

A Layover in Detroit, or Wherein Lies the Future of Black Studies?

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On October 5–7, 1999, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History held its 84th national meeting in Detroit. As the chair of the Department of Africana Studies at Wayne State University, I served on the host committee and gave welcoming remarks at the opening of the conference. I ended my comments by including a joke adapted to the occasion: “The study of Black History is like flying on the National Black Airlines. No matter where you’re headed, there will be a layover in Detroit.” This analogy is not far from the truth. Detroit is a key focal point for historical analysis, especially with regard to twentieth-century developments and twenty-first-century projections.

Approximately 83 percent of Detroit’s one million citizens are African American. De-

spite its economic difficulties since the shift from an industrial economy to a technological one, this city (and its surrounding metropolitan, tri-county area) houses one of the largest black middle classes in the United States. Its particular history is that before the abolition of slavery it was one of the last stops on the Underground Railroad before crossing the Detroit River into Canada. As a consequence of the Great Migrations north to work in the automobile industry during the twentieth century, this city became the site for the intersection of the civil rights movement and the labor movement. Its radicalism is the consequence of a progressive working class that championed the cause for race, gender, and class equity in labor struggles and in electoral politics. Today, these issues are critical to ideological concerns in our aca-



"My Teacher Called Me Ugly Today." Photo by Kristen Clarke.

democratic communities and in our holistic intellectual selves.

Even more so, these issues are related to real crises in the black community and in the black condition. At this historical juncture, however, class division within the race confounds Detroit politics. The dismantling of the Detroit Board of Education and the takeover of the Detroit public schools by a black mayor marked the first act of disenfranchisement in this city since the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Real estate speculation and the building of gambling casinos have dislocated and shortchanged long-term residents for the sake of "economic progress." Before Coleman A. Young (the previous mayor and an icon of black political radicalism) was cold in his grave, Detroit was being assessed, redressed, and sold down the river to suburban speculators and developers.

Although the black urban crisis is not the focus of this paper, it does affect the ideological agenda of black studies at Wayne State University, which sits in the hub of Motown. In the wake of the so-called second Detroit Renaissance, the working-less class has been "kicked to the curb"; but struggles launched and executed by that community resulted in the Center for Black Studies and the subsequent establishment of the Department of Africana Studies. Any discussion about the future of black studies at Wayne State University is directly related to this historical reality. And since parallel circumstances exist throughout the country, the analogy could be appropriately applied elsewhere.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois coined the much-quoted phrase, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." My contention is that the problem of the twenty-

first century is the problem of the color-coded class line. This is not to diminish the affront of racism, but rather to redefine how the race problem has been reconfigured within the increasing gap between the rich and poor and the vanishing middle class. Predominantly black cities are dealing with the encroachment of a ruling elite gaining control of public policies in cities and dismantling affirmative action programs in education and employment throughout the nation. This is most readily observed in Detroit, where this class schism has contributed to the alignment of prominent black officials and entrepreneurs with corporate interests and Republican outsiders. To some, this may appear to be purely a political issue, but a parallel in the academy can be likewise observed.

The pursuit of a profitable career as an academic presents a contradiction and a compromise with regard to intellectual and creative expression. The marketplace has already begun to dictate the value of thought and inventiveness. The previous perspective of the discipline, derived from the immediate and historical struggle for freedom, has been altered in accord with the relativistic objectivity of the intellectual elite. The expectation for academic scholars to adhere to the vocabulary of their peers configures a "double consciousness" that often does not survive the conversation of transference. The physical distance between black communities and most black scholars positioned on isolated campuses diminishes their intellectual clarity and clouds their imagination. They study their subjects from the outside and process their information through the coded voice of the ivory tower. Or, in other instances, they are so caught up in romantic revisionism of Africa and in ancient Egypt they cannot connect with contemporary reality across the street, inside urban borders.

This is not to diminish the value of contemporary scholarship, but the reach of in-

tellectual pursuits is limited by its given context. The future of black studies largely resides in the capacity to resolve internal intellectual contradictions by addressing the actual needs of African Americans and thereby challenging academic elitism. No doubt, there is some progressive value in enlightening our university colleagues. God knows they need all the help they can get to assuage further descent into the quagmire of intellectual arrogance and esoteric navel contemplation. But talk is cheap when the task at hand should be to develop an intellectual discipline that *also* illustrates how to transform dialogue into tangible means, how to apply genius to real-life circumstances.

The appeal for innovative scholarship appears in ironic circumstances. Most recently, I got a rather alarming fax. It read, "Rosa Parks Goes to U. S. Court to Defend Her Name." Indeed, on November 4, 1999, a civil rights icon filed a lawsuit to protest the exploitation of her name as the title of a rap song by the group OutKast. Admittedly, the representative for the group said there was no correlation between the lyrics and Rosa Parks. Only the refrain, "Get to the back of the bus," suggested a connection to Parks and a reason to use her name to popularize the song, which has already reaped a astronomical sales of \$32 million, as entered into court records during the hearing. There is a huge generation gap looming between the consciousness of the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s and the onslaught of commercialism and materialism that now impacts and directs the culture of contemporary youth, who see themselves as outcasts and believe in "gettin' paid."

Moreover, it makes one wonder about the distance between the scholarship on "rap music and rap culture" and the community of youth who adhere to and live it. Who buys this music anyway? Does the symbolic rever-

sal of desegregation in the name of Rosa Parks appeal to young white youth as well? Certainly, they are a part of the market as much if not more than black youth. Is this some semblance of the same exploitative ignorance that assaulted her in 1993 in front of her Detroit home? When the black male assailant was asked did he know that she was Rosa Parks, his reply was, "Yeah." This young man's callous indifference is reflective of a metaphorical irony in need of repair. The civil rights movement is under attack from within and without.

Parks lost the legal argument, and this was a subject of some discussion at a tribute in her honor a few weeks later on November 28, 1999. It was both a sincere and suspect event that night at Orchestra Hall. Vice President Al Gore presented her with the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor, Aretha Franklin sang with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee hosted the auspicious occasion. But there was also the annoying background noise of the "nouveau riche" exchanging business cards, answering pagers, and placing cell-phone calls while Aretha sang "a rose is still a rose" to Rosa. Once again, this civil rights legend had been turned into a business opportunity.

It may not be as tragic as a street mugging, but considering the advantages that these well-paid professionals now enjoy as a consequence of generations of sacrifice, it is another sad statement about values gone awry, another glitch in the historical continuum, another symptom of the disease of cultural amnesia.

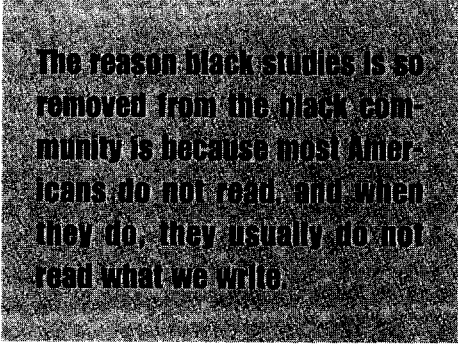
The reason black studies is so removed from the black community is because most Americans do not read, and when they do,

they usually do not read what we write. Moreover, many cannot decode the level of vocabulary published in a theoretical text, the kind of book that gets published by a university press and secures tenure for the author. The issue is literacy and/or insensitivity.

In the first instance, the incapacity of black youth to rise above the anger and violence enveloping their imagination and the articulations in their songs is directly related to the fact that they speak another language and live in another country, on

the other side of the classroom border. We must redirect at least some of our intellectual enterprise to consider that dimension of a possible reading audience and try to interact in a language and in a context that will elevate their understanding and supplement their vocabulary.

The second instance is class insensitivity. Even if the scholarship is read, the audience does not identify with the critical concerns entrapping the black masses. Although some of us were focused on how to get "freedom," others of us were in pursuit of the other American dream—how to get rich. These two American myths are equally strong and tear at our disparate selves. In our present economic plight, the desire for material wealth outweighs our dedication to the oppressed. Or, perhaps, the confusion resides in the belief that money creates freedom. Before the abolition of slavery, freedom was sometimes purchased. Many freedmen and women believed the acquisition of wealth extended the dream of freedom beyond physical bondage. It was widely espoused then, as it still is today, that class ascension, social leverage, and mobility for African Americans can be ac-



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quired through riches. In her essay, "Our Greatest Want," published in the *Anglo-African Magazine* in 1859, Frances E.W. Harper illuminates the inherent contradiction in this belief:

We have money among us, but how much of it is spent to bring deliverance to our captive brethren? Are our wealthiest men the most liberal sustainers of the Anti-slavery enterprise? Or does the bare fact of their having money, really help mold public opinion and reverse its sentiments? We need what money cannot buy and what affluence is too beggarly to purchase. Earnest self-sacrificing souls that will stamp themselves not only on the present but the future. Let us not then defer all our noble opportunities till we get rich. And here I am, not aiming to enlist a fanatical crusade against the desire for riches, but I do protest against chaining down the soul, with its Heaven endowed faculties and God given attributes to the one idea of getting money as stepping into power or even gaining our rights in common with others. The respect that is only bought by gold is not worth much. It is no honor to shake hands politically with men who whip women and steal babies. If this government has no call for our services, no aim for your children, we have the greater need of them to build up a true manhood and womanhood for ourselves. The important lesson we should hear and be able to teach, is how to make every gift, whether gold or talent, fortune or genius, subserve the cause of crushed humanity and carry out the greatest idea of the present age, the glorious idea of human brotherhood.¹

What Harper proposes in her concluding sentences challenges us to direct the wealth of all of our resources toward a larger purpose. The demand is for economic justice, not excess and privilege. Scholars have stud-

ied rap culture and its creators and benefited from the sales of these books; and yet the youth who listen to and ascribe to the values espoused in the songs have not benefited from these studies about them. The dialogue is between academics and educated audiences who are less interested in understanding than they are in voyeurism. There is little genuine enthusiasm in resolving the crisis that surmounts the circumstances that fuel the lyrics of the culture. The embodiment of anger; the expressions of violence; and the disrespect that dominates the booming, aggressive end rhyme of "gangsta rap" is indicative of the circular oppression and socioeconomic conditions that consume black youth, pledging allegiance to 40s and marijuana blunts and demeaning womanhood.

At the University of Michigan, the Midwest Consortium on Black Studies convened in April 1999 for a conference titled, "Black Agenda for the 21st Century: Towards a Synthesis of Culture, History, and Social Policy." Due to the declining number of African-American Ph.D.s, a concern was voiced about the longevity of the discipline and its capacity to generate progenitors of black studies. But the brain drain begins long before the students decide what to study at the university level. We are in competition with the appeal of big, fast money gained from dealing in the illegal drug trade, a profession glorified in rap songs and on street corners.

Unbeknownst to most educators, African-American genius is embedded in our rich oral tradition. One of our most visible talents is our ingenuity with language, our linguistic dexterity with English. Rappers have exploited this talent to their advantage in the music marketplace. The imagination that resides in the language also holds our creativity, our inventiveness. As scholars, we need to intervene at the elementary, middle, and high

school levels with strategies that deal with the literacy and socioeconomic crises in viable, programmatic terms. Students must be taught how to appreciate their endowed talents and develop them for application in other arenas without sacrificing integrity by smearing the legacy of our cultural heroes and heroines.

The appearance of the high-profile imagery of the "Harvard Dream Team" on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, the broadcast of black studies specials on public television, the distribution of black history on CD-ROM or online.edu may grant an American-styled legitimacy that the dominant culture acknowledges and to some extent respects. But despite the grandeur and the sophistication of these presentations, the commodification of the discipline and the culture emanate haunting shadows from a slave auction. Even though humans can no longer be bought or sold, it is still profitable to sell one's soul.

At the same time, there is a history of a black middle class that resisted a superficial, materialist existence. This community gave as much as it received and, in some instances, gave more. It invested in the building of institutions and people for pragmatic purposes. Frances Harper was not alone in her belief or her practice. Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Anna Julia Cooper, and many lesser known strivers balanced their material prosperity with cultural well-being.

In our contemporary context, Rosa Parks has never abandoned her fight for civil rights. The Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Defense sponsors the Pathways to Freedom Program, which helps young people aged eleven to seventeen acquire the skills necessary "to work for human rights in all

areas."² By tracing the Underground Railroad to the civil rights movement, these youngsters advance their literacy, math, and problem-solving skills in practical settings within a larger historical context.

Perhaps we, as African-American scholars, should continue to follow Parks's lead and expand our ideological dialectic to encompass the relationship between freedom and class conditions within a practical framework and a historical context. We can reclaim the activist values that established the discipline in the first place and resist intellectual exile in hostile territories. We can engage the conscious effects of class dynamics on the imaginations and souls of the American people and provide intellectual insight that forewarns young people and our peers about how the trappings of capitalistic greed result in a return to the back of the bus.

I ended the title of this essay with a question mark because it is indeed a subject to be pondered with open possibilities. Answers to the question reside in the neighborhoods and in the time frame of black people. To many esteemed colleagues, such a question may seem irrelevant, naïve, and even pedestrian. But maybe this essay will give reason to pause and to consider a layover in Detroit for some serious intellectual soul searching. Maybe it will arouse those comfortably cushioned in fat careers to consider that within the hallowed halls of "the ivory tower" black studies is beginning to pale.

Notes

1. Frances E.W. Harper, "Our Greatest Want," *Anglo-African Magazine*, Vol. 1 (1859), p. 160.

2. *Rosa Parks: A Tribute to Her Quiet Strength* [program book] (Detroit, Mich.: The Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development, November 28, 1999), p. 77.