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The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date

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## ***The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date***

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**Hortense J. Spillers**

### **1**

The silver anniversary of Harold Cruse's *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*<sup>1</sup> has passed without remark. The occasion of the lapse, as well as a few notes on the situation of the black creative intellectual today, provides the impetus for this writing. From the distance of twenty-seven years, the "crisis" that Cruse explores appears infinitely more complex than it might have been in 1967, when the work was published to controversial hue and cry. One's impression is that the project did not win the writer very many friends or influence the right people,<sup>2</sup> but that it was as necessary a reading

1. Recently reissued, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* bears the subtitle *From Its Origins to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1967). All citations from the text come from the 1967 edition, with page numbers parenthetically noted.

2. Robert L. Allen's *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1970) examines *The Crisis* against the backdrop of the Black Power movement. See "Black Power and Bourgeois Black Nationalism," 171–80.

Contemporaneous reviews of Cruse's work are too numerous to list here, even partially, but I would call brief attention to two of them from the period: Michael Thelwell, *boundary* 2 21:3, 1994. Copyright © 1994 by Duke University Press. CCC 0190-3659/94/\$1.50.

and calling out as we had had in quite awhile, and, I would go so far as to say, have not quite matched since that time, even though we have been treated to a few celebrated “licks” on the theme by prominent black intellectuals along the way. I recall with some nostalgic yearning, related both to my youth and to what must have seemed to many of us then a period of great optimism, reading *The Crisis*, a couple of years after its publication, in great excitement and agitation of feeling. First, here was an explicit statement, *at length*, concerning the vocation of the black intellectual for the first time, as far as I could tell, since W. E. B. DuBois’s autobiographical projects, beginning with *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), that blended the strategies of the “self-life-writing” with those of cultural and political critique. In other words,

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“What Is to Be Done?” *Partisan Review* 35, no. 4 (Fall 1968): 619–22; and Ernest Kaiser, “Review,” *Freedomways* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1969): 24–41. Thelwell finds abundant ironies riddling Cruse’s posture toward the intellectuals, among them, that Cruse, while lambasting others for their pursuit of integrationist social practices, had had himself to go “downtown” for the publication of *his* book. Furthermore, just as Cruse had held black intellectuals culpable to charges of intellectual timidity and self-ostracism, he himself, Thelwell implies, had reenforced such a stance by appealing to them as a separate and distinct class interest or formation: “Even the title of this book constitutes a kind of heresy in that liberal tradition which maintains that the community of ‘intellectuals’ is raceless and shares only work-related problems of methodology, analysis, craftsmanship, for it sets up a ‘class’ of black intellectuals with common problems not shared by nonblacks” (619). Thelwell finds the intent of *The Crisis* “obscure,” its focus “blur[red],” and its reading of the role of communist ideology overdetermined in Cruse’s assessment of integrationist distortions. (I would point out another small irony of ironies: that Thelwell himself would appear as one of the essayists in a collection of responses to William Styron’s controversial novel of 1968, *The Confessions of Nat Turner. Ten Black Writers Respond* published pieces on Styron’s work that ranged in view from outrage to subtler critical signatures. The point is that if Thelwell himself does not mean the opening sentence of his review as tongue-in-cheek, then he will have missed the political implications of both the collection of essays and many of the essayists’ anger at what they felt to be aggressive presumptuousness on Styron’s part. Need we point out that black intellectuals as a social formation sprout teeth precisely because the liberal view, itself a *political* position, sutures power differences that conceal the moves it performs as a natural “innocence”?)

Ernest Kaiser reviews *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* against the perspective of African American intellectual history, noting that several of its early reviewers, many of them Anglo-American reviewers for mainstream journals and newspapers, had produced a hodgepodge of incoherence in addressing this work, precisely because they were ignorant of its predecessor texts. Kaiser’s review is valuable, because it examines several positions on *The Crisis* and the ways in which they are flawed. The *Journal of Ethnic Studies* devoted a third of its contents to a reappraisal of Cruse’s work in vol. 5, no. 2 (Summer 1977): 1–69.

DuBois's autobiographies were themselves a demonstration of the project that the black creative intellectual might engage when he or she defines his/her *auto-bios-graphê* in the perspective of historical time and agency. Between DuBois and Cruse, with the possible exceptions of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, who had both focused on the fictional writer's commitment and vocation, we had had to wait awhile, as though poised, it seemed, for an apposite interpretive gesture at the close of an era of cataclysmic events between *Brown versus Board (Topeka)* (1954) and the 1964 Civil Rights legislation—the two punctualities that frame one of the most fateful decades of African American cultural and historical apprenticeship in the United States. Second, Cruse appears to have been up to the job, not mincing words about the intellectual failures of the dominant culture, not biting his tongue, either, about the abysmal conceptual lapses of the minority one in question, specifically, the ill-preparedness of my generation of political activists to take on the strenuous task of sustained analytical labor. Now it seems that we have not only not yet articulated a systematic response to Cruse's "crisis" but that the problems that he was courageous enough to confront have not been better formulated, despite our improved access to certain cultural institutions and conceptual apparati. Taking Cruse, then, as one of our chief cartographers, can we begin to map the terrain anew? Can we say more clearly now, *after his example*, perhaps *because* of it, what the problem is that constitutes a "crisis" for the African American creative intellectual at the moment?

Our crisis today is confounded not only because so much time has passed between one systematic articulation and the next (still slumbering somewhere) but primarily because the peculiar conjunction of historical forces has brought us to an uncanny site of contradictions: when Cruse wrote his work, the impulse of the revolutionary—at least the spirit of revolt—was everywhere inchoate, although there had not yet been massive public reaction against American involvement in Vietnam. Student rebellion at the time was largely centered in the southern United States, taking its major impetus from Martin Luther King's nonviolent protocols—voter registration campaigning and grass-roots organizing in rural and urban centers across the South, and the whole range of acts of civil disobedience, from sit-ins, pray-ins, and wade-ins at pools, restaurants, movie houses, and other places of public accommodation, to the economic tool of the boycott. But Stokeley Carmichael's (Kwame Toure) cry of "Black Power" on a Mississippi road one day (which event Cruse historicizes in the closing chapter of *The Crisis*), the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the inspired witness of

Malcolm X, and the dramatic rise of the national Black Panther Party were driven like a wedge through black psyche, an occurrence that had been prepared by the Watts rebellion of 1965 and the assassination of Malcolm El-Hazz Malik El Shabazz that same year. But it seems that something so awful crystallized in 1968, on either side of the Atlantic, that in my own autobiographical sense, at least, the year irrevocably split time around it into a "before" and "after," finding closure *only* during the fall of 1969. It is as if one day the familiar world spun out of control, as, for instance, two cultural icons fell over within six weeks of each other in the raw display of a national pathology. That incredible year, which marked the assassination of both King and Robert Kennedy, which witnessed the most brutal national Democratic Party Convention in living memory, and which, by its end, saw the instauration of Republican rule that would run unbroken in the nation from 1968–1993, with a four-year respite during the Carter presidential era, would inscribe as well the inauguration of changes that we could absolutely not have foreseen in their broader scope and meaning.

The period 1968–1970 meant, at last, the fruition of a radical and pluralistic democracy, or *so it seemed*, with, for example, comparatively larger numbers of African American students admitted to the mainstream academy and agitation for the movements in black studies and women's studies, and their far-reaching implications for a radically altered curriculum, especially in the humanities. These initiatives constituted the vanguard of an attitudinal sea change, which, coterminous with the Continental movements in structuralist criticism, linguistics, feminist theory, and philosophy, would so reconfigure the leading assumptions of the traditional humanistic order, that within twenty years of the American withdrawal from Vietnam, the "English department," for example, as an institutional disciplinary site, would be virtually evacuated as a unified course of study, grounded in an indisputable canon of "great" literary work and supplemented by a more or less homogeneous critical establishment.

In brief, as turbulent as the 1960s were for those of us who lived the era, as crisis-ridden as the situation was for the black creative intellectual, as Cruse understood it, nothing within his lights or our own could have sufficiently prepared us for what I would regard as the central paradox of this social formation nearly thirty years later: Although African American intellectuals as a class have gained greater access to organs of public opinion and dissemination, although its critical enterprise has opened communication onto a repertoire of stresses that traverse the newly organized humanistic field, and although we can boast today a considerably larger

black middle and upper-middle class, with its avenues into the professions, including elective office, some corporate affiliation, virtually *all* of the NBA, and the NFL, and a fast break into the nation's multimillion dollar "image" industries, the news concerning the African American life-world generally is quite grim. In fact, it is chilling news, as we learn from certain observers, that the black prison population in the United States, for example, is substantial enough to "outfit" a good-sized city—some six hundred thousand subjects, most of them male. And, indeed, there seems very little reason to believe that certain undiminished symptoms of social dysfunction will do anything but exacerbate what is, for all intents and purposes, a genocidal circumstance: the unabated availability not only of drugs but of the social and economic network of relations that have engendered a veritable *drug culture*; the ravages of poverty and illiteracy; a vital international arms market that directly feeds a nation in love with the idea and practice of violence; and race hatred/"tribalism," restituted by an entrenched and immoral political reactionism, whose targets are the city—its poor, its young mothers, and their children.

To call attention to these vital details is to indulge the litany of responses that is by now customary for the black creative intellectual.<sup>3</sup> Though

3. Pastor of Dorchester, Massachusetts's Azuza Christian Community, the Reverend Eugene Rivers addressed an open letter to Boston's black intellectuals entitled "On the Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack," published in the *Boston Review* 17, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 1992): 3–4. The letter elaborates its concerns against the background of Noam Chomsky's essay, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," which appeared in a 1967 issue of the *New York Review of Books*. Chomsky, in turn, had been inspired by a series of articles written by Dwight MacDonald, appearing in the journal *Politics*. The question was whether intellectuals have any special moral responsibility, and Rivers quotes from Chomsky's piece: "Intellectuals have a 'responsibility . . . to speak the truth and to expose lies' and a duty 'to see events in their historical perspective'" (3). Calling directly on the Boston/Cambridge intellectuals by name, Rivers reminds his readers that a black elite is "not exempt" from the current crises facing African American communities across the country. Rivers's call was answered on two separate occasions, at fora sponsored both times by the *Boston Review*. The first exchange took place on 30 November 1992, at the Arco Forum at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government; hosted by Anthony Appiah of Harvard, speakers included Rivers himself, Cornel West, bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Glenn Loury, and Margaret Burnham. The transactions from the initial symposium were published in the *Boston Review* 18, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 1993): 22–28.

The second round of talks was convened at MIT, again under the auspices of the *Boston Review*, with complementary sponsorship provided by MIT's Department of Politics; hosted by Margaret Burnham of the Department of Politics, speakers included Reverend Rivers, Regina Austin, Randall Kennedy, Selwyn Cudjoe, and bell hooks. This second

no one ever quite says it this way, it is as if the intellectual himself/herself is culpable, both as a social formation within the larger ensemble and *in person*, for this precise structure of contradictions. Because Cruse is working off the traditional emplotment, *The Crisis*, too, refracts culpability of the black creative intellectual; in fact, we might even say that *disparagement* of the intellectual in general and of the African American intellectual in particular inscribes itself as a rhetorical form of utterance. But if the intellectual subject, as I see it, can accept no credit for whatever gains black Americans have made over the past thirty years, except that he/she has been a beneficiary, then one is hard put to impute blame at his doorstep for the failures. It seems to me that a more useful way of analytical and declamatory procedure would be the attempt to establish a *total perspective* against which the work of the intellectual unfolds. In other words, the plight of the American city and its implications for the social landscape must be examined as one of the primary structural givens to which social formations variously respond. I attempt such a sketch below.

While the desegregation of the nation's public school systems was *intended* to address and ameliorate inferior educational facilities provided for America's black population, it appears to have induced, *by the way*, the collapse of a homogeneous structure of feeling and value that had consolidated notions of self-esteem and steeled the soul of the black young against the assaults that awaited it. But the liquidation of a traditional program of values, as it relates to African Americans, is only a single feature of the radical swerve that worries one's perspective; in fact, we might even go so far as to say that the dispersal of black intellectual talent, and its deflection away from its customary social target, is a *symptom* of certain *global* forces that have had a negative impact on the life of American society in general, rather than the primary *cause* of devastation: the entire array of postmodernist sociality, whose chief engine is fueled by late-capital economies,<sup>4</sup> has homed in on black life with laser-like precision. Very specifically, the condensation and displacement of labor (intruding Freud where one never expected to find him) favor the well-educated social subject who can dance

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forum occurred nearly a year later on 17 November 1993. The *Boston Review* published the transactions in volume 19, no. 1 (Feb./Mar. 1994): 3–9. Glenn Loury, whose illness prevented him from attending the second meeting, published a companion piece, "The Poverty of Reason," 10–11, in the same issue of the journal.

4. I broadly allude to one of the definitive works on the postmodernist encounter provided by Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

the new technologies of automated work, moving the society toward less and less *physical* labor, altering notions of liberal property in the process, and toward those subjects who can interpret the social organism back to itself as readers, writers and managers of highly consolidated social properties, both real and symbolic.<sup>5</sup> The actual flight of labor, which one had not quite realized was “flight” until the dramatic closing of the General Motors plant at Willow Run, Michigan, for example, during the national political campaigns of 1992, quite likely originated when one was simply being annoyed rather than watchful—during the era of what we have come to call the oil crisis of 1973, with its attendant manipulation of the global money supply, the increasing political clout of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and the coming to international dominance of the Asian market, particularly the awesome competitive machinery of Japan’s. (Those of us who grew up in strong, black nuclear families quite simply shudder to think what might have happened to ourselves in the absence of, say, a Memphis International Harvester, the company from which my father retired in the early seventies. A manufacturer of farm implements, based in Illinois, Memphis International Harvester moved away from this major southern city shortly thereafter, phasing out a few thousand jobs with its departure. One of the city’s other major industries—Firestone Tire and Rubber—closed at about the same time, as it, and other post–World War II enterprises, whose workers had educated a good number of the early and late “boomer” crop, either disappeared altogether or converted to greater automation. It is not by error that a phenomenon named “the consumer,” the origin and end of mass distribution and production, was “born” to us with vivid presence at the close of the sixties. Automated machinery, of course, “automatically” consolidates labor’s quantity, as it alters work type and content, and as President Clinton alludes to the point by encouraging the national business community to practice and elaborate protocols of job “retraining.” He predicts that America’s current college population, for instance, will change job *type* at least a half dozen times before retirement.)

The decline of the American market, then, which Reagan’s “Good Morning, America” low-tax program did not quite forestall, has joined forces with late-capital schemes of global reorganization in a dizzying velocity of

5. A useful collection of essays on positions on property, beginning with the seventeenth-century doctrine of liberal property espoused by John Locke, is provided in *Property: Mainstream and Critical Positions*, ed C. B. MacPherson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).



change that has shifted the very imaginary object on which the black creative intellectual had worked at one time—a stake in the soil, actually bound by coordinates on the map of the inner city: the old “community” is neither *what* nor *where* it used to be, as the tax base could not but have followed the wealth—both in and of itself and of labor’s potentials—to the city’s rim and well beyond.<sup>6</sup> Even though it seems to me that this latest version of urban flight might be traced back rather pointedly to a month and a day in 1954 and the famous (or infamous, depending on one’s viewpoint) Supreme Court mandate to public school districts to desegregate “with all deliberate speed,” such movement, along the rift of America’s sharply drawn binary markers—“black” and “white”—was underscored by voting patterns that brought massive gains to a new, post-Goldwater Republican Party. At the very moment, however, that the new studies movements and widespread student protests were making their witness felt on college campuses across the United States, a mature political “backlash”—which the Clinton “Third Way” interrupted, three decades later, by interpolating a different political strategy between a strictly urban, predominantly minority, and poor electorate, on the one hand, and a basically suburban, predominantly white and middle-class electorate, on the other—had been preparing itself for well over a decade.

Within this maelstrom of forces, the black, upwardly mobile, well-educated subject has not only “fled” the old neighborhood (in some cases, the old neighborhood isn’t even there anymore!) but, just as importantly, has been *dispersed* across the social terrain to unwonted sites of work and calling. From my point of view, this marks the *ace* development that today’s black creative intellectual neither grasps in its awful sufficiency nor wants to bear up under inasmuch as he/she is sorely implicated in its stark ramifications. (We chase, instead, after fantastic notions, quite an easier pastime than looking at what has happened to community.) It would be an error to assume that he/she has had the *choice* to do other than go out, just as our current social and political analyses are spectacularly “hung up” on a too literal and simpleminded idea of what community might mean, in the first place, and *in addition to* a location called home. I believe that an under-

6. Mike Davis offers a stunning reading of the nation’s socioeconomic crisis by way of one of its major inner-city formations—South Central Los Angeles—in “Who Killed LA? A Political Autopsy,” *The New Left Review* 197 (Jan./Feb. 1993): 3–29. Davis trails the tax base to the suburban context and discusses its implications for presidential politics 1992. But against his broad strokes, we espy the larger fate of the American people in light of post-Cold War labor shortages.

standing of this internal diaspora would bring the black creative intellectual to a more satisfactory view of the thematics of flight, a rather contrastive nuance, after all, to that of *dispersal*. And it would certainly redirect his/her wasted energy, moaning over a *monomyth* of a version of community that *only* needs enterprise zones in order to be whole again. This paralysis of understanding, brought on by guilt over one's relative success and profound delusion about one's capacity to lead the masses (of which, one supposes, it is certain that she is not one!) out of their Babylon, disables the intellectual on the very material ground where he/she now stands: on the site of the mainstream academy and its various ideological apparati, for the most part, as the assumptions of the progressive movements that propelled him/her to such status in the first place are quietly, though widely, threatened now by a well-heeled, highly efficient coordination of right-wing hegemonic forces,<sup>7</sup> spreading like mycelium through the body politic. The conservative agitation that Cruse must have sorely, urgently felt during the writing of *Crisis* is fully unfolded in our midst today, and the picture is not pretty. As I see it, the most significantly assertive domestic enemy since the ravages and excesses of the McCarthy era drove a punishing offensive through the heart of an older cadre of left-wing intellectuals, this new immorality of power, tricked out in the discourses of political and economic rationalism and binding a national array of appallingly ignorant media in its thrall (to wit, the canard of "political correctness," virtually unquestioned by nearly *all* print media in the United States) goes basically unchallenged by today's comfortable left-wing intellectual subjects, of which social formation the black creative intellectual *ought* to be not only a member in good standing but perhaps among the *first* standing. Distracted, instead, by false or secondary issues, yielding apparently little resistance to the sound intrusion of market imperatives on the entire intellectual object, including that of African American studies, today's black creative intellectual lends herself/himself—like candy being taken from a child—to the mighty seductions of publicity and the "pinup," rather like what an editor of *Lingua Franca* only half-jokingly dubbed, once upon a time, the "African American du jour." Might it be useful, then, to suggest that *before* the black creative intellectual can "heal" her people, she must consider to what extent she must "heal" herself, and that *before* the black creative intellectual can offer a salvific

7. A piece of work that I would consider required reading for a fuller understanding of the political conjuncture in which we are currently located, "Manufacturing the Attack on Liberalized Education," by Ellen Messer-Davidow, *Social Text* 36 (Fall, 1993): 40–81, unfolds the sources and the stage of right-wing U.S. political formation in the Reagan/Bush era.

program against crack and crack-up, she is called upon to consider what immediate conversion she must herself undergo? And is it too much to imagine that what is wrong with "the community" is wrong with oneself? And furthermore, could one submit that the black creative intellectual, like the black musician whom she so admires, has an "object" in fact, but that she is not always interested in what it is?

One should not be at all surprised, then, that the post-Cruse intellectual "throws down," in the midst of coeval pressures and forces, looking and feeling, at least some of the time, like a lost ball in high weeds. In fact, Cruse now appears to have been far better situated than we, in our "lateness," in our rather startling ethical laxity on occasion. In the wake of a powerful spectacle of pain and loss, the old vocabularies of moral suasion and consensual conscience—and we feel it everywhere, from our relations with African American students and colleagues, alike, and theirs with ourselves, to our considerable indifference to anything outside career—seem peculiarly impotent and moribund now. Not only have we lost a considerable percentage of our natal population to the arts and stratagems of destruction—and realize that we will lose quite a few more before this massive hemorrhaging ceases—but also our customary discourses of the moral and ethical quickening, with its evocative lament, its vision of the redemptive possibility, the old faiths that could move a mountain, or so one believed, all mark the lost love-object now.

But certain fatalism need not be the outcome; instead, we are called upon to reconstitute the centrality of Cruse's interrogation—what is the work of the black creative intellectual?—*for all we know now?*

## 2

While the fundamental charge that Cruse laid out is not different, *by definition*, in the contemporary period, it seems infinitely harder to grasp because of "conditions on the ground," some of which I have briefly attempted to explore. In short, the apparent homogeneity of the mass, which black life offered to the imagination in the late sixties, is more or less revealed now as the necessary fiction that has come unraveled at the seams. Cruse worked his two major premises against the notion of an ethnic group consciousness *in place*; this economy of motives defined for him the reality of black persons, *as a homogeneous social formation*, in America: (1) on the one hand, the impulse to collective self-determination and economic independence, or an African American cultural nationalism—"Black Power," in short (after Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.), and (2) the impulse

to assimilation of the ideals and promises of American democracy, on the other. For Cruse, the nationalist strain was “strikingly cogent” across lines of class and could be thought of as a “residuum of what might be called the Afro-American ethnic group consciousness in a society whose legal Constitution recognizes the rights, privileges, and aspirations of the individual, but whose political institutions recognize the reality of ethnic groups only during election contests” (4, 6). The integrationist strain opposes the nationalist in Cruse’s scheme, while both have their roots in the nineteenth century. Even though “integrationism” was not available as a concept to Frederick Douglass, the latter embodies nevertheless Cruse’s prototypical representative of the integrationist urge, as Douglass’s contemporary, Martin R. Delany, for example, stands for the “rejected strain,” or the nationalist impulse. The dilemma for Cruse was the capitulation of black intellectual leadership to integrationist formulas that essentially depleted the energies of the community, as they robbed the latter of its crucial human and symbolic capital. In DuBois, the two strains “nearly merged into a new synthesis,” inasmuch as DuBois was “a leading exponent of the Pan-Africanism that had its origins with Martin R. Delany,” as well as one of the key movers of the Niagara Movement (1905) and what Cruse calls the “NAACP [growing out of the latter] integrationist trend” (6).

The thrust of *The Crisis*, then, is to demonstrate systematically the default of black intellectual leadership in relinquishing its agenda to mainstream apparati and personalities, focusing on the fate of the Harlem community as a quintessential instance of the life-world in the post-World War II era. However, Cruse is careful to provide a backdrop to Harlem in the fifties and sixties by examining the political pressures brought to bear on it during the twenties and the period of the Harlem Renaissance. Pushing the analysis back in the early chapters to the teens and to Philip A. Payton’s Afro-American Realty Company, a movement in which black economic independence was principally responsible for the African influx into Harlem, Cruse rehearses the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 Russia on the conceptual weave of ideas available to black intellectuals along an evolving political spectrum. In fact, Harlem’s political landscape was grounded in the antipodal oppositions that reflect Cruse’s primary binarism—nationalism versus integration: Garvey’s “Back-to-Africa” movement and its attendant black nationalism, on the one hand, and the radical historical materialists, on the other, and their alliance with Marxist thinkers, who refracted the political imperatives of the Communist movement in their theory and practice.

As these considerably antagonistic forces warred over time for the

soul of Harlem, as it were, in the pages of *The Messenger*, *The Masses*/*The New Masses*, and *The Partisan Review*, among other organs of public opinion, Harlem itself lost its resources in black theater, for example—to wit, the American Negro Theater—and a paradigmatic occasion to hammer out an infrastructure of institutional support that would generate and sustain African American cultural life. While the powerful declamatory and polemical ambitions of Cruse's work are central to his project, he lays out, early on, a ten-point plan not only to correct the errors of the past (which continue into the present) but also to set the community and its leadership on a different future course. For Cruse, the “answer” was primarily economic in the pursuit of a cooperative economic idea against the ideology of competitive market economics. Under “basic organizational objectives” spelled out in the third chapter of Part 1, Cruse elaborates the following aims for the Harlem community and, by metonymic substitution, for the entire life-world:

1. The immediate “[f]ormation of community-wide citizens' planning groups for a complete overhaul and reorganization of Harlem's political, economic, and cultural life. . . .”<sup>8</sup>

2. Black people with business competence should form cooperatives “which will take over completely the buying, distributing, and selling of all basic commodities used and consumed in Harlem, such as food, clothing, luxuries, services, etc.”

3. Harlem's proliferation of small, privately owned black businesses should give way to consolidated cooperatives that “would eliminate this overlapping, lower prices, and improve quality. Cooperatives would also create jobs. Many of the excess stores could be transformed into nurseries, medical dispensaries for drug addicts, etc.”

4. “[C]itizens' committees to combat crime and drug peddling. These committees should seek legal permission to be armed to fight the dangerous network of drug-selling.”

5. “[A] new, all-Negro, community-wide political party to add bargaining force to social, cultural and economic reforms.”

6. “Extensive federal and state aid . . . to finance complete economic, political and cultural reforms in Harlem. Without political power these social changes cannot be won.”

7. Tenants' cooperative ownership of housing, “or, at least, municipally controlled housing.”

8. Cruse felt that such groups should aim beyond “the goals of mere anti-poverty welfare state programs such as HARYOU-ACT” (The Harlem Youth Rehabilitation Program-Harlem Youth Unlimited).

8. "Citizens' planning groups on the reorganization of Harlem's political, economic, and cultural life should aim to establish *direct* lines of communication from the community to appropriate departments and agencies of the federal government . . . whenever it is deemed necessary and politically apropos, and in the interest of expediting community decisions, municipal and state echelons should be by-passed."

9. "Citizens' planning groups must devise a new school of economics based on class and community organization. Such a school should be predicated on the need to create a *new black middle class* organized on the principle of cooperative economic ownership and technical administration."

10. "Citizens' planning groups should petition the Federal Communications Commission on the social need to allocate television and radio facilities to community group corporations rather than only to private interests." (88–89; Cruse's emphases)

The Cruse cooperative model, with its egalitarian attitudes and roots in the indigenous locale, would have had to situate itself in perspective with wider national and international interests—in effect, would have had to *compete* against such interest formulas—but Cruse recognized the latent capitalist desire in the African American middle-class subject, at least, that would challenge his model, if not wreck it, so that a good deal of the urgency of *The Crisis* is directed toward its contradictions. It should be pointed out that the fractured scene of ideological belief has not been healed, inasmuch as the African American community remains muddled about capitalistic practices, or so it seems, tending to believe that only white racist supremacy has prevented it from sharing in, from, in fact, helping to generate, the fruits of "business," what a Steinbeck narrator once called a "curious ritualized thievery." What this belief means is that black Americans *would be* capitalistic, *except for*; this rather unarticulated wish is quite a different thing from belief in a systemic and radical uprooting of the dominant paradigm of American economism. At any rate, Cruse's ten-point plan shares a resonance with classical black models of economic and cultural independence in its appeal to a materialist deep reading, at the same time that it anticipates schemes of collective wealth and accountability.

Cruse develops his interrogation around the Harlem scene because of its critical black mass, its concentration of symbolic capital, and its sensitive location in what was, at the time of the writing, the preeminent world-class city. Harlem, as the cultural capital of black America, had held this position for at least a century, and probably a bit longer, when we recall the sites of beneficent and cooperative societies, church activities, and women's support networks, lifelines which are detailed in Dorothy Ster-

ling's *We Are Your Sisters*.<sup>9</sup> New York City, if not Harlem, per se, along with Philadelphia, offered early black self-help programs through clerical organizations, particularly the African-Methodist Episcopal Church, as early as, in the case of Philadelphia's "Mother Bethel" A.M.E. Church, the late eighteenth century. The reign of New York City as one of two or three urban centers that focused the liberational energies of America's free black population remained unchallenged through the period of post-Reconstruction and gained reenforcement in the post-World War I period as an outcome of massive black flight from the South. The year 1918, with its record lynchings across the southern United States, as black soldiers returned home from the killing fields of Europe, effecting common cause with labor recruitment efforts and the trials of the peonage-sharecropping system, delivered unprecedented numbers of black people to the New York scene of Harlem and what Cruse tracks of Phil Payton's real-estate organization. Its culmination is expressed as a cultural/arts movement in the Harlem Renaissance, but Cruse would attribute the failure of this arts movement to sustain itself to that complex of forces that remained knotted and left over from the tensions between Garveyism and black radicalism, à la Marxist thought.

The official home of the NAACP, the National Urban League, and their respective organs of public address, *Crisis* magazine and *Opportunity*, Harlem was poised, at the close of the war, to begin to exploit its proximity to the publishing houses, the major presses, the salon culture of the Big Apple (for example, Mabel Dodge Luhan as chief hostess of the 1912 renaissance), and those agencies of cultural and artistic brokering that would offer key access to figures like James Weldon Johnson and Claude McKay, who both figure prominently in Cruse's reading of early Harlem culture. Harlem's wealth of symbolic capital, including the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library and powerful local organizations such as the Abyssinian Missionary Baptist Church—pastored by the Clayton Powells and Wyatt T. Walker, among others—offers additional reasons why its appeal seemed only natural to Cruse, who had spent a good part of his young manhood in the community. At one time the home of Sugar Hill, with its substantial bourgeois and professional-class black subjects, Harlem is today the shattered "dream-deferred" of one of its finest poets—Langston Hughes, who, in the heyday of *his* Harlem, sang its democratic possibilities, its *mezclada* of Afri-

9. Dorothy Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984). See especially Part 2, "Free Women, 1800–1861" (85–235), on the early work by African American women's community.



can American and African-diasporic elements. Hughes died the year that *The Crisis* was published, as though marking the collapse of a particular cultural synthesis.

It seems fair to observe, then, that Harlem's centrality as cultural capital of black America has been effectively eroded by forces too complex to exhaust here; some of them, however, are immediately explicable in Republican political schemes of the early eighties and beyond, if not the late, difficult years of the Carter presidency, whose policies of "benign neglect" of America's great cities in the East, and chiefly of New York City, aided in their depopulation trends and the subsequent economic maturity of the country's Sun Belt, certain major southern cities, especially Miami and Atlanta—both capitals now of the *new* New South—and California's fabulous Route 1, the gateway to the Pacific Rim and Central America. When one speaks today about a cultural and intellectual capital of black America, the mind scatters in different directions, as it is at least clear that "it" is no longer a place. But certainly Atlanta, with its favorable climate, its black critical mass and manageable human scale, its affordable real estate, and its efficient infrastructure and hospitable disposition to high-yield investment capital has become, since the publication of *The Crisis*, a major player for such honors. DuBois's "hymn" to "Atlantis"—an imaginative *tour de force* on the principal stop along the old "Black Belt" nearly a century ago—seems, from our current perspective, appropriately forward-looking. But however one might respond to this question for the pollsters, the contradictory impulse that stamps African American life and thought as an unmistakable ambivalence is supplemented now by the subject's need to work out a new poetics of travel and exile, a new sort of relation to home that is no longer bound to the specificity of place but that the subject must now learn to *remember*. In other words, because Harlem is no longer quite in vogue, nor yet the City on a Hill in Cruse's central vision, one must decide anew what he/she now thinks about Memphis and Birmingham.

Though Cruse does not touch on DuBois and travel as a significant theme in the life of black creative intellectuals, it is nonetheless imperative that DuBois's and Cruse's successors do so, inasmuch as its attendant anxieties bear on a subject that African American culture criticism *does* make explicit: DuBois had called it the "double consciousness." And while the DuBoisian paradigm is not exactly the same idea as Cruse's "nationalism" versus "integrationism," both concepts resemble each other in the emphatic split that they each posit at the center of black life.

The distance and the difference between DuBois and Cruse are not



contextual alone, but signal an epistemic shift of terms, the differing critical postulates and instruments that bring new objects on the social landscape into view, or ones that show new facets of relationship between one object and another. DuBois was writing in the early decades—he lived so *long*—of the appearance of the disciplines of the social sciences in the United States: sociology, economics, and psychology, in particular. Cruse, by contrast, was at work, having come of age in the 1940s, in the triumphant era of the object of the social science: “man” in his milieu, as the Marxian *homo economicus*, as the primary target of elements of the socius (work and labor relations, family life, leisure time, sickness, aging, and dying), and as the major features of “human” were atomized in the particular protocols of a specific disciplinary object. These rather sharp contextual and epistemic contrasts do not just describe but foreshadow one of the central concerns of this writing—the matter was not entirely lost on Cruse—and that is the extent to which the intellectual is *chosen* and formed for his/her task by the prevailing critico-theoretical paradigms, rather than simply *choosing* and getting down to work; as I hope to suggest shortly (and in short), following the lead of Thomas Kuhn<sup>10</sup> and Louis Althusser<sup>11</sup> on constituting the cog-

10. One of the most important works on paradigm formation and its impact on scientific research is provided by Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, vol. 2, no. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

11. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: Verso Books, 1986); see especially Part 1, Louis Althusser, “From *Capital* to Marx’s Philosophy,” 11–71. All quotations are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in my text as *RC*.

I obtained a copy of Althusser’s posthumously published autobiography, *The Future Lasts Forever* (*L’Avenir dure longtemps*), ed. Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang, trans. Richard Veasey, with an intro. by Douglas Johnson (New York: The New Press, 1993), too late to examine for this writing. Its revelations will inevitably alter our reading of “Althusserianism,” as Douglas Johnson calls it, though I would not attempt to predict in what ways. If, as Johnson suggests, the autobiography “is filled with details which one can read, irrespective of the destiny of the Althusser,” then I would conjecture that “Althusserianism” offers an “intellectual adventure” that we might pursue, as well as the “histoire à sensation” (Introduction, xvii). In any case, I am not shy to press a point borrowed from his theoretical scaffolding in order to advance the building at hand. Althusser died in 1990, of a heart attack, at seventy-two years of age, after a long regimen of psychiatric treatment and sporadic confinement in various French hospitals. One of them was Paris’s Sainte-Anne, a site which provided the occasion for Michel Foucault’s studies in madness—which would lead him to *Madness and Civilization*—when Foucault, along with Johnson and Althusser, was an agrégé candidate at the École normale supérieure. The autobiography features two pieces, “The Facts” (“Les Faits,” 1976) and the longer



insensitive to the nationalist element in black culture, were, in fact, hostile to it, as one intellectual and writer after another ended their careers disillusioned over this peculiar lapse. Others besides Cruse have asked why the radicals could make room for, or accommodate, every other nationalistic interest, *except* the black one. Cruse said as much, offering, as a result, an incisive critique of entrenched Marxist dogma.

Though Cruse might have gone even further himself toward exposing the fault lines of his own theoretical moment, of his own distinct contribution to precisely the Mills-Bell debate that he valorizes in the final chapter of *The Crisis*, no one, I believe, has spoken more forcefully of what must be done; particular paragraphs from the peroration of *The Crisis* still lacerate:

The special function of the Negro intellectual is a cultural one. He should take to the rostrum and assail the stultifying blight of the commercially depraved white middle class who has poisoned the structural roots of the American ethos and transformed the American people into a nation of intellectual dolts. He should explain the economic and institutional causes of this American cultural depravity. He should tell black America how and why Negroes are trapped in this cultural degeneracy, and how it has dehumanized their essential identity, squeezed the lifeblood of their inherited cultural ingredients out of them, and then relegated them to the cultural slums. They should tell this brain-washed white America, this "nation of sheep," this overfed, overdeveloped, over privileged (but culturally pauperized) federation of unassimilated European remnants that their days of grace are numbered. (455–56)

Cruse goes on, but we see right away in this paragraph's unmitigated commitment to the declamatory word, to the polemical address, marked by anaphora and a virtually visionary appeal, what was driving Cruse and how right he was; the passage rather reminds me of the rhythmical and performative steam behind particular clusters of sentences by Cornel West, from *Breaking Bread*,<sup>12</sup> in his dialogue with bell hooks. Though I have decided

12. Cornel West and bell hooks, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), see especially "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," 137–47. One of the clearest, and most compassionate, voices of our time, Cornel West would supplement the Marxist and Foucaultian paradigms of knowledge with the habit of insurgency as the required *repositioning* of the black creative intellectual. While I agree with him that the insurgent feature of black intellectual life must be recovered in its critico-theoretical efficacy, I take fairly strong objection to the *route* that his conclusion traverses:

to quarrel with aspects of the West/hooks text, I nevertheless recognize the role that *rhetorical inspiration* is called upon to play in intellectual work. For West, the dilemma of the black intellectual will not heal itself until this social formation of thinkers articulates a new, Foucault-inspired "regime of truth" that is "linked to, yet not confined by, indigenous institutional practices permeated by kinetic orality and emotional physicality, the rhythmic syncopation, the protean improvisation, and the religious, rhetorical, and antiphonal elements of Afro-American life."<sup>13</sup> One spies the black preacher in the heart of this model, and while such transformation might help (and I rather doubt that it will), one can guess that it would be as easy to turn the preacher into an intellectual, as it would to turn an intellectual into a preacher. At any rate, both Cruse and West capture *in the writing* the heartfelt passion that I believe has compelled the black creative intellectual all along. For Cruse, the African American culture worker was a *man* (Lorraine Hansberry is one of the few women whose work makes an appearance in *The Crisis*, and not very flatteringly), a man bent upon a mission, apoca-

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Firmly rooted in the romantic ground of organicity, this argument conduces toward the two most powerful (and predictable) motifs of African American cultural life: "*the black Christian tradition of preaching and the Black musical tradition of performance*" (West's emphasis 136). Compared to the "richness, diversity, and vitality" of these great forces, "black literate intellectual production" is impoverished, etc. Not only is "black literate intellectual production" *another order of cases*, with which the current generation of black creative intellectuals is not consistently engaged, but the analogy itself, which actually collapses those *differences on the bottom line*, induces invidious distinction. One could say, on the one hand, that black preaching shows no commensurate achievement to John Coltrane's discography, while, on the other, no musical artist, one might contend, can claim an accomplishment equal to the Reverend Martin Luther King's—in actual and pragmatic outcome (i.e., Civil Rights legislation, etc.). Either way, such an interpretation would be absurd, wrongheaded, and incapable of providing the subject the means by which to justly gauge either black preaching or black musical performance. Just so, I would suggest that the way to intellectual "greatness," if we must put forth a cattle show here, will *not* consist in the oral, improvisational, and histrionic modes of production, but in the risks, *in writing*, in the systematic wager to expose the gaps in Western writing economies. I would submit that the historic *conceptual/enunciating* impoverishment of African and diasporic social formations is equal, at every step, to their "concrete oppression" and, in fact, *names* its twin efficacy. What, then, is black creative intellectual production when *not* oral, improvisational, and histrionic? We already *know* what it is as the latter, if the real legacy that we fashioned during the late sixties tells us anything and signals exactly where we have landed today. We might say, finally, that the work of the intellectual is to make her reader/hearer *discomfitted*, *unoriented* and, therefore, *self-critical*. She is not, in fact, a "Dr. Feelgood," or "Mr. Goodbar."

13. West and hooks, *Breaking Bread*, 144.

lyptic in character, upon whose effectiveness the very survival of not only the community but the very nation itself depended. Cruse concludes the paragraph:

The job has hardly begun. America is an unfinished nation—the product of a badly-bungled process of inter-group cultural fusion. America is a nation that lies to itself about who and what it is. It is a nation of minorities ruled by a majority of one—it thinks and acts as if it were a nation of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. This white Anglo-Saxon ideal, this lofty dream of a minority at the summit of its economic and political power and the height of its historical self-delusions, has led this nation to the brink of self-destruction. And on its way, it has effectively dissuaded, crippled and smothered the cultivation of a democratic cultural pluralism in America. (456)

I think that Cruse here is calling upon his intellectual John the Baptist to step into the fray and lead the charge that Randolph Bourne had dared to imagine in the 1920s. Troping on Bourne, Cruse suggests, “For American society, the most crucial requirement at this point is a complete democratization of the national cultural ethos. This requires a thorough, democratic overhauling of the social functions of the entire American cultural apparatus” (457).

For all his prickliness of style and certitude of conviction in his own superiority to the task—and in some ways, that only Cruse appears to understand what is needed offers a needless distraction for the reader—Harold Cruse betrays, in *The Crisis*, his link to the times: He was its child in language, as we recall that the late sixties were one of America’s great eras of black preaching, in King, in Malcolm X, in Baldwin’s writings, even though we do not customarily think of James Baldwin as *preaching* in his written work, and Cruse was his time’s child in the sure beauty of hopefulness, of *looking forward*, and he was most certainly its child in the evocation of a scene of confrontational hostility between dual and distinctive agonists, or opponents. While Cruse had quite forcefully and persuasively urged the black creative intellectual of his audience to look toward his *numerous* affiliations with a critical eye, indeed, to seek to forge strategic alliances and politically appropriate friendships, he falls back in the press of closure on the time-honored literary device known as “Black America” and “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant” America. While there is never a doubt that “Black” and “Wasp” are sign-vehicles that signify real political constituencies and concrete cultural allegiances, it is also true that there is enough overlap be-

tween these intersubjectivities—for good or ill—on the cultural and social plane that a strict division between them is messed up everywhere *but on paper*; in other words, the black creative intellectual of Cruse's time, with his increasingly "integrated" social status, was being importuned to assail *some* of his friends. And *benefits*.

If living in the time after Cruse has taught us anything, it has been virtually knee-jerk doubt, unease, and suspicion of what we have come to recognize as binary claims. That old American mine field, wired with updated booby traps, staked out the terrain that Cruse had to cross. He negotiated it fairly well, in my view—our age, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, has not yet produced an even remotely comparable reading in imitation of its patient and skillful exegesis. Nevertheless, that was then, and here we are now, in the aftermath of not only his writing but also a deranged global order and a decentered, if not jettisoned, subject of history. Because Cruse could not have anticipated the massive project of deconstruction—and here I do not mean specific texts but, rather, an entire repertoire of gestures that have dismantled many of the very assumptions of humanistic inquiry—Cruse becomes for us, from this distance, a *closed* mastery, dated by its era yet useful in its incisive daring. That he spoke to his time in the name of the black creative intellectual is sufficient.

### 3. Do You Know What They Call You Behind Your Back?

Even though starting from a different point, the intellectual is situated in African American culture in precisely the same manner that Cruse was—poised toward the history that hurts, to echo Jameson.<sup>14</sup> But the link between this hurting history and the step beyond marks the immeasurable distance that separates us from Cruse's certainties and those of the late sixties. The intellectual, then, installed in his/her own autobiographical moment, is always wrestling with a tale of the same two cities; one of them goes this way: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* recounts a tale in which the hero/protagonist is confronted in an open forum by a Negro who asks a real question. The setting is the university, and the audience, of course, is predominantly white (as it gallingly shows the tendency to be, and as the

14. As the "experience of Necessity," Fredric Jameson argues, as the refusal of masterful encodation to be dismantled, "History is what hurts." See "On Interpretation," in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 102.

question itself implied criticism of Malcolm's position). For all of his significant beauty, a dogmatist, nevertheless, the public Malcolm assumed that his fellow and brother was "trying to get house," as we used to say in the neighborhood, by posing *that* kind of query, in *that* kind of space. When one attempts "to get house," he wishes to make points at his interlocutor's expense, to win the crowd and its approbation. The man may or may not have been "up to" this game of signifying,<sup>15</sup> but it felt so to Malcolm, who delivered, in turn, the withering "answer" that stops black blood cold: Do you know what they call you behind your back? And by the age of six, if not before, every black child knows that it is "nigger."

Malcolm, himself signifying, was illegitimately silencing debate, which marks the difference, at the same time that his interlocutor, in case he'd "forgotten," was being reminded of his *positionality*, despite. In other words, the tacit agreement that prevailed among parties—to submit the behavior and the desire to the *rules of the moment*—was disrupted by its sudden return to the moment's diegesis. (It goes without saying that to do so is rather like striking a tear through the fabric of film stock at the moment that it rolls through the projector.) The black creative intellectual, then, is rarely afforded the *occasion of the moment* clean; either he/she will remind him-/herself, or someone else will, of the "big picture," let's say, the material scene through which he/she is moving. The very ability to *differentiate* oneself as *an intellectual worker* under the historicizing conditions of African American culture, long constituted in and by dominance as a mute *facticity* and *tactility*, has barely been achieved by African Americans across the life-world. In fact, as one speaks, he/she does so against the background that Malcolm X (and, I dare say, *any* figure of public standing) exploited with considerable cunning.

So it is that the "homegrown" intellectual is addressing her hermeneutic demand not only to the cultural dominant but to her natal community as well. Furthermore, it is by sectors of both that she is, in effect, interpellated, or summoned, as a responsible subject and subjectivity. And how

15. The "signifying" process comprises one of the rich semiotic practices of the life-world and has been the subject of seminal investigation in Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977); see especially chap. 5, "'The Forms of Things Unknown': Black Modes of Discourse," 101–67. In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Henry Louis Gates, Jr., magisterially bridges Smitherman's vernacular "signifyin/siggin" and literary theory's signification to construct a contemporary interpretive model of black tradition theorizing "about itself."



could it be otherwise? How could it not be double trouble that her very vocation is itself a space not yet entirely cleared out, as it were, by a culture that maintains no obligation at all to believe *her*, especially; to treat her, to imagine her, as a credible discursive subject, working on an intellectually identifiable object, at the same time that she encounters it as contradictory, if not adversarial, that she moves on in a “negative capability”? The *other* tale, then, that the black creative intellectual confronts marks the weave of contradiction as a fruitful one, but only if . . . It is, perhaps, too soon here to speak of *bravery*, but I suspect that that must be our destination through the reversals of assumption that now make it difficult, if not impossible, to (1) reconstitute a “talented tenth,” which is itself the culminative position of the *myth of representation* (as both DuBois and Cruse embraced it from their common historic past); (2) sustain the idea of the intellectual as a leading and heroic *personality* rather than a local point of oscillation among contending conceptual claims; and (3) continue to pursue a theory and practice of intellectual or cultural work that is *performative* rather than, for lack of a better word, unfortunately, “scientific,” or responsible to a “cognitive apparatus,” or a “thought-idea.” These “impossibles,” we ought to add, began to take shape long before *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* was published, if we push the reel back to the generation of Randolph Bourne, Kenneth Burke, and “The Fugitives,” on the one hand, and of W. E. B. DuBois, “The Niagara Movement”/NAACP, and early Pan-Africanism, on the other. But if our predication of cataclysmic change on a geopolitical scale has led us to imagine an earthquake in one direction, then we could sketch a dismantling, equally as powerful, from another and overlapping one that more directly bore down on Cruse’s era; in short, 1968 was engendered by an additional context that brought movement, indeed, crisis, across the field of signification.<sup>16</sup>

I would track its more or less arbitrary moment of origin to 1966, when a series of seminars and colloquia, convened by the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University, resulted in the publication of a gathering of essays entitled *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio

16. Jonathan Culler’s work includes two indispensable texts that introduced a wider audience to the propositions and methodologies of linguistic/structuralist literary procedure: *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975); *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).



Donato.<sup>17</sup> The parent sessions had been convoked during a week in October, 1966, at an international symposium called “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” (“Les Langages Critiques et Les Sciences de l’Homme”), with support from the Ford Foundation. Humanists and social scientists from across the United States and eight other countries had converged on Baltimore at the time. This symposium series led to a two-year protocol, “which sought to explore the impact of contemporary ‘structuralist’ thought on critical methods in humanistic and social studies” (SC, xv). Seminar participants included, among others, René Girard, Lucien Goldmann, Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida. While the choice of this date may be somewhat questionable, it serves a purpose nevertheless for situating the arguments and propositions of structuralism<sup>18</sup>—the cross-disciplinary and systematic examination of the *conditions of discursivity*—to the fore in relationship to a wider audience of academics in the United States. As the editors of *The Structuralist Controversy* explained the impetus behind both the symposium and the volume, structuralist method itself had come to redefine a plurality of disciplinary procedures:

As this was the first time in the United States that structuralist thought had been considered as a cross-disciplinary phenomenon, the organizers of the program sought to identify certain basic problems and concerns common to every field of study: the status of the subject, the general theory of signs and language systems, the use and abuse of models, homologies and transformations as analytic techniques, synchronic (vs.) diachronic descriptions, the question of “mediations” between objective and subjective judgments, and the possible relationship between microcosmic and macrocosmic social or symbolic dimensions. (SC, “Preface to First Edition,” xvi)

I did not become familiar with this work, however, until the following decade, when, as a first-appointment assistant professor of English and black studies, and an NEH post-doctoral fellow, I attended the open-

17. *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972). This work is hereafter cited in my text as SC.

18. One of the earlier anthologies of cross-disciplinary readings in linguistic method starts its chronology with excerpts from Marx, through the canons of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan. See *The Structuralists from Marx to Lévi-Strauss*, ed. Richard and Fernande deGeorge (New York: Anchor Books, 1972).

ing of the School of Criticism and Theory, convened June/July, 1976, on the campus of the University of California, Irvine. Having been captivated a couple of years before by the corpus of Kenneth Burke, which suddenly made clearer to me exactly what I had been attempting to achieve in my doctoral dissertation and the undifferentiated restlessness to change and inform my own conceptual language, I had been prepared, without knowing it, for the tonic instruction of Hayden White, before *The Tropics of Discourse*; of Fredric Jameson, before *The Political Unconscious*; of René Girard, just after *Violence and the Sacred*; of Edward Said, shortly before *Orientalism*, a topic that he introduced to the student body that summer in an evening lecture; of Hazard Adams; and of Frank Kermode, the wry, authoritative figure in the mix. When I returned on an occasion of the next generation of the School, as an instructor, during the summer of 1990, at the current home of SCT on the campus of Dartmouth College, what had been news to myself nearly fifteen years before had become by then standard (perhaps even *glib*) operating procedure.

To my mind, at least—and this imagined nexus seems worthy of extended investigation—the new procedural methods of reading “naturally” belonged to their historic moment as the iconoclastic blast from the teachers of students in rebellion. As buildings were being seized and occupied by students on college campuses across the United States, in opposition to the Vietnam War, in support of black studies and women’s lib, it seems that certain teachers, on the other side of the Atlantic, were preparing the epistemological foundations of profound change: (1) a rereading of the Marxist theoretical revolution; (2) the unconscious as (if) a linguistic structure; (3) mythic systems as the paradigmatic semiotic; (4) the rupture of the transcendental signifier and the undivided subject of presence; (5) the deployment of a natural historical sequence, reconfigured as a discursive series of relations; (6) the conversion of the women’s movement into a theoretical and curricular object—to name a few of the more obvious developments. Looking across the disciplines revised and corrected by radical procedure, Macksey and Donato perceived a “horizon of a conceptual system” that had given way to “philosophical metaphors of defeat—‘supplement,’ ‘trace,’ ‘simulacrum,’ ‘series,’ ‘archive,’ ‘errancy,’ and the like” (SC, xii). Such an outcome had indeed induced a “climate” of opinion in which

today’s task for thinkers . . . resides in the possibility of developing a critical discourse without identities to sustain concepts, without privileged origins, or without an ordered temporality to guarantee the mimetic possibilities of representation. The fundamental entities of

such systems, adrift in radical discontinuity, are *Events* which cannot be accounted for by transcendental idealities. (SC, "The Space Between—1971," xii)

A shaken academy, by 1971, would certainly be able to attest to "Events" no longer explicable, in the main, by the "transcendental idealities" that had subtended a "divided house."

It is precisely the asymmetrical poise of the period—students in rebellion "everywhere," but the most innovative instruction coming, often, from the other side—that lends the era its haze of *conceptual* origins, which Paul Bové's work, *Intellectuals in Power*, goes far to clarify in the figure of Erich Auerbach.<sup>19</sup> It should be noted, however, that the "New Criticism" movement that had captured the imagination of America's literary/critical establishment from the 1920s on had already succeeded in divorcing an object, the "heterocosm,"<sup>20</sup> from its sociopolitical context. It was not necessarily difficult, then, to transfer a sensibility, trained on the academy's "close reading" and the conventions of irony/ambiguity, to the world of text and discursivity. In fact, it would appear that the "New Criticism," in certain of its critical dispositions, at least, had anticipated the Continental drift. Moving out of its customary orbit, English and American literary studies came, increasingly, to demarcate the vanishing center of a centrifugal motion, as literary criticism gave way, in time, to literary theory, and as the object of investigation was itself reconfigured: Instead of a hierarchical canon of literature, defined by periods, anxieties of influence, eminent practitioners and their derivatives, the literary object was knocked over and flattened out into a sea of discursive possibilities that swam unfamiliar currents—philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, film studies, feminist discourse and theory, black studies and African American expressive culture, and, lately, newer occasions in postcolonial, multicultural, lesbian/bisexual/gay, cultural, popular studies, and "minority discourse(s)." From that point of view, the ensuing fifteen years have been heady with a progressive unfolding, instigated by a handful of enabling postulates that we have already identified.

19. Paul Bové, *Intellectuals in Power: A Genealogy of Critical Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

20. In his germinal work on romanticism, M. H. Abrams, as one of the school of late New Criticism critics, discusses the poem "as heterocosm." Marking one of the stages of literary historiography that Abrams evolves from the mimetic, to the objective, traditions of the literary art, the heterocosmic replaces "the speculative metaphor of poem as mirror." See *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 272.

Whenever a thorough intellectual historiography of the period is attempted, we imagine that it will flesh out these impression points that have not only marked their objects but, in a very real sense, constituted them: Saussurian linguistics and its aftermath; Freudian psychoanalytic work, restituted in the writings of Jacques Lacan; Derridean philosophy and its implications for an American school of deconstruction;<sup>21</sup> the strategies of structuralist and poststructuralist cultural behavior, the Foucaultian shift of paradigm, from the delineation of objects to their relationship in the ensemble, contextualized by enunciative fields and their inscriptions in the regimes of power and domination; the extensive Marxist critique by Marxists themselves, who sought to reinterpret historical materialism in light of late capital and the pervasive force of market that further disrupts our notions of a sacrosanct privacy. These far-reaching changes, carried through in a number of disciplines, have altered our view of the historical, as well as the literary, object, which now belongs to textual production and discursive positioning as the new rule. With Spivak's English translation of *De la Grammatologie*,<sup>22</sup> the project of deconstruction, which dismantled the centrality of a unified subject in logos, gained ground as the new technic of reading. Between 1966 and 1976, then, the outline of the new academy was laid down, or, more precisely, a revised and corrected curriculum of the humanities was inaugurated. Converging on this scene of displaced conceptual objects were numbers of new academic players, from the late sixties on, a consequence that has conduced toward a terminal degree, for example, and "full-time equivalents" in the university's departments of literature that bear no exact semblance to degree and curricular protocols as short a time ago as *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*.

The implications of the paradigm shift for black creative intellectuals have been fairly massive, or, more exactly, have not been isolated in their impact. For one thing, the black intellectual, firmly installed, during DuBois's era and overlapping onto Cruse's, in indigenous black institutions, as a rule, have been repositioned in the mainstream academy. It is fair to say that whatever spaces of creative autonomy were yielded by a more homoge-

21. For a "different" Derrida, Rodolph Gasché's *Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) takes the philosopher askew the field of literary theory, per se, and reads him against the grain of post-Hegelian discourse.

22. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* trans. with intro. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). Originally published as *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1967).

neous culture and life-world tended to dissipate by the late sixties. In other words, it is rare today that a black writer or critic finds means of support outside the academy or some other institution situated in the cultural dominant (e.g., mainstream publishers, etc.). One could even go so far as to say that mainstream institutions appear to meet the intellectual's *desire*, however he or she might "carry on" about the community. The "organic intellectual" that we have imagined after Antonio Gramsci locates a romantic, liberated figure, then, who never really fructified and who remains a symptom of nostalgic yearning, looking back on a childhood perfected through the lens of distance and distortion. The truth, more nearly, is that writers, in particular, and certainly the critics/theorists, have been as compelled as any other subject of economy to follow whatever fortunes, in this case, of the "prose arts," into the contemplative sanctums, in an age dominated by communications technologies. The younger members of Cruse's initial audience, then, either leaving undergraduate schools or entering graduate programs, at the time that *The Crisis* was published, were never wholly destined, by very virtue of the aims of the Civil Rights movement itself, for the singularity of motive, of address, that Cruse's passionate invocation conjured up. Many of those persons, like Cruse himself at the University of Michigan, would be exactly positioned, in their future, between a putative community on the one hand and the politics and discursivities of the predominantly white academy on the other. We could say with a great deal of justification that the black creative intellectual has been more hesitant than not to acknowledge precisely *where* and *how* he or she "is coming from" and in what ways *location* marks in fact a chunk of the *historical material*. A more efficacious critique, or, I should say, one that is less loaded with pretenses and pretentions, altogether depends on such acknowledgments.

Furthermore, if Steiner and Foucault were right, man is not only no longer the linchpin of historical movement but history itself demonstrates a minimal resiliency of meaning as a self-reflective tool in the current inventory of media-inspired, constructed punctualities. Certain idols of narrative have lost their explanatory power for American culture in general and for African American culture, in particular, if its contemporary music tells us anything, so that the key question for the black creative intellectual now is: How does one grasp her membership in, or relatedness to, a culture that defines itself by the very logics of the historical? Or, as I queried earlier, What is the work of the black creative intellectual, *for all we know now*?

The short answer is that the black creative intellectual must get busy *where he/she is*. There *is* no other work, if he/she has defined an essential

aspect of his/her personhood as the commitment to reading, writing, and teaching. From Howard University to Cornell; from Wilberforce to Berkeley; from Tuskegee to Harvard; the relational object does not change, and *that*, it seems to me, decides the main problem to be disposed of—how to take hold, at last, of the intellectual object of work *in language*. The black creative intellectual, from Ralph Ellison, in *Invisible Man*,<sup>23</sup> to Imamu Baraka, in *Home*,<sup>24</sup> to Toni Morrison, in interview,<sup>25</sup> to name some of the most eminent cultural figures, embraces the black musician and his music as the most desirable model/object. While African American music, across long centuries, offers the single form of cultural production that the life-world can “read” through thick and thin, and while so consistent a genius glimmers through the music that it seems ordained by divine authority its very self, the intellectual rightly grasps the figure of the musician for the *wrong reasons*: *not once* do we get the impression that the musical performer promotes his own ego over the music, or that he prefers *it* to the requirements, conven-

23. One of the controlling metaphors by way of which Ellison's protagonist descends into a deep reading of the historical narrative is supplied by the figure of Louis Armstrong and the Blues. See the Prologue, *Invisible Man* (New York: The Modern Library, 1992).

24. Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1966); see especially “The Myth of a Negro Literature,” 105–15. A writer himself of considerable power and range, Imamu Baraka/Leroi Jones anguishes the reader about what he calls “Negro literature.” One is afraid that he meant nothing much more than that the “Negro” writers—those of “impressive mediocrity,” in his opinion—were quite simply the ones who came *before* him and his generation of black/American writers. The point, however, is that, once again, literary intellection/production among African Americans is abject before the towering accomplishments of the musical artists: “Only in music, and most notably in blues, jazz, and spirituals, i.e., ‘Negro music,’ has there been a significantly profound contribution by American Negroes” (106). On prediction, we read that the writers’ quite “spectacular vapidty” is due, in large part, to their membership in the “Negro middle class” that goes “out of its way to cultivate *any* mediocrity” in the interest of showing that it is not what it is—Negro. Thirty years down the line, perhaps it is time for the intellectuals to revise and correct the question of “middle-class” status *in/and* black music/art?

25. In this wonderful interview with Robert Stepto, Toni Morrison, shortly before the publication of her third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), can at least imagine an “enormous space” of possibility for *all* the black arts/creativity. Speaking of an “open,” “freer” moment for literature, in the post-sixties’ period, she observes, “I think of it in terms of the one other art form in which black people have always excelled and that is music, an art form that opens doors, rather than closes them, where there are more possibilities, not fewer.” See “‘Intimate Things in Place’: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” in *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, ed. Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 213–30.

tions, and history of practices that converge *on the music*; if that were not so, then little in this arena of activity would exhibit the staying power that our arts of performance have shown over the long haul. In other words, though ego-consciousness is necessary, it is the *performance* that counts here, apparently, as we know black musicians and remember them by the instruments of performance, and performance marks exactly the standard of work and evaluation that has not changed, from the Fisk University Jubilee Singers, Bessie Smith, and Thomas Dorsey on one end of the spectrum, to Charlie Mingus, Phineas Newburn, and Mulgrew Miller on the other, with Willie Mitchell and Booker T. and the MGs in between. Across nearly a century of African American musical performance, implied in the foregoing figures, a variety of syntheses is at work, so that, for instance, Billie Holiday and Leontyne Price are not judged by the same musical standards, do not perform the same instrumentality, just as Theolonious Monk and Keith Jarrett each demonstrates a respective brilliance. What they have in common in their considerable divergence of time, location, and calling is performative excellence, and it seems to me that *this* is the page of music from which the black creative intellectual must learn to read. (One might also bear in mind that musical excellence *historically* relates to the *entertainment* needs of the dominant culture: at least one captivity narrative by an African American writer rehearses a horrifying story of the bonded, who were forced to dance.<sup>26</sup> In other words, music in black culture achieved its superior degree of development, in part, because its ancestral forces were *occasioned, allowed*. The culture's relationship to language is the radically different story too familiar to repeat.) The black creative intellectual does not make music, as it were, and should not try, but he/she *can* "play." What, then, is *his/her* "instrument"?

Sharply and flatly: it is the "production process of the object of knowledge" (RC, 41). A seminar on Marx's *Capital*, conducted by Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar at the École Normale Supérieure in early 1965, resulted in a publication that was translated into English in 1970—*Reading Capital* (*Lire le Capital*). In a complicated reformulation of the Marxist epistemological moment, Althusser, in the opening segment of the text, patiently elaborates the problem that Marx exploited as that of reading itself, but a *reading* no longer "innocent." In the course of that discussion, Althusser

26. "Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup," with a preface by David Wilson, in: *Puttin' On Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 324. Northup penned his narrative in the 1850s.



retrieves the “object of knowledge,” concealed by a “reading at sight” (*RC*, 16) and the “empiricist conception of knowledge” (*RC*, 35), as a distinction to be made from the “real object.” It seems to me that it is precisely that confusion, in one of its avatars, that persistently dogs African American sociocultural work as the hidden component of analysis. Bringing it out, I think, would set the work and the culture worker on a different course and induce a new set of demands. While we can not exhaustively reread Althusser “reading Marx” here, a few contextualizing observations are in order.

Althusser is poised toward *Capital*—about a century after the first volume was written<sup>27</sup>—as a philosopher might be, and Althusser differentiates such disposition from that of the economist, the historian, and the philologist, who not only would have addressed the work in a different way from the philosopher but would have *assumed* the object, comparing it (and here we might conjecture that Althusser means effecting a commensurability) “with an object already defined outside it, without questioning that object itself” (*RC*, 14). But to read *Capital* “as philosophers” would be to interrogate “the specific object of a specific discourse, and the specific relationship between this discourse and its object” (*RC*, 15). One would gauge the place of *Capital* in the history of knowledge by putting to the “discourse-object unity” that it presents “the question of the epistemological status which distinguishes this particular unity from other forms of discourse-object unity” (*RC*, 15). *Capital*, as the object of this sort of inquiry, is, within itself, a rather remarkable occurrence, inasmuch as the Marxist canon, in general, is assumed by black creative intellectuals—and this was certainly the rule of the past—to be a quintessential by “privileged model of anchorage,” an “expressive reading, the open and bare-faced” witness of the “essence in existence” (*RC*, 35). But it is precisely this “reading at sight,” Althusser contends, that the Marxist episteme disrupted. Taking his introduction to the seminar at face value, we can insert his move within the general climate of critical opinion—including a prior moment in French intellectual history by way of a veiled reference to existentialism’s “essence/existence” debate—coming to prevail on both sides of the Atlantic. In short, it seems that the blindnesses and insights, the visions and oversights, the “marks of an omission produced by the ‘fulness’ of the utterance itself” (*RC*, 23) were enabled, as a self-reflexive project, *only* at that moment. “Seeing, listening, speaking, reading,” those “simplest acts of existence”—*in light*

27. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, intro. by Ernest Mandel, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).



of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—were reopened to unsettling oscillation. “Only since Freud,” Althusser claims, “have we begun to suspect what listening, and hence what speaking (and keeping silent) *means (veut dire)*; that this ‘meaning’ . . . of speaking and listening reveals beneath the innocence of speech and hearing the culpable depth of a second, *quite different* discourse, the discourse of the unconscious” (RC, 16).

*Capital* is repositioned, then, as the *reading* target, whose transparency “in the dramas and dreams of our history . . . its disputes and conflicts . . . its defeats and victories of the workers’ movement” (RC, 14) will be rendered an instance of the very thing that Althusser is calling for in a reading that has lost its “innocence”: the “sighting” of an “opacity” that addresses another “thought-object” and that demonstrates the special domain of that object on the historical material ground. Taking the “empiricist concept of knowledge,” which defines knowledge as the function of the real object, to be the culminative moment of ideology, Althusser effectively “retroacts” *Capital* as postmodernist critique, insofar as Marx posed the answer to the question that classical political economy hadn’t even asked. (“What is the value of labour-power?” Asking, instead, “What is the value of labour,” classical economists had elided terrains of inquiry, “by substituting for the value of labour . . . *the apparent object of its investigations*, the value of labour power, a power which only exists in the personality of the labourer, and is as different from its function, labour, as a machine is from its performance’ ”<sup>28</sup> [RC, 20]. Not aware of the substitution, Marx argued, classical political economy was led down the road to “inextricable contradictions” that induced exclusive preoccupation with labor value and its prices, with the relation of this value to the value of commodities, and so forth. By inserting “the personality of the labourer” into the equation, Marx was enabled to see the “oversight” that classical political economy had made on its own answer: “. . . is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of labour.” The question that Marx restituted, then, had as its answer: “*The value of labour-power is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of labour-power*” [RC, 23]. According to Althusser’s reading of this outcome, what the classicists did *not* see is precisely what they saw as the “invisibility” of “sight” [RC, 21ff]. The oversight was not performed on the object but in the sight—“an oversight that concerns *vision*: non-vision is therefore inside vision, it is a form of vision and

28. Althusser quotes this passage of *Capital*, vol. 1, from the Éditions Sociales version.

hence has a necessary relationship with vision" [RC, 21]. Perhaps Ralph Ellison's protagonist of *Invisible Man* had already anticipated such a reading as Althusser performs?) Althusser's demonstration of the disruptive syntax, which the unasked question provoked, induces this graphic equivalent: "'The value of labour ( ) is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of labour ( )'" (RC, 22). Marx, in effect, he is claiming, indexes the silences, the aporias, in the discourse of classical political economy.

Teasing out Marx's reading further, Althusser is led to the empiricist critique, which, he believes, will compel us to reorganize our idea of knowledge as the "mirror myths of immediate vision and reading" and to conceive it, instead, "as a production" (RC, 24). By "production," Althusser refers to those "structural conditions" that enable knowledge; "sighting," then, is no longer the peculiar perceptual endowment of an individual subject, but is, rather, "the relation of immanent reflection between the field of [a] problematic and *its* objects and *its* problems" (RC, 25). Clearing ground for "earthliness," or the Marxian "absolute immanence" (RC, 131), Althusser wants to reconfigure the relation between a knowing subject and how he arrives at knowing—in other words, the latter is neither given in the thing itself nor is it the transparent transcendent:

Vision then loses the religious privileges of divine reading: it is no more than a reflection of the immanent necessity that ties an object or problem to its conditions of existence, which lie in the conditions of production. It is literally no longer the eye (the mind's eye) of a subject which sees what exists in the field defined by a theoretical problematic: it is this field itself which sees *itself* in the objects or problems it defines—sighting being merely the necessary reflection of the field on its objects. (RC, 25)

The empiricist concept of knowledge, which implies the transparency of reading, offers the "secular transcription" of a "religious phantasm," grounded in "the Logos and its Scriptures" (RC, 35). The empiricist function of knowledge can be said to effect an occlusion, insofar as the knowledge that it derives is revelatory—it is to be supposed—of a real object, or is itself the space of such knowledge. Althusser represents this process of derivation as an "abstraction," a separating out of the thing itself from the "dross," or irrelevancy, that conceals it:

To know is to abstract from the real object its essence, the possession of which by the subject is then called knowledge. . . . Just as

gold, before its abstraction, exists as gold unseparated from its dross in the dross itself, so the essence of the real exists as a real essence *in* the real which contains it. (*RC*, 36)

In this case, the special vocation of knowledge is “to separate, in the object, the two parts which exist in it, the essential and the inessential—by the special procedures whose aim is to *eliminate the inessential real*” (*RC*, 36). By way of a series of operations and probings—“sortings, sievings, scrapings, and rubbings”—the subject who knows hits pay dirt, as it were, the “second part of the real which is its essence, itself real” (*RC*, 36). The object then stands revealed before us in all its pristine clarity of origin, purpose, motivation, no trace of hands touching it. Thus “the relation between the visible and the invisible is therefore identical to the relation between the outside and the inside, between the dross and the kernel” (*RC*, 37). A variant on the conception of epiphanic vision, the empiricist concept would hold that transparency

is separated from itself precisely by the *veil*, the dross of impurities, of the inessential which steal the essence from us, and which abstraction, by its techniques of separation and scouring, *sets aside*, in order to give us the real presence of the pure naked essence, knowledge of which is then merely sight. (*RC*, 37)

Althusser is then able to poise the empiricist concept against the Marxian episteme, which makes a distinction, say, between “the idea of the circle” (after Spinoza)—which demarcates the space of the knowledge of the object—and the circle itself, “which is the real object” (*RC*, 40).

Two final citations of moves in *Reading Capital* should bring us to the desired intersection; this seems to me the principal lesson to be pondered: Althusser spends considerable time attempting to deconcatenate (1) “the real-concrete” from the “thought-object,” a distinction, he tells us, Marx defended. The “real-concrete,” or the “real totality,” “survives in its independence, after as before, outside the head” (*RC*, 41). The object of knowledge—

a product of the thought which produces it in itself as a thought-concrete . . . as a thought-totality . . . as a thought-object, absolutely distinct from the real object, the real-concrete, the real totality, knowledge of which is obtained precisely by the thought-concrete, the thought-totality

—does not simply describe a different object from the real, but a different process of production as well:

While the production process of a given real object, a given real-concrete totality (e.g., a given historical nation) takes place entirely in the real and is carried out according to the real order of *real* genesis (the order of succession of the moments of *historical* genesis), the production process of the object of knowledge takes place entirely in knowledge and is carried out according to a *different order*, in which the thought categories which “reproduce” the real categories do *not* occupy the *same* place as they do in the order of real historical genesis, but quite different places assigned them by their function in the production process of the object of knowledge. (*RC*, 41)

But this thought-object of knowledge is not an equivalent of what Simone de Beauvoir said that the magical was—“spirit drooping down in the midst of things”—but is, rather,

the historically constituted system of an *apparatus of thought*, founded on and articulated to natural and social reality. It is defined by the system of real conditions which make it, if I dare use the phrase, a determinate *mode of production* of knowledges. As such, it is constituted by a structure which combines (“*Verbindung*”) the type of object (raw material) on which it labours, the theoretical means of production available (its theory, its method and its technique, experimental and otherwise) and the historical relations (both theoretical, ideological and social) in which it produces. (*RC*, 41)

This “system of conditions of theoretical practice,” then, “is what assigns *any given thinking subject* (individual) its place and function in the production of knowledges” (*RC*, 41–42; my emphasis). I italicize in order to say that the *central positionality* of the black creative intellectual is constituted by systematic *theoretical practice* and that *this* is his/her “instrument,” forever and anon. If, like Duke Ellington, he/she wants to be famous and celebrated, then, perhaps, he/she has landed in the wrong orchestra pit. Althusser does not say as much, and needn’t have, insofar as the dilemma before me is not the problematic that concerned him in the least, but I emphatically mark the point in order to expose the primary *non-dit—not-said*—of African American intellectual life, ironically, and that is its *right to exist* not only within the “real totality” of its natal life-world but within the “real-concrete” of knowledge production, of which one of its key sites in American

society is the academy, mainstream and otherwise. The “real-concrete” question, then, that is posed to black creative intellectuals—What will you do to save your people?—and its thousand and one knee-jerk variations, is therefore misplaced. It seems to me that the *only* question that the intellectual can actually *use* is: To what extent do the “conditions of theoretical practice” pass through him or her, as the *living site of a significant intervention*? In other words, as it passes through “I,” what alterations of its properties does the “I/eye” perform? Quite obviously I mean to say that the shifter in the formulation need not refer, *at all times*, to an autobiographical itinerary but might inscribe an *ensemble* of efforts—the research center, the think tank, the thematic fellowship, and so forth—defined along particular lines of stress. The journal and the periodical also come to mind as an analogy on a single mode of collective intent, although, locked as we are in our notions of heroic individualism and the allure of romantic aloneness, which the academy fosters daily, we can neither easily imagine it nor always positively *desire* it. This seems to me the *test* of the theoretical paradigm *at any given moment* and its—*of necessity*—*hegemonic possibilities in this here moment*, especially, if we take “hegemonic” in the sense that Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe redefined it: an open and indeterminate range of elements that “fill a hiatus that ha[s] opened in the chain of necessity.”<sup>29</sup> From the beginning of Marxist theoretical practice, they tell us, hegemony and its logics had offered itself “as a *complementary* and *contingent* operation, required for conjunctural imbalances within an evolutionary paradigm whose essential or ‘morphological’ validity was not for a moment placed in question.”<sup>30</sup> If that is so, then Laclau and Mouffe have danced hegemony around to a user-friendly “socialist strategy” that is open to new democratic cunning, and this seems to me *exactly* the meaning of America in the sixties—that American intellectual life, with its rapid incursions and cross-racial fusions since Cruse, has brought us face-to-face with explosive potential *in the theoretical object*. To fritter the time away thumb-sucking would give revitalized meaning to *tragedy* and *farce*.

Now, I do not intend to lightly dismiss the tireless, cross-generational question that is put to black creative intellectuals, but I do mean, and want, to *displace* it—to *interrogate the question*, as Randall Kennedy only barely began to do in a recent public forum on this matter, “The Special Responsi-

29. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso Books, 1989), 7.

30. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 3.

bility of the Black Intellectual in the Age of Crack.”<sup>31</sup> (Isn’t it also the “age” of e-mail and the deadly “virus,” inscribed along various fault lines, from the immunodeficiency syndrome to computers? Isn’t it also the age of armed kids and the first open and dramatic signs of society’s return to the rule and the law of the *patronne*, the pimp, as an intermediary and prophylactic device against rape and hunger, and “sewered” through the nation’s underground of drugs and firearms? The sign of the Father that is missing? What does it mean to sum up the age under the rubric of crack? Why not flight, or fantasy and the peculiar turn of the screw that black population brings to it? And who said that the black creative intellectual could even begin to know how to fix it?) One knows what the question says, but what does it *mean*? As *formulated*, it means nothing, yet; in other words, it might mean Everything, in which event it is unanswerable. In a different way, it means something entirely different from the thing it is *asking, demanding*. The black creative intellectual might evolve, instead, a whole catalog of inquiries, deliberately left unstable in order to allow for self-revision—not entirely unlike the Lutheran theses posted on that church door at Wittenberg so long ago—that would move the theoretical, if we could imagine the thought-totality and its discrete moments, moving in a mortal knower, as a kind of *torque*. His/Hers is not the salvation “business,” though *if* he/she

31. See note 3 above. In an attempt to interpolate, on the spot, one of the layers of analysis that tends to be elided in public discussion about the duties of black intellectuals, Harvard law professor, Randall Kennedy, in response to moderator Margaret Burnham’s request, during the second Cambridge symposium, that he clarify some earlier remarks that he had made, asked: “[D]o black people have more of a responsibility towards black people who are in misery *than their white counterparts who are sitting next to them* [my emphasis]. My answer was: *no* [Kennedy’s emphasis]; we all have a very high responsibility towards those who are in misery” (*Boston Review* 19, no. 1 [Feb./Mar. 1994]: 5–6). Reading the question again for this transcription, I now see that the italicized portion of the sentence *could* just as well mean “white counterparts” to the black helper-intellectuals, as “white counterparts” to misery’s helpees. If the former, then the question is worth asking, inasmuch as nonblacks occasionally believe, it seems, that blacks can solve their “Problem” all by themselves, since “It” is their “fault.” At any rate, my question would be rather different from Kennedy’s (and would include, for example, who is going to “help” the intellectuals?), though *who* is asking the question, as I had inferred that Kennedy meant—*when, where, how, why*—the Burkean “grammar of motives”—is dropped from the inquiry, as a rule, and should be restored. Further, one conjures a question that is never asked: What is the obligation of white intellectuals to *their* people? And why is the question never posed in that way, linking the white intellectual subject to “race”/ethnicity, since there seems to be incredible need for *someone* to tend this field? Or did 1968 take care of that?

"saves," *if so*, he/she will do it in the *only* way he/she knows how—as a reader/writer/thinker/teacher.

The "raw material" that the black creative intellectual works on, then, is not the "real-concrete," or "'pure' sensuous intuition or mere representation," but, as Althusser contends about the conceptual apparatus, "an ever-already complex raw material, a structure of intuition or 'representation' which combines in a peculiar 'Verbindung' sensuous, technical and ideological elements" (*RC*, 43). Against the imperial demands of the empiricist concept, he goes on, knowledge does not confront

a *pure object* which is then identical to the *real object* of which knowledge aimed to produce precisely . . . the knowledge. . . . For that raw material is ever-already . . . matter already elaborated and transformed, precisely by the imposition of the complex (sensuous-technical-ideological) structure which constitutes it as an *object of knowledge*. (*RC*, 43)

Perhaps the "purest" object that the black creative intellectual always imagines as the unmediated "thereness" is situated in his/her concept of natal community. But, in my view, the time has come for us to rethink community, if we dare, precisely as an "object of knowledge," beginning with our false relations to it as an "unchanging same."<sup>32</sup> Earlier in this essay, I attempted to demonstrate how the black intellectual's current view of community is not only fictional—such status is *not* the problem—but that it describes an *inadequate* fiction, precisely because it is not rich enough either in content or transitional elements. Attempting, further, to understand how that is so, against some of the ideas deployed here, should bring us to closure.

#### 4

For L. B.

Is Cruse's community the same as our own, as DuBois's? And what might it have been for the past, which they have consistently represented here? Perhaps one can back into a response: in order to think community,

32. Apologies to Professor Deborah McDowell for "misreading" the title of one of her essays, "The Changing Same," on African American women writers. See "The Changing Same: Generational New Literary History," *New Literary History* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1987): 282–302. In this context, I mean the exact opposite from McDowell's "changing same."



one must be, in some way, separated, or apart, from it, for it marks the complicated viaticum of travel. To that extent, it is the *differentiated* portion of consciousness from which one splits off in the inception of language and division. It is unspeakable that it is so, not easily borne as knowledge about myself and my premiere “others”: that some time, I will leave this house of my father’s support and my mother’s pacification in order to take my place, make my way, in the midst of strangers who have unanswered needs. But I am bound for this alienation that demands its reconciliations, bound for the wider village of worldlings, each “overhearing” his own tale of the sorrowful report that cannot be uttered, all at once, and, perhaps, not at all, and to what other end do I acquire and practice the strategy of *memory*, unless it is to allow myself the occasional *revisions* of my loss? But I only knew this *afterward*. This is the *personal* economy that is not unfamiliar to the black creative intellectual, or, let’s say, to the serious sojourner: In fact, community is my primary speech, the genesis of “I,” the awful gauge of my time. Is it true, then, that one leaves home to learn *to remember*? If it is true, then we encounter the truth of paradox, and that is to say, that *because* I remember, I never departed.

But this phenomenon that we grasp as an unbroken fabric of relations is already constituted and handed over to the subject as a kind of layered, invented *trust*—it is itself an *idea*, materialized in a *location*, but by no means limited to the spaces identified as a topographical specificity. Infinitely representable, community is both a sum total and a not-entirely thinkable, except by way of the metonymic device. As a sum total, it is all affect, too multiple, individualistic, and porous to catalog, but its subjects, by virtue of interpellation, insertion, and agreement to play the game, as it were, find common ground in the *narrative emplotments* that converge on it; thus, community is also a *position in discourse*. For both DuBois and Cruse, community stood in for a preeminent stability, except that both writers left its borders open to expansion: Cruse, for example, selects representative figures of West Indian origin to portray his notion of Harlem as a cosmopolitan city within a city. But precisely because his West Indian characters did not share an indigenous culture with his black American ones, community, in *The Crisis*, is troubled by the assumption of sameness. From that point of view, community hides the suture that stitches together certain discrete elements of identity, especially differences of class. While DuBois’s community slightly varies over the course of his considerable project, it overlaps features of Cruse’s own: (1) a commonality of “suffering” that overruns difference; (2) an easily isolated social formation within a larger sociopolitical



scheme; (3) or, to reverse the foregoing, a marked position that defines itself against an unmarked one. DuBoisian community inscribes not only a sameness but an *allegory* on the same that DuBois called “souls of black folk” and their “drama of a tremendous striving.” In both emplotments, one can, in effect, grasp community in the palm of the hand as a smoothed over, globular complex. DuBois and Cruse are not alone in perceiving the problematic in this way, for it marks the leading figurative construct in African American writing—sermons, poems, fiction, polemic, argument—over two centuries of endeavor. The young sixties’ intellectuals did not intervene a different idea, except that community became for them an obsessive feature of speech, underscored by certain anxiety. It demarcated the place that one had *abandoned*, or had been abandoned by. The cultural analysis has not moved beyond the benchmarks left by DuBois and Cruse, and the problem seems to be how to convert a *negative* affect into *meaning by negation*? A new cultural analysis starts there—surmounting the fear of culture/analysis itself.

Since 1968, virtually all public exchange to which I’ve been an ear concerning intellectuals and the community has been fraught with anxiety and confusion, and indeed it would appear that the very *public* nature of the address goes far to hamper incisiveness: microphones, which amplify one’s words, often spontaneous and improvised on the spot, define the exchange as ritualistic display—an occasion *to posture*; against the background of an auditory, which, in its silence, sends up its own demands, not at all answerable in the moment, the participants have “face” to save, to *preserve*, and from that point of view, the public forum tends toward the *conservative* instinct. It was precisely such circumstances, we imagine, that provided the frame through which Malcolm X’s “answer” rolled toward his interlocutor. Add to the scene the imperial camera and its magnificent array of lights, and we have pure “theater,” by definition, fantastic and deceptive. If anything, the participants are transformed, in the flow of nervous energy and expectation, into actors, of a borrowed shape, an amplified identity, whose text is now self-consciously geared toward the repertoire of signals that fix and capture them in a momentary stardom. It would be exact to say that under these conditions, the play *is* the thing, and nothing more. In fact, one might go so far as to say that the participants are using the name of the interrogation as an alibi to *perform personality* rather than using the latter to execute the former. Furthermore, it might not be by accident that, since the late sixties and the explosion of the image industries, our public discourses have been immeasurably impoverished—or so it seems—precisely by way

of the *theatricalization* of culture analysis and the “object of knowledge,” from presidential politics to the politics of the black creative intellectuals and the community. *Both* have been redefined by new regimes of domination that do not, in their comprehensive powers of attraction, always allow themselves to be clearly understood in that way. If African American culture has been transformed by internal divisions of flight and dispersal—and the latter must also mean various *repositionings* in the national culture and not simple, physical movement, or mobility, alone—then the object of analysis must be grasped in light of it.

But the intellectual has imagined flight only in its negative instance as a supposed rejection, when his very status, or standing, as an *intellectual* requires that he take on a language and disposition that are “foreign.” In other words, the work of the academy, or more specifically, the “cognitive apparatus,” is defined, symbolically speaking, as “not-mother,” a “not-my-own.” I am referring less to the maternal and paternal objects here as gendered actants of precisely defined sexual role than the *ground of intimacy* that the subject *assumes*: the more or less harmonious ensemble of impressions that bound me not only to my body, but my body as it is reflected back to me in the eyes of others that I recognize as *like myself*. Whether or not this relation is troubled is less the point than that its complexities convey to one the sense of ease—the relay of constitutive continuities among particular kinetic, linguistic, sensual, and material gestures—through which one comes to experience home. From this point of view, community describes both the extension of home as well as its spatial/temporal origins. As I understand it, community, however, is already a *cross-weave*—its local economisms linked into a larger network of sociopolitical/cultural relations and the messages that traverse it consequently—that prepares its subjects to receive the supplemental. We cannot imagine learning, acquisition, the *foreign* language, precisely as the various pains of intrusion unless we first understand how community has intimately prepared the ground as the apparent continuing unity against which “unhome” is measured.

While it is clear that I am reading the weave of issues by way of a different narrative emplotment, borrowed, in part, from psychoanalytic theme work, this interpretive device, to my mind, has the advantage of allowing for a conceptualization that is open to *contemporaneity* and what precedes it—an *idea of the past*. Because our current state of cultural analysis can only imagine, in large part, the life-world as the motion of *crisis*, as the urgent immediacy, overwhelmed by the “real,” it, therefore, has no *theory* of the past, even though it brims over with it as the coercive, unreflected principle,

or law, of our present. Because we have only managed to rethread a *politics of representation* and its theoretical paradigms, based on a false idea of the collective, we currently have no theory of a “one” and cannot, consequently, imagine the “many.” In other words, liberal, bourgeois “individualism,” which the intellectuals only claim to eschew, is a different proposition from the individuated nominative property who locates herself/himself in historical/cultural apprenticeship and is also *located* there. But hauling an uncritical individualism into the backdoor of the analysis (and practicing it quite rawly and openly), the intellectuals *can* well imagine a *representative hero* whom they, in turn, embody. But it seems to me that if community is embedded in each, so to speak, then its restitution will commence with a theory of “one,” in short, the capacity to perceive community as a *layering of negotiable differences*. Doing so would allow us to understand how change, or altered positioning, is itself an elaboration of community, rather than its foundering.

The model that I am proposing would be based on a theorization that melds various aspects of the human sciences and a mode of culture analysis for which we currently have no name, but one might think of it as a *cultural demography*; this new “science” would be alert to the *cultural* implications of movement, which is not only a primary meaning of the life-world but one of its most significant literary tropes<sup>33</sup>—the “symbolic geography” that would explain (1) diasporic movement, (2) internal migration, and (3) the mechanisms of fantasy and ambition that contextualize African American struggle. In short, we would seek a theoretical apparatus that could measure deviance, not as *deviance* (or sociopathological dysfunction) but as the “mark off” from legacy, or the making use of what one has been given.

If we attempted to flesh out this model, we might derive the following topics:

1. Marking overlaid by opportunity. If we concede to DuBois and Cruse that there is an African American culture, distinct within the framework of American culture, then we will also concede that its subjects can *reflect* on its status, as DuBois and Cruse are representative instances of just such reflective powers. This marks the space of the hiatus—the break from dailiness, the distancing time, which I addressed before. In other

33. Robert Stepto has created a stunning interpretive device by way of a demographic topos—ascend and immersion thematics—in his examination of select narratives from African American writing. He reads his “symbolic geography” against several canonical works, including that of DuBois, Ellison, and Hurston, in *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1979).

words, being a subject of “community” means not only *reacting* but also *reflecting*, and it is within the context of reflection that the work of culture analysis proceeds. Quite obviously, the point is to imagine as many in reflection as possible—is that not one of the *political* aims of “struggle”?—but certainly the culture worker/intellectual cannot be embarrassed out of this advantage, as today’s black creative intellectual appears to be too often. Concession to the political implications of “race,” of racialistic ideology, is required, but the question for theory is what contribution the thought-object can make to exposing and illuminating it.

2. African American culture, as a distinctive social formation, disappears into a general economy of practices, but it has been difficult for the intellectuals to follow its trails; in fact, the analysis traditionally frames itself as a neatly rectangular object, whose “geometry” might be read in rather precise dimensions of closure, when it seems, more exactly, that the life-world is not a plane figure at all. In work and labor, property and the judicial system, standard grammars and social behaviors, the school system and taxation, medical practice and health care, buying habits and consumerism, susceptibility to certain common national narratives (i.e., “beauty,” “success,” “wealth,” etc.), the fantasy apparatus and the constitution of the sexed subjectivities, the ideological apparatus and the devices of “self-fashioning”—across this vast array of the social and material network, the subject of African American community is installed in processes of “social contagion.” In fact, we might pick up the trail of one of its key manifestations in the new institutional practices that we have been alluding to all along.

For all intents and purposes, the years immediately following the publication of *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*—1968–1969—marked the inaugural years of black studies as a new institutional site within the mainstream academy. At Brandeis University, for instance, the student occupation of Ford Hall, during eleven days in February 1969, had elaborated fourteen demands, one of which called for the creation of black studies, whose chief administrative officer would be chosen by the students themselves. As I recall, the initial outcome of the rebellion virtually followed the outline demanded by black student leadership. This pattern of instauration proceeded across the country so that by the mid-seventies, many of the leading predominantly white campuses either had a black studies program or department in place, or were putting forth some effort to establish one. The 5 May 1994 volume of *Black Issues in Higher Education*<sup>34</sup> calls atten-

34. Mary-Christine Phillip, “Of Black Studies: Pondering Strategies for the Future,” *Black Issues in Higher Education* 11, no. 5 (5 May 1994): 14–19.

tion to the twenty-fifth anniversary of this initiative. Two paradigms obtained: (1) an appointment in black studies, as some of the programs fashioned an Afrocentric/Africanist response to the traditional disciplines, heavily influenced by the American social science paradigms and their empiricist concept of "reading," or (2) an appointment in one of the traditional disciplines in the humanities or social sciences, with a complementary appointment in black studies. In some instances, the institutions pursued a mix of procedures, with the black studies protocol filled in by both disciplinary and extra-disciplinary appointments. It was not always clear, however, under the circumstances, just how an FTE in literature, say, situated in the English department, would differ in her pedagogical and "scientific" practices of the teaching of African American literature, for example, from one situated in black studies, teaching the same. But there was some vague sense that the *discipline* of literary instruction, as well as a body of knowledge, would prevail in one case, while it was not at all certain what its opposite, or contrastive, aim or project might be from the perspective of black studies. It is fair to say that if the practices of reading, criticism, and theory in the field of African American literature is any example, then black studies has either not yet defined its *disciplinary object*, *apart from* the itineraries of the traditional disciplines that converge—revised and corrected—on it, or has had a very difficult time clarifying such an object. While there doubtlessly has been, and continues to be, successful programs and departments in African American studies (as it is called today)—the tenuring and promotion of personnel, the granting of degrees and/or certificates, even a few research centers, scattered across the country—the visionary company of African Americanists tends to "do" the studies from the vantage of the constitutive disciplines.

What we have, then, is an interesting, complicated picture—African American studies, as a discrete *bureaucratic unit*, often separated from (by choice) or peripheral to (by design) the main centers of the ongoing life of the institution and African American studies, as it is renamed and refracted through the optic of conceptual apparatus located "elsewhere." Personalities working the field split along similar fault lines so that many black scholars in the humanities fields of the institution, wherever they may be *bureaucratically located* in relationship to the "Keepers," belong, by implication, if not by practice, to the African American studies project in its dizzying replication of the issues. (One of its latest reincarnations is cultural studies, with its nexus to African American literary studies and its sixties' political formulas.) It would appear, then, that within this economy of ways and means, the most

innovative and substantial work has come from black creative intellectuals located *within* the disciplinary spaces of the traditional curricula, inasmuch as their work is directed toward intervening on a *specific thought-object* (i.e., literature, philosophy, music, sociology, etc.).

We must try, then, to sort out a *disciplinary object* from a layered and complex political motivation, differently understood, it turns out, by different actants, depending on location. To my mind, that object must move through a first step—to *become* a disciplinary object, or to undergo transformation of African American studies *into* an “object of knowledge,” rather than a more or less elaborate repertory of performative gestures and utterances. At the end of the first twenty-five years, the intellectuals have barely taken the first step, though we have had important work emerging from individuals in the disciplines, particularly in literary studies, history, and sociology.

Today, the emergence of such an object is blocked by two difficulties, which appear linked to the same regime of power that black studies was originally thought to impinge upon, and that is the “pimpification” and the colonization of the (non)object, worked through those attractive practices and proprieties that more or less “get” us all, one way or another. The colonizing of the new institutional spaces is rather like its pimpification, except that the personalities in the former relations are more attractive, in some cases, downright charming and sanguine, and differently configured in relationship to the regime of knowledge. In other words, today’s colonialist of the new protocols is quite a lot smarter than his predecessors and brings quite legitimate skills of accomplishment to his/her work. He *himself*, she *herself*, is not a bad fellow; in fact, one might even go so far as to say that some of her best friends are among them; but none of that, of course, is quite the point to be made: we wish to know what happens to *the investigation*, whatever soul is minding the store or when one leaves the scene. Now, what follows might be read as blank parody, with grave implications for our common future as culture workers, and if we imagine that this part of the essay is *novel-like*, we shall all have fun: it is a misfortune of our history that certain of our black studies programs, for reasons that will already be apparent, were left to the charge of perfectly nice people, in some cases, and not so nice at all, in some others, but who, at any rate, were not scholars and writers in the least sense, say nothing of scholars and writers of some stature. In the most offending instances, some of the black personalities who converged on black student populations, on predominantly white campuses in the late sixties, were rather sinister figures, or of shadowy character, but in the event that I am wrong about this interpretation, they had, as far as

one could tell, at least no interest in scholarship and inquiry of any sort and no skills, actually, to engage them. The male figure, in almost every instance I mean here, was put in place *by the institution, with the endorsement* of local student leadership, itself misinformed, often, about a proper set of aims and objectives for a black studies protocol and even less about an acceptable set of credentials *for a college or university*. I would call, in the worst-case scenario, which is obviously not the only possible one, the male figure of the old model the paradigm of the “pimp,” because all the resources earmarked for the local black population passed through him and, quite literally, through his offices—personnel action, curricula development, course requirements, and most particularly, the dreams and aspirations of the black young, who were not, are not, the children of the “Keepers.” With their “man” on the job, the “Keepers” themselves could then look away, as this has been the paradigm of the “overseer” and *his* “over seer” in the life-world since time immemorial.

The next act of this development is even painful to ponder, to say nothing of to write about, and follows the initial deeds like night the day: Because we ourselves were not sufficiently vigilant, or experienced, or were guided, as well, by the practical objectives of career building, we could not have clearly perceived how the groundwork was laid *then* for our intellectual synthesis *now*, and that is the *commercialization* of black studies/ African American studies without *deliberate* speed. I think we must make here a slight distinction between *commercialization* and *commodification*, inasmuch as the latter is to effect, in cash nexus, an exchange of work for a salary, or wage, from a corporation; it is the money of our bread. For lack of a better word, *commercialization* is the “selling” of an “object,” however we identify it, for purposes of self-aggrandizement and gain, even though it is not always clearly the case and even though the *outcome* could well benefit many others, and that is the subtlety of African American studies as *a business*, or an enterprise, today. We are, quite simply, not certain where its *commercial* successes will take us, though it is a dead certainty right now that some of us are personally benefiting from its journey along the academic interstate. Because it was installed on the academic time line when it was, even though “Negro History,” for example,<sup>35</sup> was introduced

35. One of the century's early black eminences, Carter G. Woodson, along with DuBois, can arguably be said to have established the discipline of African American historiography, both as a profession and as a conceptual itinerary. With George Cleveland Hall, W. B. Hartgrove, Alexander Jackson, and J. E. Stamps, Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and established the *Journal of Negro History*



to the curriculum of traditional black institutions of higher learning decades ago, African American studies became a mode of analysis subject to the heightening tensions of "late capital" and its thorough intrusion into every crevice of daily life. On the one hand, then, we could say that the commercialization of the object of inquiry is nothing more than a smart and strategic response to the occasion at hand. It is to be *enterprising* in light of opportunity; and given the American Way, this is downright *patriotic* participation in the GNP. On the other hand, however, we must point out what seem to be some of the dangers of commercial shock treatment.

Because today's academy moves farther and farther away from its *educative* aims and becomes an arm of what Cornel West refers to as "business civilization,"<sup>36</sup> it tends to be thoroughly corrupt in its measure of intellectual work, which slides, more and more, onto an interface with the performance arts. Today's black creative intellectuals, then, in responding to the provocation, are sometimes, as likely to be made up in their public function by the agent and the ad man as not. The *economically* and *politically* weakest constituent groups among the college's and the university's clientele suffer the gravest damage in this case, though none of that will

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in 1916. Complementary to this effort, Woodson also initiated "Negro History Week," which slowly evolved into "Black History Month." For the academic year 1919–1920, he served as dean of the School of Liberal Arts and head of the graduate faculty at Howard University; from 1920–1922, Woodson functioned as dean at what would later become West Virginia State College, retiring from teaching at the end of this stint. Born in 1875, Woodson edited the *Journal* and directed the Association until his death in 1950. His prolific output includes archival work on education and the church, his most well-known texts, perhaps, *The Negro in Our History* and *The Miseducation of the Negro*. Though a difficult personality, apparently, Woodson seems to have cultivated a talent for what Susan Sontag called "appreciation": Four volumes of the Reverend Francis K. Grimké's sermons, speeches, and addresses were edited by Woodson, as well as a volume of letters written by enslaved persons.

36. See note 3 above. At the first Cambridge symposium, Cornel West made an incisive point in observing that one of the black intellectual's difficulties was the sustaining intellectual life in a "business civilization." The problem seems so severe that one wonders if the entire problem of the intellectual subject and ethical responsibility is itself an anachronism, if we have in fact entered the first stages of a postintellectual period, as the thought-object is packaged like the self-serve food item? In such a culture, West goes on, the intellectuals "actually surface precisely when they are experts . . . but experts aren't intellectuals. Some are. But most aren't" (*Boston Review* 18, no. 1 [Jan./Feb. 1993]: 25). West offers that Reverend Rivers, perhaps, had invited his interlocutors to be *experts*, rather than *intellectuals*, a distinction West insisted upon. Might we add to his carefully stated objection the "fallacy of authority," in which case the subject-who-is-supposed-to-know is *assumed* to know everything?

be apparent, since the aim, it seems, is to *graduate* consumers, not literate, capable persons. We risk banality in saying that today's academy, by trivializing and degrading its *critical* function in the society, has shot itself in the foot: administratively top-heavy, bogged down in the "business" of making money, "busy" with "image," "name," "rep," "public relations," and how to keep its professoriat the most impoverished and demoralized class of professional workers in the nation's history and conscience, today's academy has broken faith with its own most sacred duty, if we might call it that—to feed the mind-life of the civilization entrusted to it. While we cannot definitively blame the site for its various and varied products, just as the institution, at any given moment, must respond to a general economy of practices, I nevertheless see it as the chief context and system of values through which American culture work unfolds today. As for the impact it is having on *African American* culture work, quite specifically, I would dare say that as a *process in intellection*, the latter verges on a state of collapse. Do we exaggerate?

While the work of individual scholars and writers goes on in a successful, often admirable, way, there is not a campus, or a single black academic person, who remains unaffected by the "morning news," let's call it. I do not wish to impose a "speed," or rate of velocity, on the change of the tune, nor am I suggesting that anyone ought to, but it does seem to me that too rapid oscillations (1) prevent careful and considered work from occurring, since one is "bopping" right along to the next latest "hit"; (2) identify African American work in culture as a fashion, eminently, if not imminently, displaceable by other fashion modes; (3) feed the sole frenzy of the "Keepers" to attract student and dollars, which further debases the intellectual currency; and (4) "evacuate" graduate education, wherein lies the object's future, in the sense that our students quite sensibly flock to wherever they perceive "it" is happening. African American studies and those disciplines arrayed around it can least afford this modality of response, since its aim is to take hold of an utter paradox, lived and conceptual, into whose midst the intellectual is hurled with considerable force, and that is his/her situatedness in American/Western culture as an African-descended person. Therefore, the command on his/her work seems to be, at all times, the powerful articulation of a mode of address that speaks/writes/teaches this problematic in its various theoretical inflections. In brief, it is the work of synthesis and the consolidation of the collective gain: at this late date in the century, we cannot properly gauge, have not properly gauged, the work of DuBois, Woodson, Cruse, and Blassingame, among others, *against* their social context, if we no longer have a good idea why we are here.

It seems to me that we must further aim toward improving the *quality* of African American culture work and not simply proliferating its number of bibliographical items; in the past, detractors of the black studies model disparaged it because it was said to be an unresearched field. This criticism was not as useful as it might have been, though one got the point, inasmuch as “fields” are not provided by nature. They are *founded*, *processional*, and dynamic, and cannot be researched until they are materially situated in relationship to a conceptual landscape—to a repertoire of topics and inquiries. Fields emerge from the socius as *collective* engagements, but we verge on losing this dimension of the studies because the time *to reflect* in reading and writing is truncated, not by shifts in the paradigm, or improvements on the question, but by the need to sound the next thing. But how do we decide? If such determination is simply market-driven, then it seems the obligation of the intellectuals to weigh the implications of this outcome. African American studies, as a “supermarket” of notions, certainly inscribes one of several possibilities of form and, in fact, faithfully mimics the public relations urges of today’s academy. But what does such form secure for the object’s location?

To build institutional legacies in African American studies, within the predominantly white academy, seems entirely appropriate as one of the goals of American higher education today. But this aim must be clarified *over* and *above* the heroic personality of individual figures, and that identifies one of the central weaknesses of the academic context in which the black intellectual operates. For example, more than one institution, to my knowledge, has thrown its weight behind a single individual, in whose departure the site of African American studies, if not, in fact, razed, is *emptied out* (like an abandoned building) of gesture, civil and otherwise, for those who follow. In other words, the representative figure, in the absence of commitment to a scene of instruction, in the absence of an informed *political practice*, exhausts whatever goodwill there might be—in the local case—with his/her departure. Without putting too fine a point on this, we could say that at least the *political* lesson here can be read on a sign board: that until the dominant culture of academic life is prepared to receive black persons *in the moment of their appearance, in the moment of their person*, and not as the diapason replay of “race” myth, then the decisions of individuals might well reverberate in the lives of others. No one ever said that this was a *fair* outcome, but I believe that it *is* an *accurate* reading.

Quite in keeping with the thought-object-become-an-object-of-capital, the institution, in some cases, has not only “domesticated” the dissent of African American studies but has moved it “uptown.” This is very

fine, except that doing so appears to have induced what I called earlier the formation of a now-colonized studies, squarely installed within the central machinery of the liberal institution. But is this a contradiction? Today's black creative intellectuals in the academy are being sorted out now as two decisive *class* interests *within* an already small minority social formation, and its main determinant is inscribed along lines of gender. Heads of programs and departments, of research centers and the like, are male, by and large, and, just as interestingly, with *considerable* cooperation from some of their female colleagues often enough. Even this is not entirely objectionable, except that funding agencies, administrative officials, or any other agentification of the resources tend to bunch up the working capital, let's say, at the door of the male head, just as in the old black studies model, the campus's sphere of (black) influence orbited its path. It needn't be as sure as sunrise that *women* intellectuals, in this order of things, are going to be declassified and orientalized, but it is so, as a handful of males ascend to the top and females descend toward the bottom. We cannot assign fault or blame here, as there would be no justice, or accuracy, in attempting to pinpoint it. We can certainly not claim, either, that the ascendant sphere, or class, has not earned its status, deserved its various merits, but we do mean to call attention to the *systemic* and *systematic* replay of gestures of empowerment that, by very definition and practice, exclude women as social subjects from whatever grouping as a matter of reflex. At some time, the black creative intellectuals must respond to this aspect of the definition of *siting* on the conceptual object. I mean, in other words, that the *position* of the speaker in discourse goes far to decide the credibility of his/her report.

Quite possibly a reflection of the shadowy "laws" of cross-racial male bonding, this late development in African American studies, enabled and rewarded by college and university administrations, has impact on the entire field of inquiry: the women "teach," the men "preach," the women "follow," the men "lead," the women "nurture," the men "posture," the women "do good," the men "do well," just as the men drive "rather elegant cars," they think, while the women take the "unbearable ugliness" of their solid old Volvos down to the local mechanic's for the installation of a new airflow meter and hope that that will do. Is this nothing more than the all-too-human cackle of envy? If that is all that the complaint were, then we could dismiss it as a minor misfortune of the trivial, but one is not altogether sure that we can dispatch it so easily, *because* the moment of the scene that I am describing appears to have become the staging ground for the reprise of certain historic tensions that perennially surface across the life-world. Not

forcefully drawn out by either feminist inquiry or African American theoretical work, this component of division offers one of the key reasons why an *intramural* aspect of culture analysis is both necessary *and* evaded, for it would force us to confront what is suppressed in the public discourse of the analysis, indeed, what the politics of “race” customarily require to be censored here: the *strong* line of gender, as “race” “within” runs a broken line from one actant to another, as positioning in discourse overlaps a *strategic* class formation. African American “community” fractures against the broad back of this paradigmatic social configuration, mapped according to the demographics of larger cultural patterns. Mediated, in this case, by the American academy, this network of social relations reveals—in small—the incredible array of unarticulated tensions that would describe *movement* and *mobility* as decidedly *internal* features of analysis.

Thus, the academy offers the black creative intellectual his own, dear laboratory. He brings the community with him to it, bears it between his ears, so that, quite remarkably, his community must be rethought on the site of the foreign, with the *learned* tool. We are accustomed to hearing that the intellectuals must go back to community, but the only community there is goes forward with the objects already at hand. In fact, the “answers” that he/she seeks are already there, *at hand*, if by that we mean the willingness to *stake the inquiry*. I have placed emphasis on “inquiry” throughout this essay precisely because it is the *refused* device within a repertoire of choices. I am quite frankly puzzled that this is so, except that it “tears” one apart, insofar as he/she must now *discriminate* within a field of objects held in trust as his/her familiar. The rupture of certainty is exactly the stage here so that the narrative of the “sojourner” in a “strange land” is not entirely, or solely, the work of figuration. Or, we could say that, if it is, then the uses to which it is put are not negligible. We have not yet quite seen, even though some notable persons—Harold Cruse, among them—once labored diligently for the *conceptual object* of an African American studies. Still called “victim studies” by those who have no idea what its “architects” were aiming for and who have no interest in knowing, it is, to their mind, the sign of “Africinity”—the illegitimate issue of an unnamed and unnameable source. But *that* seems exactly the point—to now *name* the question that rupture evokes within the context of a specified loss—here, *imagined*. But in the game of culture, there are ways by which loss is *suspended* in gain. Is there a “science” in such a social text? At least one culture worker thought so.

Michel de Certeau highlights Freud’s “Moses and Monotheism” as

just such an act of suspenseful engagement—on the oxymoron, we might say. The studies in a cultural demography that I have insisted upon would at least light out for new ground with a somewhat different thought in mind. I borrow it from de Certeau:

["Moses and Monotheism"] has much to do with *suspicion*, which is rupture, doubt; and with *filiation*, which is both debt and law. Membership is expressed only through distance, through traveling farther and farther away from a ground of identity. A name still obliges, but no longer provides the thing, this nurturing land. Thus Freud must bet his place within writing. He gambles it with his cards on the table—he risks his relation with the real—in the game organized by a loss. The obligation to pay the debt, the refusal to abandon the name and the people ("Jerusalem, I shall not forget thee.") and hence, the impossibility of not writing, are built over the dispossession of all "genea-logical" language. The work has no hereditary soil. It is nomadic. Writing cannot forget the misfortune from which its necessity springs; nor can it count on tacit, rich, and fostering "evidences" that can provide for an "agrarian" speaker his intimacy with a mother tongue. Writing begins with an exodus. It proceeds in foreign languages. Its only recourse is the very elucidation of its travels in the tongue of the other: it is analysis.<sup>37</sup>

With *interrogation* to the fore, in lieu of the transparencies of "reading," perhaps we leave in place for Lois Brown, Lyndon Barrett, and all their arriving company a clearer space for work.

" . . . And so, I cleaned my house."

37. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 318–19.