

Manning Marable

**Dispatches
from the
Ebony
Tower**

**Intellectuals
Confront
the African
American
Experience**

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Columbia University Press
Publishers Since 1893
New York Chichester, West Sussex
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dispatches from the ebony tower : intellectuals confront the African American
experience / edited by Manning Marable.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-231-11476-1 (cloth)—ISBN 0-231-11477-X (pbk.)

1. Afro-Americans—Study and teaching (Higher) 2. Blacks—Study and teaching
(Higher) 3. United States—Race relations—Study and teaching (Higher) 4. United
States—Ethnic relations—Study and teaching (Higher) 1. Marable, Manning, 1950-

E184.7.D57 2000

99-055525

305.896/073/0711—dc21

CIP

Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and
durable acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America

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Lee D. Baker

Over the past fifteen years many African Americans have come to embrace rather broadly defined ideas of Afrocentricity. These popular notions of Afrocentricity loosely integrate and routinely police certain beliefs, practices, rituals, or other cultural activities that signify a loyalty to (and the unity of) a community of African descent. Although the performance and intellectual elite have made Afrocentricity “almost ubiquitous in the public discourse on race and African American identity,” the activities are indeed performed across class lines, ranging from sorority theme parties on college campuses to study groups in the housing projects of Louisville (Ransby 1994:31; Mullings 1994:28; Jones 1996:147).

From the pulpit to the vendor, in the classroom and in the cell block, on peoples’ heads and on the Internet, African Americans are consuming and reproducing notions of Afrocentricity to cultivate a collective identity and challenge the ascendancy of Whiteness in U.S. society. President Bill Clinton has even chimed in by stating, “White Americans and black Americans often see the same world in drastically different ways” (Clinton 1995). With some twelve million people celebrating Kwanza annually, the merit of Afrocentricity lies in the Afrocentric values embraced by a large swath of U.S. society.

Anthropological Silence: The Power and Politics of Space and Place

A shift from industry to service production during the last two and one-half decades has left U.S. central cities in a wake of desperate poverty that

has been compounded by an erosion of gains made during the war on poverty and the civil rights movement, fueling despair and displacement and fostering what Cornell West calls nihilism. These decades, however, also witnessed a horizon of unparalleled opportunities for African Americans and the largest growth of the black middle class in this nation’s history. And it has been within this context that Afrocentricity has gained currency and generated considerable debate in and outside the academy. Anthropologists, however, have been strangely absent from both the forceful assertions and rigorous critique of Afrocentric discursive and cultural practices. Whether or not scholars weigh into the academic debate, one cannot dismiss the cultural significance of Afrocentricity during the final decades of the twentieth century.

My rationale for this anthropological silence is actually related to the many reasons why ideas about Afrocentricity have emerged in this context as a particularly salient U.S. discourse. Anthropologist Eric Wolf has long asserted that anthropology should actually be the “study of human freedom and liberation, of human possibility and necessity” (Wolf 1987:xii). Similarly, Stanley Diamond has emphasized that anthropologists need to explore how “human beings not only reflect cultural events but synthesize experience and have the capacity to react in creative and unexpected ways” (Diamond 1987:341). Even though participants in the Afrocentric project, explicitly, make, recreate, and affirm ideas of culture and history as a form of resistance and liberation, anthropologists have not been compelled to engage Afrocentricity, even though it clearly lies within the outlines painted by these venerable anthropologists.

The issues generated from the high-stakes debate land squarely within the purview of anthropological inquiry, since the contested terrain is, after all, culture—a culture “through which communities interpret their past, understand their present, and imagine their future” (Mullings 1994:28), but also a culture that “stresses its contextual, heuristic, and comparative dimensions” (Appadurai 1997:13).

I find it curious that very few anthropologists have attempted to explore, ethnographically, why notions of Afrocentricity resonate with the experience of so many African Americans or why certain African Americans gravitate to the principles of Afrocentricity to help negotiate contemporary society. While her findings will be published soon, Yvonne V. Jones is one of the only anthropologists to actually conduct ethnographic fieldwork that explores how people use ideas promoted by advocates of Afrocentricity to foster empowering notions of identity and culture.

The academic "space" where this silence becomes deafening is the discourse on place and space: the politics of identity, nationalism, and so-called imagined communities. From my perspective the Afrocentric project lies flat in the teeth of the "politics of place making and in the creation of naturalized links between places and peoples" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992:12). It is particularly glaring when Asante explains, "*Dislocation, location, and relocation* are the principal calling cards of the Afrocentric theoretical position" and organizes *Kenet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* using the spatial metaphors of "Interiors," "Anteriors," and "Exterioriors." (Asante 1992:20; 1990).

In *Place and the Politics of Identity* (1993) Michael Keith and Steven Pile evoke Fredric Jameson to explain how their type of cognitive mapping is "meant to allow people to become aware of their own position in the world, and to give people the resources to resist and make their own history" (1993:3; emphasis added). The choice of verbs is interesting, but it does not explain why these postcolonial geographers and late capitalist ethnographers have not addressed Afrocentricity. It is particularly unusual in light of the examples they use to explore how "new spaces of resistance are being opened up, where our 'place' (in all its meanings) is considered fundamentally important to our perspective, our location in the world, and our right and ability to challenge dominant discourses of power" (Keith and Pile 1993:6).¹ No matter how one construes the Afrocentric project, it falls within this rubric. I do not want to suggest that no scholars associated with cultural studies have addressed Afrocentricity because Paul Gilroy and Anthony Appiah have been quite vocal (Appiah 1995:50; Gilroy 1993).

There are perhaps numerous reasons why the popularity of Afrocentricity has not been considered within anthropology. I speculate that one reason is that the Afrocentric project belies a bipolar political spectrum often demarcated by radical/revolutionary, core/periphery, conservative/progressive, etc. Gupta and Ferguson observe:

It must be noted that such popular politics of place can as easily be conservative as progressive. Often enough, as in the contemporary United States, the association of place with memory . . . and nostalgia plays directly into the hands of reactionary popular movements. (1992:13)

They point to easy examples of reactionary place making like the "frontier" or the "small town." Much more complicated, however, are exam-

ples of an imagined "Africa," or "Nation" of Islam employed as symbolic anchors to help empower African Americans in the U.S. Like many populist movements, Afrocentricity blurs easy distinctions between conservative and radical because it fosters liberation *and* fuels essentialism, empowers people *and* polices boundaries.

Although Afrocentricity's counterhegemonic potential is easily identified when George F. Will, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., and Dinesh D'Souza feed when George F. Will, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., and Dinesh D'Souza each view it as tantamount to treason. Its glaring essentialism cannot be overlooked, however, when claims are made about supercharged melanin that "helps blacks 'speak and read faster,' as well as 'glide in the air like a Magic Johnson or hit top speeds like Florence Joyner'" (D'Souza 1995: 51). I find assessing everything in between much more difficult.

How does one assess the way Marion Barry appropriated an Afrocentric perspective, along with Christian salvation, to persuade the electorate to vote him into office? How does one assess the throngs of black men held rapt by the explicit Afrocentric themes woven into nearly every speech during the Million Man March? Or how does one square the popularity of Afrocentric ideas with the gross black-white disparity over the Simpson verdict? Assessments like these complicate the spectrum laid out by Gupta and Ferguson and perhaps give pause to scholars engaged in the debates about space, place, and identity. William Julius Wilson suggests that "the vitriolic attacks and acrimonious debate that characterized this controversy" around Afrocentric perspectives has actually "proved too intimidating to scholars, especially liberal scholars" (Wilson 1996:174). Scholars who study the U.S., especially identity formation, must tackle the complicated politics this discourse cultivates. They should neither dismiss it as exclusionary essentialism nor blindly promote its virtues. We simply need more scholars who are committed to highlighting the importance of our culture, reclaiming our history, and correcting Eurocentric distortions of our experience.

Yvonne V. Jones is one anthropologist who provides a useful approach for exploring the significance of Afrocentricity by analyzing the various ways people in Louisville, Kentucky integrate its ideas into their lives. She has documented how ideas about Afrocentricity are articulated within a wide range of local practices that may

involve the construction of a distinctive religious ideology in which Afro-Baptist tenets may be juxtapositioned with Islamic or Afrocentric beliefs and traditions, as well as the deliberate formation of an African

personality evidenced by outward symbols of dress, name changes, and participation in various social gatherings and rituals. (Jones 1997:117)

If writers coupled Jones's rich ethnographic analysis to virulent attacks aligned with intellectuals like George Will, a more balanced picture of the texture, counterhegemonic potential, and, indeed, hybridity of the Afrocentric project would emerge. While there are numerous ways to approach a cultural critique along these lines, I would like to frame my approach for explaining why Afrocentricity has emerged as an important public discourse with something like a supposition: *The complex social and cultural processes of collective identity formation that compel the majority of affluent African Americans to challenge ideas of "The American Dream" and vote overwhelmingly against their class interests lead many of these same Americans to embrace notions of Afrocentricity.*

Jennifer L. Hochschild, in *Facing up to the American Dream*, employs a mountain of survey research and opinion polls to explain the paradox she identified: that affluent African Americans are "succeeding more and enjoying it less." By the 1990s, she explains,

well-off blacks have come to doubt the reality of the [American] dream for African Americans. They have also become increasingly pessimistic about the future of the dream in general, and more embittered about American society than white Americans expect, given their class's improved standing. (Hochschild 1995:87)

In specific ways Hochschild's research confirms Michael C. Dawson's notion of a "black utility heuristic." In *Behind the Mule* (1994) Dawson draws from rational choice theory and research on black political behavior to argue that, unlike most Americans, "it is much more efficient for African Americans] to use the status of the group, both relative and absolute, as a proxy for individual utility." (Dawson 1994:10).

Hochschild and Dawson each view their research in terms of explaining a paradox or solving a puzzle, but both lines of thought turn on the fact that African Americans culturally construct collective, political, and social identities in ways that oppose the rugged individualism implicit in notions of the American Dream and in ways that ensure political homogeneity even while the black population is becoming economically polarized. The survey research Hochschild and Dawson marshal to solve these "riddles" actually quantifies the extent to which African Americans view

themselves collectively. Afrocentric activities and rituals describe and inscribe this identity with the ideas of Umoja and the oft-quoted Ashanti proverb, *I am because we are, without we I am not; I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.*

Central to the various approaches to Afrocentricity are symbolic representations like those that validate lived experience and confirm African Americans' unique cultural patterns and rich cultural heritage. This knowledge about Afrocentricity and its subsequent rise in public discourse has accompanied African Americans' increased civic and political agency since the civil rights movement. The agency is evidenced in the way activists have successfully pushed for Afrocentric approaches within the public school curriculum, social service agencies, and higher education. These dynamics also help to explain why hip-hop musicians, wedding planners, Kwanza caterers, and festival organizers respond to "the market" when they weave Afrocentric symbols into their consumer goods.

Historically, African Americans have often embraced ideas that explain contemporary social conditions and their unique contributions (and relationship) to the greater American experience. George M. Fredrickson, in *Black Liberation*, outlines similar dynamics with the rise of theological ideas about Ethiopianism in Jacksonian America. David Walker, Martin Delany, Alexander Crummell, and Frederick Douglass each articulated a form of the "Ethiopian myth" that expounded on the unique and civilized virtues of Christian Africans throughout the diaspora, while condemning white Americans for absconding the pillars of democracy and violating Jesus's clear directives delivered in the sermon on the mount (Fredrickson 1995:60). As Fredrickson notes, this type of theology used "an intellectually and emotionally satisfying narrative structure for black hopes and aspirations."²

A variety of different political, social, and cultural agendas have been promoted within the black community, and, during certain periods, some gain more currency than others. The ones that gain currency, successfully, make sense of the prevailing conditions or are simply more satisfying. While Afrocentricity offers novel approaches for negotiating contemporary society, the reasons it has emerged as a salient discourse for many Americans are the same reasons the agendas set forth by Ethiopianism, Washingtonism, Garveyism, negritude, and the black power movement all gained currency: the proponents effectively used theory and practice in an effort to combat oppression—making the object the subject, fostering agency, and cultivating subjectivity. What is new about the nineties is that

many members of the growing African American professional class have subverted what Louis Althusser calls the ideological state apparatus with Afrocentric themes.

People have successfully lobbied school boards, deacon boards, and community development boards in an effort to incorporate Afrocentric perspectives within these governing bodies' respective institutions. These efforts make people working for a more inclusive and pluralist society furious.³ The furor is often compounded by whites who impatiently point to the recent progress in racial equality, diversity of institutions, and representational curriculums; however, equally impatient blacks counter by pointing to all the inequality that remains.

The public tug-of-war has left many white Americans more sanguine about efforts to make the U.S. more inclusive and many black Americans more skeptical about making democracy work for all Americans. This tension has been accentuated because, just as whites' blacks' standards for success, equality, and justice rise as they experience some (Hochschild 1995:104). African Americans, however, cannot reasonably expect a more inclusive democracy when Rush Limbaugh and his ditto-heads, Ward Connerly and his CCRI, and William H. Rehnquist and his Supreme Court majority envision a better America with eroding affirmative action programs, draconian welfare reform, punitive immigration policies, erasure of majority-minority congressional districts, and sharp reductions in college financial aid.

Collective Identity: A Delicate Balancing Act

As the so-called black middle class adapted to the changing economy, they adopted new definitions of success. Competing with white privilege became a delicate balancing act. More affluent African Americans are increasingly pursuing success on competitive terms opposed to relative terms—characterized by an older generation and the less affluent (Hochschild 1995:142). Competitive success, for example, is the type of success achieved by a regional manager seeking a post as a V.P., but relative success is achieved by an individual doing better than, say, one's parents. By changing the criteria of success, shattering the glass ceiling with the efforts of John Henry is no longer tenable. The invisible glass ceiling actually transforms into a well-defined balance sheet where personal, social, and cultural costs must be carefully weighed against individual benefits. The bottom line: assimilation is often viewed as the price of the

American Dream. Yet that price can be negotiated by a home well appointed with African art, rhetoric about "cooperative economics," and even a Kwanza cocktail party. Various Afrocentric ideas actually play an important role on both sides of that balanced sheet.

I am not suggesting *because* affluent African Americans are jaded by the persistence of racism in the face of campaign rhetoric and civics lessons exulting principles of equality, freedom, and justice for all that many embrace notions of Afrocentricity. Nor do I want to suggest that Afrocentricity is a substitute for the American Dream. Quite the opposite, the rise of Afrocentricity is as American as hamburgers.

In 1919 William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, in their classic *Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, laid out three scenarios for Polish families who immigrated to America. The first included individuals who assimilated the values and attitudes of American individualism and consumerism. Although forced to abandon Catholicism, their family, and community because they could not engage in gift giving, reciprocity, and the practices that ensured group solidarity, they successfully melted in the pot. The second scenario included individuals who tried this approach and failed. Ostracized from community and family members, they turned to crime, delinquency, prostitution, and, in the author's terms, dysfunctional behavior. The third scenario included those who embraced and reinvented Old World values and cultural practices, adapting them to the New World circumstances. With increased value placed upon the family, community, and sense of their Polish heritage, they formed business collectives, engaged in bloc voting, and turned to the traditional spiritual practices of their motherland for succor, solace, and sanity.

Although I would explain these as cultural practices of any nested subaltern, the popularity of Afrocentricity can also be seen as quintessentially American in its strategy of empowerment and self-help. Fierce in their hostility to drugs and casual sex, people who articulate an Afrocentric discourse in the public sphere are in the forefront of black self-help movements. These facts obviously have not convinced George Will and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. that Afrocentricity is not, *prima facie*, inimical to the so-called virtues of U.S. democracy.⁴

Afrocentricity has gained a certain currency in the nineties because it helps people explain contemporary and historical conditions and counters the hegemony of Eurocentric images. Although recognizing Derrick Bell's assertion of the permanence of racism, or experiencing the nihilism that Cornell West describes, may make Afrocentricity attractive, popular,

and satisfying, many African Americans use Afrocentricity as a vehicle to nurture a collective identity (Bell 1992:xiii; West 1994:12).

The conundrum both Hochschild and Dawson explore is the fact that middle-class blacks vote against their pocketbook and challenge the precepts of the American Dream once they achieve relative standards of economic success. Although Hochschild recognized research that suggests "since 1952, well-educated blacks have consistently expressed more group consciousness than have poorly-educated blacks," both Hochschild and Dawson assume that African Americans should behave, at least statistically, like other ethnic or language minorities and reproduce patterns of rugged individualism once they have "made it" (1995:122). One can almost feel Hochschild's despair as she came to the conclusion that African Americans are not like other Americans because they tenaciously hold onto a sense of collective responsibility.

Many middle-class blacks feel an acute responsibility to their history; their poorer fellows, their race, and each other. That sense of responsibility may not be growing, but they sense that American society will not allow them to fulfill their responsibility despite new-found wealth and power [which] clearly is growing. The new frustration leads to a bitterness against other Americans, and eventually against the American Dream. (Hochschild 1995:115)

The data she uses to support this conclusion is not drawn from the research of her friend, colleague, and mentor, William Julius Wilson, but the Chicago political scientist bent on demonstrating that race is not declining in significance—Michael C. Dawson. Quoting Dawson's *Behind the Mile*, she explains, "Up to two-thirds of blacks believe that 'what happens generally to black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life'" (1995:123). Dawson, who is shackled by his own rational choice theory, dismisses culture all together. He argues that African Americans employ a bounded procedural rationality that explains why many African Americans are personally invested in the fate of the larger population. He suggests that this sort of rationality

is measured not by how well humans achieve rational ends by maximizing one's own utility but by how rational the process of decision making is. . . . According to this view of rationality, the episodic intensification of racial hostility would lead African Americans to continue basing their political choices and behaviors (at least partly) on a calcu-

lation of racial group interests, even if over a short period of time **race** has seemed to be less of a factor in determining one's life chances. (Dawson 1994:62)

In a similar fashion, both Dawson and Hochschild reach the same conclusion, African Americans tend to construct a sense of collective identity that shapes identity.

Afrocentricity can thus be viewed as a mechanism to confirm and affirm, inscribe and describe this collective identity. It nurtures the unity "thing" that is at once policed and desired. Virginia Dominguez offers a useful perspective: "How we conceptualize ourselves, represent ourselves, objectify ourselves, matters not just because it is an interesting example of the relationship between being, consciousness, knowledge, reference, and social action, but at least as much because it is a statement about power" (Dominguez 1989:190).

Afrocentricity has emerged as a significant discourse because it not only resonates but actually becomes part of these cultural processes. Negotiating power has been central to cultural formations within the African American community. As Leith Mullings eloquently notes, "The essence of African American culture, and therefore its resilience, lies in our people's persistent struggle for survival, continuity, and liberation" (1994:29). Ultimately, this is the goal of the Afrocentric project, to advance and facilitate these cultural processes.

Notes

Thanks to Molefi Asante, Betsy Bryan, Yvonne V. Jones, Maulana Karngwa, William A. Little, and Manning Marable for their support and comments.

1. Merely suggesting, however, that these scholars are rearticulating older forms of intellectual paternalism does not help explain anthropologists' absence from the debate over Afrocentricity.

2. He continues to explain that "it also planted the seeds of Pan-Negroism, or Pan-Africanism" (Fredrickson 1995:63). There are fundamental parallels with this movement in the nineteenth century and Afrocentricity today, including the notion that Africans are just as civilized as Europeans and able to erect equally grandiose civilizations.

3. Actually, if one draws parallels to the movement to desegregate public education, virtually the same patterns are articulated with Afrocentric curricula. There was resistance to desegregate graduate and professional schools, but, proposed at the grade-school level, that is when the perceived threat was heightened to a fevered pitch.

4. Describing African Americans who celebrate their African heritage,

James Baldwin similarly noted, "In this need to establish himself in relation to his [African] past he is most American." Asante actually lists specific "guidelines" for an Afrocentric perspective that would be welcomed by any U.S. civics teacher. These are "to be excellent, provocative, organized, educated, and dependable" (1988:41).

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