of slavery, and it may have led to an overwhelming desire to return to or reconstruct a fixed past; but for the Créolistes it occluded and prevented the necessary embracing of an already transformed and multiply rooted present, one present in their creole language. Though he may have been the great poet of neologism, of creating novelty in language, Césaire remained committed to French. And as an elected official, that commitment was viewed in line with his support for the departmentalization of Martinique rather than independence from its colonial power.

It is through Édouard Glissant, however, that we've come to discuss if not embrace the poetics and politics of creolization in the literary and cultural politics of the Anglophone world in the wake of Negritude. It is through him that we can then make sense of Wilson Harris in an Anglophone world that is without the historical superstructure or intellectual continuum to support or acknowledge him, save for post-colonial notions of “hybridity” fashionable a decade or two ago. Harris was of the same generation as Glissant but produced his work on the margins of the literary and cultural history sketched above. He was clearly aware of Negritude and was a critical but enthusiastic reader of the work of André Breton, Michel Leiris, and other surrealists who he engaged first from the intellectual distance of a colonial Guyana and then from the heart of empire itself, England. Just as the landscape of the Guyanese rainforests utterly dominate much of his fiction—he was a government surveyor for some years—it’s hard to ignore the cultural politics of his country. After all, despite its postcolonial history of inter-ethnic tension, Guyana lacks the cultural resources or raw numbers to be ultimately defined by any of its specific ethnic groupings. That he himself was radically mixed—indigenous Caribbean/South Asian/Black/European—perhaps also made a “consolidation of identity,” to use his words, difficult to politically achieve.

Creolization and what Harris would call “the cross cultural” are deeply related. They address the process by which oppositions allow for juxtaposition, collage, and bricolage but then inevitably blend and blur while reshaping the very memory or intentions of what initially brought them together. In Harris’s words, oppositions and differences enact a cross-cultural dialogue in which they consume their own biases, because within them — in a phrase that should be tattooed and spray painted everywhere—is “a curious half-blind groping” towards alternate modes of community and/or modes of being or knowing “beyond static cultural imperatives.” Because self and other are twins not oppositions —“carnival twinships” as he once put it—because they are performances not identities, they are each other’s destiny, hence the endless mirrors, rivers, streams and reflective surfaces that suffuse his fiction rendering reality much like as through a prism. The goal was to explore and enact a model of cultural difference in which elements were not negatively opposed as was/is the case in colonial and racist modes of apprehension and social arrangement.

This is what lies beyond Negritude. As both Glissant and Harris note, Negritude merely consolidated and reified those modes of apprehension and social arrangement, even if it reversed their value or position. This is at the root of my initial complaint that the Anglophone world has yet to produce a politically valid (not self-hating) anti-Negritudist movement or a legitimately black anti-essentialist or ultimately anti-identitarian sensibility. Yes, we critique essentialism, problematize identity, and reject totalizing racial assessments; yet we ever revert to a blackness that cannot function without endless defense and justification and is rooted in totalizing racial assessments of our
own. However, that endless defense might be its own justification. It’s clearly the engine behind the commodification of blackness that proliferates in our knowledge industries.

An Anglophone surrealism and a post-Negritude response would likely have helped free racial thinking from the endless and oftentimes narcissistic thickets of this extreme identitarianism and would have impelled us to reimagine fundamental notions of community. Because of this lack, those attending to racial transformation and cultural becoming have Wilson Harris to represent such a break. And in a moment when whiteness, capital, and colonial power have furiously retrenched and “consolidated,” the temptation for us to respond with consolidations of our own—the Negritude response—can only be avoided with effort and legitimately radical alternatives. Harris’s attempt to narrate a world without centers or borders or identities was therefore prescient, far more so than Glissant, who despite his hostility to nationalism and colonial power dynamics has been easily recuperated by critics who ignore or evade his hostility to notions of fixed identity, historical “roots,” or conventional notions of resistance.

Harris, however, is patently and gloriously irrecoverable, at least so far. Though his work does allow for the same amount of “post-colonial” critique as Glissant’s, it is also explicitly focused on the complex process of renewing and reimagining community across cultural, racial, and historical barriers. Our notions of resistance aren’t enough here. They are radically challenged in that they can feed the consolidation of identity, that “conquistadorial habit,” he’s called it. And his decentering of subjectivity—all subjectivity, not just that of the colonizer—was not just an attack on the hierarchies of European knowledge as it was with surrealism. It was a necessary prologue to enabling that “curious half-blind groping” mentioned earlier.

Now the consensus is that Harris’s irrecoverability and his minor or cult status is largely due to his prose. It’s true that its complexity and density, whether fiction or non-fiction, regularly ban him from course syllabi and the rituals of literary culture, even in the Caribbean. But considering that he was first introduced to many of us at the high point of post-structuralist theory when we were also introduced to Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, and then via postcolonial thought, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, and given that we would then engage Judith Butler and now Sylvia Wynter and Edouard Glissant, it’s hard to merit his critical prose with such intractability. And in the wake of radical modernism his fiction isn’t any more challenging than Faulkner’s, Woolf’s, or Joyce’s. It really is that assault on identity, that challenge, one that goes so far in his work that the very environment as well as myth, dream, fantasy, and artistic creation are all given an equality of perspective and sentience, and therefore render knowledge, history, and resistance difficult to fathom much less claim. And his habit of rendering the other as partial self, or seeing the self partially in the other; in his civilizational perspective that renders our struggles against the staggering vistas of History; these work against the narcissism of those who comb his work for specific evidence against specific oppressions.

But it’s really all about the admittedly inelegant term, “groping,” which is hard to articulate in our contemporary cultural and political climate, without its suggestion of impropriety and unwelcome sexual advances. This only emphasizes just how rooted creolization is in the notion of unwelcome physical and cultural border crossings and also how such transgressions have regularly been policed or exploited. In Harris’s mythopoeia, as a historical and metaphysical process this “groping” must be “half-blind” and uncertain since knowledge, like subjectivity, is endlessly partial yet forever seeks its own reinvention. That dynamic process is central to the work, so much so that the term is arguably the most notable word in his oeuvre, possibly second only to “quantum” in its frequency. The latter is similar in that it implies probability, chance, and uncertainty,
Werner Heisenberg—he of the “uncertainty principle” in physics—being an influence. But that restlessness characterizes his prose, and is what makes it difficult to settle on a specific character or setting or to fetishize specific situations or power dynamics. It’s all partial, shifting, and evanescent and difficult to appropriate for specific political ends, particularly those rooted in race or identity.

Or, again, in the “rubbing together” of sex. As others have argued (Robert J.C. Young most prominently), metaphors of blending like creolization or hybridity are always rooted in sex—heterosexual sex to be clear. Speaking in metaphorical terms, cross-racial sex and desire have long been narrative clichés for cross-cultural intimacy and of course the “birth” of something different from foundational elements. The torrid plantation soft-core melodramas of Edgar Mittelholzer, the other major postcolonial Guyanese author, are far from Harris’s vision. Harris is the least sexual writer one can imagine, unless one describes the sensual excess of his landscapes and language as pornographic, or argues that his ontology was libidinal in its promiscuous drive towards fecundity in both the natural world and the infinite, possible worlds of cross-culturality.

There is, though, a radicalism in that ontological promiscuity, in submitting to its breathless uncertainty. It was perhaps too quiet for the nationalism that initially surrounded Harris’s work and the anti-colonial fervor that continues to feed much of the cultural and literary work of the Anglophone Caribbean; it certainly can seem a hyper-mystical or quasi-religious quietism. But when we realize that reducing meaning to binaries is not enough, and that rejecting them has largely led to reversing not transcending them; when the relationship between humans and the environment demands to be replaced by a greater mutuality, a distinctly non-human centered one; or when we realize that cultures themselves do hunger for otherness and transformation and intimacy, and that there are ways to encourage those heretical or even perverse movements that reject the inhuman logic of centralized power; when the old rhetoric of self and other has once again failed, perhaps then we will be truly ready for the Palace of the Peacock.

Louis Chude-Sokei is the Editor in Chief of The Black Scholar.

Filed Under: Uncategorized

Policing and the Violence of White Being: An Interview with Dylan Rodríguez

September 12, 2016

The following interview was conducted by Casey Goonan, an editor with True Leap Press. It originally appeared in the independent, open-access journal Propter Nos.

Casey Goonan: The US white-supremacist state operates today through a different set of discourses and cultural structures than in previous epochs. Your work interrogates such shifts at a level of depth and nuance that is of particular importance for emergent struggles against racist state violence. “Multiculturalist white supremacy,” “post-racial liberal optimism,” “white academic raciality”—such terms are utilized throughout your work to interrogate a myriad of theoretical and historical conundrums that define the post-Civil Rights era, particularly in regards to racial violence and subjectivity. Can you, in very broad strokes, lay out what you are trying to accomplish with these interventions
in the discourses, practices, and forms of embodiment that so violently delimit the possibilities for radical social change in the United States?

**Dylan Rodríguez:** The aftermath of American apartheid’s formal abolition has been overwhelmed by a grand national-cultural vindication of “Civil Rights” as the vessel of fully actualized gendered-racial citizenship. This fraud has, in various ways, facilitated rather than interrupted the full, horrific exercise of a domestic war-waging regime. For the sake of momentary simplicity, we can think about it along these lines: the half-century narrative of Civil Rights victory rests on an always-fragile but persistent common sense—the idea that national political culture (“America”) and the spirit of law and statecraft (let’s call this “The Dream”) endorse formal racial equality. Bound by this narrative-political context, the racist state’s mechanics shift and multiply to rearticulate a condition of normalized racist violence that is **condoned or even applauded by the institutionalized regimes of Civil Rights.** (It is not difficult to see how the NAACP, JACL, LULAC, Lambda, NOW, Urban League and other like-minded organizations condone or applaud domestic racial war, so long as it is directed at the correct targets: gang members, drug dealers, “violent criminals,” terrorists, etc.). In other words, the contemporary crisis of racist state violence is not reducible to “police brutality” and homicidal policing, or even the structuring asymmetries of incarceration: it is also a primary derivative of the Civil Rights regime.

This regime is in some ways inseparable from the emergence of post-1960s technologies of criminalization that resonate with—rather than offend—the (defrauded) dream of vindicated Civil Rights citizenship. After all, the racial/racist state is still being called upon to legislate, protect, and serve the Civil Rights Citizen, even as it is the subject of militant demands for reform that will align it with the Civil Rights versions of America and The Dream. This is the contradiction that yields more and more layers of gendered racist statecraft in the post-optimist’s Age of Obama.

The widespread, Black-populated and Black-led resistance and revolt that is responding to legally-sanctioned racist police killings should therefore be interpreted as a complex form of insurgency. It is, in significant part, a strike against the respectable, non-scandalous, legitimated forms of policing that have constituted the everyday racist truth of post-Civil Rights nation-building. This insurgency is also, then, a critique of the Civil Rights regime’s complicity in that fifty-year process of national-racial reconstruction.

So the racist state has metastasized in the last half century, and created new infrastructures and protocols of civil and social death (the industrialized, militarized policing and criminalization complexes) as well as proto-genocidal methods of targeted, utterly normalized suffering, misery, and physiological vulnerability for peoples on the other side of White Being (the paradigm and methodology of human being that we have inherited as universal, unquestioned, and godlike—here I’m referencing Sylvia Wynter’s lifework, of course). I’m thinking, among so many other things, of the levees in New Orleans’ Ninth Ward, strategic ecological disruption of indigenous lifeways throughout the hemisphere and in Native Hawaii, redirection and isolation of toxic water to the poorest, Blackest, and Brownest of places, and the seemingly endless continuity of legalized police assassinations of ordinary (and asymmetrically poor, Black, and Brown) people that stretches back as far as modern policing has existed.

So, if shit is this bad—and it’s so, so stunningly clear that it is almost always worse than we want to believe it is—what is the historical responsibility borne by people who differently inherit and inhabit this condition?
I am against “unity”—militantly so—and full of desire for radical community (militantly so). At the risk of making the case too bluntly: we experience and condone banal liberal calls to unity (which are often depressingly nationalist or patriotic) so incessantly that they are inescapable (e.g. those stupid fucking French flag colors that folks superimposed on their Facebook profile pictures after the street attacks in Paris, which was like global advertising for White Lives Matter; or the absurd compulsion to insist that one is not “anti-police” when mourning yet another life destroyed by the full force of the police apparatus—because it’s never just one or two or five racist cops, it’s what protects and enables them). These are concessions to a form of political life (which is to say a particular genre of human life—White Being) that cannot be tolerated as such, if some of us expect to live or see others live. I think such concessions must be critically exposed for what they are: disciplinary exercises in assimilating different peoples’ political dreams to the conformities of White Being. At the very same time—and this is the hard part—these critical gestures have to somehow participate in creating possibilities for collective exercises of radical, creative, political-cultural genius that demystify White Being and embolden (or even productively weaponize) other insurgent practices and methodologies of human life. This is difficult, scary, and beautiful work. And if more people don’t attempt to engage in it, we know who will be the first to disappear.

Casey: Could you speak a bit more on what you mean by emphasizing the need to “embolden” and “productively weaponize” other practices and methodologies of human life?

Dylan: I’m talking about how necessary it is to take seriously how peoples (in the most differentiated sense of the notion of “peoples”) have created forms of relationality, cultural reproduction, survival, revolt, and collective being under the eviscerating conditions of this Civilization. This happens everywhere, all the time. In 1496, 1896, and 2016. Down the street and on the other side of the planet. It’s the underside of human being that the official scripts and dominant narratives of the modern world can never adequately rationalize or eliminate. This is to say that decisively displacing the universality of the White Being—and of any such universality altogether—is only a fraction of what is at stake. The fact is—and this is a long-running fact, at least half a millennium old—there are other ways of inhabiting “human being” that are constituted by the violent vulnerabilities normalized by global white-supremacist power, in all of its misogynist, colonial, chattel, and sexual normative (including “homonormative”) iterations. This is just what the fuck it means to try to live under the Civilizational regime. And this work of living, of being, of figuring out ways to thrive, when and where possible, absolutely does not require trying to deform and self-mutilate into the “human” methodologies of the White Being. Peoples everywhere have proved this.

Look, I also don’t want to be too easily mis-read here. There isn’t just one way of White Being, and we cannot overemphasize enough that White Being cannot be conflated with “white people.” Undoubtedly, Fanon is still correct in stressing the epidermalized, physiologically activated structure of power that inheres in white bodies (however white bodies are socio-politically formed and institutionalized in a given moment). My point here is that White Being constitutes another layer of dominance precisely because it is capable of hailing other beings, inviting them, seducing them—and this is yet another method to humiliate and degrade (perhaps even “de-humanize”) the “underside peoples” I am referencing.

Finally, we have to admit to ourselves that one of the most important struggles is against the desire to coalesce with White Being, both in the sense of political affinity and the conception of good living. It doesn’t make sense to funnel all manner of
insurgent activities (art, organized protest, underground political work, etc.) into demands, of this particular global racial order, that peoples targeted by White Being (now and forever) be enfolded into White Being, whether by virtue of Rights, Citizenship, Marriage, or something else. Those demands may be momentarily necessary and vital for the sake of resisting state violence, but have been demonstrated over and again to work, in the longer historical span, in the service of White Being and no other beings. What, then, would it mean to not only decisively displace the ascendancy of White Being (Civilization), but to also seek to thrive as the descendants of our particular, differentiated conditions of historical vulnerability?

Casey: Thank you for clarifying that point. Given your work as a scholar and student of radical movements that are engaged in political activity from within what you consider to be civil society’s carceral underside (i.e. the US jail/prison), what would you say are the most significant contradictions or points of antagonism arising between the terms of engagement which define the current phase of popular movement addressing criminalization and police violence and the current (and ongoing) work of imprisoned activists and intellectuals? One place we might start is recalling the aftermath of the assassination of Yogi Pinell last year at New Folsom. In this moment, it became rather apparent that a number of theoretical and practical fractures still exist between popular mobilizations on the “outside” and the political labors (and lives) of imprisoned activists “inside.” Just going off the basic fact that news of the murder of this beloved elder in the Black/Prisoner liberation struggle (clearly orchestrated by the CA prison regime) scarcely circulated in the public discourse, barely galvanizing the sentiment of free world activists (outside of certain political circles), I believe, is revealing of the types of slippages and antagonisms I am alluding to.

Dylan: This is difficult to cleanly answer, because in my view (and experience), there are sites and moments of overlap between these forms of political and cultural movement that both illuminate and blur the assumptive alienation between prison/jail and the “free world.” Further, my perspective is deformed by the fact that I am at best a reader, theorist, and interpreter of incarcerated radical praxis. Still, I think it’s possible to identify a couple points of contradiction and antagonism between: 1.) movements by and of incarcerated people and 2.) movements of revolt against anti-Black racism and homicidal police violence that are based in spheres of civil society.

First, while it is not always the case that carceral insurgencies are led or predominated by Black people held captive, it is very often a fact that such movements explicitly recognize the carceral regime as a paradigm of anti-Black violence. This is why recent political and cultural movements by incarcerated people so consistently make use of the rhetorics, symbols, and legal archives of racial chattel slavery in their internal and public discourses (including platforms and demands issued by captive people engaging in hunger strikes in places like Georgia, California, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere). On the other hand, I think there is work to be done to adequately understand whether and how current, free world-based struggles against anti-Black racist state violence may be hanging onto a fraudulent dream of (Black) citizenship even as they catalyze forms of art, critical thought, liberationist praxis, and (Black) human being that push the imagination against and past the delimited institution of citizenship (a stand-in for White Being) and toward other kinds of political-cultural vistas. That’s one thing.

The other thing is this: the weight of institutionalized dehumanization (and that’s what the carceral regime is, in its gendered-racial violence) is mind-numbing, vast, and almost entirely incalculable. We can recite statistics all day, but there is no way to adequately communicate how the last half-century of criminalization and human captivity has permanently altered peoples’ worlds. Here’s the thing, though: people who
are or have been incarcerated for any length of time—during and after their actual incarceration—trying to narrate and communicate this mind-numbing, vast, incalculable violence anyway. Consider it the voice of a human species that is illegible to White Being, and is largely illegible to those of us invited by or seduced into the ceremonies of White Being.

**Casey:** It would be helpful here if you could briefly walk us through how the “inside”/“outside” relation operates in the discourses and political imagination of the Establishment Left. I am also really curious to hear you speak more on the possibilities that “Black Lives Matter” offers as a mobilizing paradigm capable of disrupting this “inside” versus “outside” mode of thinking and seeing?

**Dylan:** Central to the formation of the contemporary Establishment Left in the US and elsewhere has been the emergence of a nonprofit/NGO complex, planned and funded by a collaboration between state, philanthropic, and corporate bodies (that is, both individual people and officials representing organizations). It barely takes three clicks into a Google search to see how the “inside/outside” relation is established by the Establishment Left. Incarcerated people (and formerly incarcerated people) are overwhelmingly addressed as clients or impersonal constituencies, and are invoked in rhetorics of state criminological reform. This is what leads to the Establishment Left’s persistent return to notions of “nonviolent crime,” “disparity,” and “mass incarceration.”

In their totality, these rhetorics reproduce problems inherent to liberal-progressive political desires, including the fabrication of a vacillating definition of those worthy of decarceration, and those whose criminality requires their civil carceral death. In none of this is there anything approaching a serious attempt to clarify, much less directly engage with, the unfolding half century infrastructure of gendered racial domestic warfare. “Disparity” is a bullshit concept, when we already know that the inception of criminal justice is the de-criminalization of white people, particularly propertied white citizens and those willing to bear arms to defend the white world. “Mass Incarceration” is worse than meaningless, when it’s not the “masses” who are being criminalized and locked up. So there is some furtive and fatal white entitlement involved in this discursive political structure. As far as Black Lives Matter goes, I think it’s imperative to appreciate the spectrum of people and political positions that inhabit this movement, and to constantly pay attention to how its place in the public discourse creates both opportunities for radical departures and burdens of political respectability that constantly attempt to domesticate its own insurgent tendencies.

**Casey:** And it’s these liberal-progressive political desires that we must now more than ever be vigilantly criticizing in our writings, analyses, discussions, and pedagogy, correct? Even amidst the possibility of having a classically “Right-wing” reactionary iteration of white nationalist subjectivity, once again, residing in the Oval Office? I know you have written about a particular notion of fascism, as it relates to the idea of liberal capitalist democracy—one that builds on the incarcerated writings of Angela Davis and George Jackson from the early 1970s. Would you say a broader public conversation about fascism and its relationship to the liberal-progressive political desires you are speaking about is necessary?

**Dylan:** I think people are already having the conversations about white nationalism and fascism in various ways, although once again, the problem is that these problems are reduced to a narrowed, particular, spectacular set of articulations (i.e. Muslim expulsion, Great Wall of ‘Merica, Blue Lives Matter, etc.) rather than analyzed as the generalized political framework through which most acceptable, or “hegemonic” notions of politics and political culture unfold. I think Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump...
are pretty much first cousins (though maybe estranged first cousins), in this sense. If we take a serious approach to the analytics of fascism, updated for the contemporary condition, the differences across this hegemonic political-cultural spectrum tend to be a matter of degree, not of kind. It’s pretty easy to see, for example, the ways that Trumpism installs assumptively extremist positions and proposals into the public discourse in ways that catalyze and legitimate reactionary white (and overwhelmingly male) violence through symbolic, state, and physical forms. What a lot of us are in denial about, however, is how much this moment of reactionary white nationalism overlaps with the prior decade of multiculturalist white supremacy and the refabrication of US patriotism via “postracialism.” So while not everyone agrees with subjecting Muslims to an American Inquisition, for example, there are some guiding agreements about whether and how people of Arab and Middle Eastern descent ought to be subjected to rationalized, responsible forms of profiling and policing. And the bottom line of this still-unfolding, historically specific policing and criminalization technology is, of course, the Civilizational formation of racial chattel and land-ecological conquest as the permanent (that is, not historically episodic) condition of political discourse generally. So what we are seeing now is a pretty fucked up situation in which some of us are actually surprised that people who look like us, and share genealogical blood with us, are fully in favor of Trump’s Bozo the Clown burlesque act. We are indignant and shocked silent when we encounter other Black, Brown, Indigenous, and queer people outside of academic left and activist circles who tell us they might—or will—cast a worthless ballot for that dude. We should not be that surprised.

Casey: I agree, we cannot be surprised. And, accompanying these reactionary articulations, there is an entire other side of the fascist problematic, right? The gradualist reformers who “mediate” the crisis . . . who co-opt, defuse, and redirect oppositional energies into the projects of the Establishment Left. Here you have a range of “compassionate” and “caring” folks—from petite bourgeois liberals to progressive nationalists to an array of “color-blind” white left-folk—all of whom, it seems, desire more so to distance themselves from the backwards or “regressive” whiteness embodied in the Trump campaign, rather than challenge it in any serious or politically meaningful way. And when the desire to confront it doesexist—when it is out there, loud and visible—that very desire appears to be a force that legitimizes their own privileged positions. They become the “reasonable” whites . . . the “civil” whites . . . the transcendent historical subjects capable of continuing the white-supremacist nation-building project. “I am not Donald Trump,” therefore my presence and manner of being/Being is universally justified. Or “I am not that murderous pig,” therefore my imagined physiological integrity, my chauvinistic comportment, my freedom of bodily mobility couldn’t possibly be linked in a parasitic way to the policing and criminalization of Black people, or that which necessitates the crisis of racialized capture and incarceration. It’s a kind of postracial desire characteristic of left-liberal whiteness in the post-Civil Rights era: a move (whether conscious or not) to disaffiliate from the cultural and political spheres of “old-school” white racist identity, which in turn only serves to shore up and affirm their own comfortable inhabitations of civil society, of “rationality,” of white life, of “White Being” (as you have so eloquently described it). But I guess that’s what you’ve been saying throughout this entire interview, right? It’s a constant evasion of political and “ethical” responsibilities that is systemically condoned. The problem lays with White Being as a larger, encompassing aspect of the fascist social condition we all (albeit differentially) inhabit.

Dylan: And to add to your entirely appropriate and necessary polemic against (white) liberalism—a task that I am happy you embrace so urgently given your own social and gendered racial position in the world—I have to stress that there are other layers to the violence of White Being that have nothing to do with the “problem of white people.”
There are specific ways, in this moment of compulsory diversity and institutionalized multiculturalism, where the post-apartheid United States is actually doubling down on gendered-racist state violence by fostering delimited avenues of social mobility (i.e. affirmative action and its aftermath) and ideologies of “empowerment.” These are usually affixed to spectacles of dark-skinned peoples’ exceptional achievements, talents, and rarified “opportunities” that work, always and incessantly, to ideologically crowd out the everyday social truths of systemic degradation and evisceration. This is just a glimpse of the mess that the ascendancy of White Being creates in its extra-supremacist moments, when it thrives on gestures of seduction, invitation, and inclusion that accompany the sturdy apparatuses of warfare, policing, and incarceration. A lot of us would kill (and sometimes do kill) for the chance to have “White People Problems” on a constant, uninterrupted basis, you know? That’s the fatal, violent, sometimes auto-homicidal and suicidal dilemma I’m talking about.

**Casey:** So then, what would you suggest . . . or maybe . . . how do you envision a revolutionary politics being further proliferated in the current historical conjuncture; in terms of organization and strategy, principles and program? For instance, given the current political climate, how might a more deeply radical consciousness be fostered in the institutional and organizational spaces one inhabits? Are there useful historical approaches to oppositional intellectual work that could be revisited and revised to broaden the public discussion of political possibilities?

**Dylan:** I’m only capable of offering a minor, situated, fragment of a response to this question, given my own limitations of experience, position, and insight. Here’s how i’ll respond: the question is not whether there is some kind of activist praxis, organizing method, or cultural strategy that can incite radical-to-revolutionary possibilities in-and-of-themselves. Rather, in this particular moment, I think the question is how to create, exemplify, and experiment in rigorously scholarly, thoughtful, historically situated forms of praxis (which may or may not take a typically “activist” form). Whether people are nourished by Sylvia Rivera or Malcolm X, the Zapatistas or the Panthers, AIM or Idle No More, there are so many exemplary forms of radical work that are also radical in their intellectual-theoretical contributions to the historical record of revolt against Civilization. This fact should enable us to engage in our creative, experimental practices in a manner that is both humbled and deeply emboldened.

**Casey:** I have some questions prepared about revolutionary organization and the politics of “spontaneity” that I would like to briefly pose before we wrap this interview up. First off, what are some central themes that must be accounted for in the formation of principled “aboveground” and “underground” counter-state organizational structures? Do you see something still useful in distinguishing a relationship between the two? What must occur differently today than in past iterations of the above/below-ground split?

**Dylan:** This is not something I’d want to substantively write or talk about on the record, right now. What I will say is that yes, there is absolutely a need and usefulness to drawing clear practical, strategic and theoretical distinctions between legal and illicit, “responsible” and explosively contentious, aboveground and underground forms of praxis and organizing. I will say that I am in a privileged position to work in the generalized realm of aboveground, legal activities but this does not mean that I abstain from supporting, theorizing, and critiquing other kinds of political work.

**Casey:** What of political action that appears at first to be “spontaneous,” for example, street skirmishes and larger, more organic insurrectionary mobilizations such as riots? Could you say these have a dimension of organization to them as well?
Dylan: Yes, always. Spontaneity is usually in the eye of the beholder. Shit doesn’t just go down because of a random act of God, or some kind of incomprehensible magic. There is always a reason: as we know, these spontaneous irruptions are often counter-insurgency tactics employed by the state and reactionary elements who wish to provoke popular backlash against a particular community or insurgent movement; other times, people have simply had enough, and are unwilling to tolerate dying and suffering “peacefully,” or “nonviolently.” And if that’s not a praxis of human being against White Being, I don’t know what is.

Casey: Do you have any suggestions about the role of writing and public intellectual work during (and in the immediate aftermath of) rioting and other forms of open insurrectionary struggle? You know . . . these periods of heightening antagonisms that disrupt the quotidian, everyday reproduction (the so-called “peace”) of white civic life. And this question doesn’t only have to be directed towards instances such as Baltimore or Milwaukee recently. It could even be expanded to encompass the phase of struggle inaugurated this summer more generally (with its array of direct actions, traffic blockades, and protest mobilizations). These are periods when clarity and sober reflection on reactionary shifts in the hegemony of “law and order” are needed in the public discourse—especially if we wish counter the effects of a state and corporate media apparatus that dehumanizes insurgency and strives to appropriate grassroots revolt into dominant cultural and political blocs.

Dylan: We’re talking about the radical, indispensable work of speaking and writing a historical record, and compiling a present tense archive. There are so many cultural forces and institutional forms that mitigate against this work, and which try to discipline and bully people out of their obligation to undertake this labor and art form (all narrative is art, don’t get it twisted). My word of encouragement and incitement is this: while there are people who are employed or otherwise materially rewarded to do the work of writing, talking, and critical reflection, the fullest sense of the radical archive draws on the creativity endemic to the practice of human being against the ascendancy of White Being. This means the historical obligation to do the work—to produce the art—is far-reaching.

Casey: Who are some central thinkers that you would recommend aspiring young activists and students in the movement read and listen to today, in regards to the strategic dimensions of radical anti-racist and Black liberationist struggles?

Dylan: I suggest a deeper, collective, critical reading and discussion of those folks in the Hall of Fame: Audre Lorde, W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Angela Davis, Paolo Freire, Haunani Kay Trask, Stuart Hall, the Combahee River Collective, Toni Morrison (recall the “Seven Days” organization from Song of Solomon), Ida B. Wells, the Civil Rights Congress (We Charge Genocide, 1951), Sonia Sanchez, Vine Deloria, and so many others. The point is not merely to read and listen, it’s to read and listen actively, collectively, and in conversation with other people.

Casey: Okay, so one last question for you Dylan. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview. Do you see any major differences that need to be accounted for in the ways that student activists mobilize on campuses and attempt to struggle today, as opposed to previous eras? Over the course of your work in the university, have you seen any transformations in the way students mobilize around racist policing, surveillance, and imprisonment (for better or worse)?

Dylan: The campus—whether university, junior college, high school, or some other schooling site—has played a significant role in almost every major or minor
transformation of oppressive and systemically violent conditions in the history of this wretched Civilization. Students face a compounded problem in the current iteration of the neoliberal white-supremacist university/college regime, however, because they tend to be subjected to untenable financial and hence labor burdens as soon as they set foot on school grounds. So students engaged in activist work today must bear even heavier demands on their energy, and are forced to survive different and often heavier physiological stresses than their counterparts from, say, 15 years ago. (Come to think of it, maybe there is a way that students today can politicize their burdens and collective immiseration in a manner that doesn’t rely on the grandstanding of Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton.) Finally, the most profound difference I have seen in recent years of student activism around criminalization, policing, and incarceration has been the circulation of the political identity “abolitionist.” Far, far greater numbers of students are embracing this position, and many are doing so even when their professed political beliefs are closer to anti-racist reform (of police, laws, etc.) or progressive decarceration (of those deemed most deserving of release from prison/jail). In other words, many student activists call themselves “abolitionists” when their political agendas are fundamentally opposed to abolition! So that leaves us with the task of teaching and demonstrating what it means to inhabit the long historical responsibilities that accompany the declaration that one is an abolitionist. You have to be willing and able to say that shit to Sojourner Truth’s ghost.

The download link for the full issue can be found here.

Dylan Rodríguez is a Professor and former Chair of the Department of Ethnic Studies at UC Riverside. He was elected Chair of the UC Riverside Academic Senate by his faculty peers in 2016. He is the author of two books: Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the US Prison Regime (2006) and Suspended Apocalypse: White Supremacy, Genocide, and the Filipino Condition (2009). His current thinking, writing, and teaching focus on how regimes of social liquidation, cultural extermination, physiological evisceration, and racist terror become normalized features of everyday life in the “post-Civil Rights” and “post-racial” moments. How do the historical logics of racial and racial-colonial genocide permeate our most familiar systems of state violence, cultural production, institutionalized knowledge, liberation struggle, and social identity? How do people inhabit these structures and logics—make sense of it, narrate it, suffer it, and revolt against it? What forms of collective genius and creativity emerge from such conditions, and how do these insurgencies envision—and practice—transformations of power and community?

Filed Under: Interview

Muhammad Ali: The King of the Inauthentic by Gerald Early

June 21, 2016

When I wrote in my introduction to The Muhammad Ali Reader (1998) that, as a society, we were on the verge of “over esteeming” Muhammad Ali and thus of grossly misunderstanding his significance and deeply diminishing him as a person, I did not see myself as a revisionist but rather a seeker of a new level of nuance, an explorer.[1] Doubtless, my observation that Ali did not sacrifice any more as an athlete when he was suspended from boxing for three and a half years for his stance against the nation’s conscription laws and the Vietnam War than those athletes who were drafted during World War II was pushback against the leftist version of Ali. Those who served during World War II lost significant chunks of their athletic life spans and were, in many
cases, in danger on the battlefield to boot. Heavyweight champion Joe Louis, the great
crossover African American athlete of the Depression, did not fight competitively from
March 28, 1942 to June 18, 1946, over four years, because of Louis’s army service
during World War II. This was a longer layoff than Ali’s. What price patriotism? What
price dissent? (Hall of Fame pitcher Warren Spahn had a layoff from baseball as long
as Louis’ from competitive boxing during World War II. He did not seem to think it hurt
his career; rather he thought he might have been aided by it. It is an open question
whether the layoff helped or hurt Ali.)

In thinking about Ali’s layoff in this context, I simply wanted readers to think about it
more athletically in order to reveal something ironical about it politically. What did it
mean compared to other young men who lost years in their prime because of military
service as he had opposing such service? But such framing was not meant to suggest
that Ali was insincere or, worse, inauthentic as a dissenter, which was precisely the
point of a recent piece in the rightwing online journal, Breitbart News, that compared Ali
unfavorably to Boston Red Sox Hall of Fame outfielder Ted Williams, who served as
pilot in both World War II and the Korean War, the upshot of which was accusing Ali of
being a draft dodger. (The only other American fighter who was publicly accused of
draft dodging was heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey, who avoided conscription
during World War I, accused by his first wife, Maxine Cates, during their bitter divorce in
1919. Dempsey was brought up on charges in federal court of draft evasion in 1920 but
was acquitted.)

The Breitbart article wanted to claim, in essence, that Williams made the greater
sacrifice, losing time as an athlete during his prime and risking his life for his country
while in combat. But the article misses the point: Ali did not dodge the draft; rather he
challenged its legitimacy and was willing to pay the price for the challenge by going to
prison if he lost. If he were a true draft dodger, Ali would have tried avoiding both the
draft and prison by any means he could. Whether his religious grounds for opposing the
draft were ethically acceptable or reasonable (he was not claiming to be a
conscientious objector in a traditional sense by claiming not to believe in the morality of
violence but a Muslim duty-bound to the dictates of his religion’s call to arms) is not in
any way a reflection on whether they were sincere or authentic.

In the case of Ali in this instance the right wants to have it both ways with Islam: it is
wrong and it is insincere as a set of religious beliefs (although with Muslim terrorists, the
right underscores that the beliefs are wrong but that they are sincere which makes them
all the more dangerous.) But the Breitbart article is part of a revisionist interpretation of
Ali, to claim he was inauthentic, fake, a fraud, a hypocrite, a shallow man. Ali as symbol
and man is thus part of the Culture Wars; the revisionism was not all generated by the
right, by the all means, but also by some liberals who became weary and wary of Ali
hero-worship in the fighter’s declining years and who wanted to challenge the liberal
and leftist view of Ali as the grand American dragon-slayer.

In recent years, the core of revisionist criticism of Ali particularly centered on his
treatment of his arch rival Joe Frazier, whom he beat twice in three fights, much of it
about how unfairly and cruelly Ali castigated and belittled Frazier in the pre-fight
promotions as an Uncle Tom and a gorilla, and as ignorant. Frazier was always bitter
about this, about how, even when he was champion after beating Ali in 1971, he was
never given his due because he existed solely as Ali’s foil. “Always able to feel the
lancing invective with which Ali assaulted him, wrote Mark Kram in Ghosts of Manila,
"Frazier began to see it as an orchestrated campaign to crush any respect he had in the
black community.”
Ghosts of Manila is the ultimate Ali revisionist book, taking Ali down a few pegs for his sexual excesses (while he preached abstinence and sex sanctified by marriage), for allowing the Nation of Islam to control his money (much to Ali’s financial detriment), for allowing himself to be bullied by the Nation about opposing the draft, almost forcing him to be a martyr, for misusing his own money in ways that were not unusual for a professional athlete but shockingly irresponsible nonetheless, and for denigrating his black opponents, largely for the amusement of his large white audience, despite his proclamations of being a loyal race man.

There is nothing that Kram describes that is untrue; indeed, bits and pieces of some of Kram’s assertions can be found in other Ali books. But the overall impression is that Ali, like the Nation of Islam, is something of a fake, a bit of a post-modernist confidence game. Nothing underscores this as much as Kram’s description of Joe Frazier as being of Gullah ancestry, where Frazier sees himself (and Kram frames him) as a pureblood (He once called Ali “a half breed”), a black from the fields, unassimilated.

To be sure, Ali politically denigrated his black opponents (who were far more competitive threats to him than the relatively few white fighters he fought) because, first, there were few other options he had to interest the general public in a bout between two black men other than politicizing his fights. Nearly all of Joe Louis’s major fights were against whites. The political dynamic of racial and ethnic difference was built into the bouts (something which boxing has always emphasized to get fannies in the seats) and Louis really had to do nothing to stimulate the public’s fantasies about what the public imagined was at stake. In the age of the black dominance of the sports, Ali had to resort to something else and in the age of civil rights and Black Power he found a winning formula: cast himself as a race hero fighting the white man’s lackey, a feat that reshaped black disunity as the race’s own sort of culture war.

Second, Ali found this to be a way to celebrate and defend his new consciousness as a politically aware black man as a result of publicly joining the Nation of Islam in 1964. (He had actually been a fellow traveler since 1961.) Being a Muslim athlete made him a new kind of being, a reinvention, something fresh and different on the scene. In this sense, Ali was an original, even as he copied the trash talking of professional wrestling, boxers like John L. Sullivan (“I can lick any son of a bitch in the house”), and the exaggerated claims of modern advertisers and Hollywood trailers, the exaggerations of popular culture. He was both P. T. Barnum and the acts that Barnum was trying to sell. In the age of mass culture, what could possibly be authentic beyond what you asserted rhetorically was authentic? For Ali and his generation, authenticity was a belief, not a fact, a manipulation of the truth, not a quest for it. And everyone in the modern world knows authenticity to be a manipulation.

Third, as a champion athlete he was a fierce competitor who defined his greatness by his rivalries. How could he truly be great unless he could convince the public he was fighting for more than just money or even fame? Was his rivalry with Frazier really very different or worse than that between Joan Crawford and Bette Davis or between Tesla and Edison or between soul singers Joe Tex and James Brown? Would anyone, outside of professional boxing, remember Joe Frazier now if Ali had not treated him the way he did?

Notes


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