

# Race and the Public Intellectual: A Conversation with Michael Eric Dyson

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Recently, conversations regarding what role universities play in larger communities have become prolific. Some scholars have argued that the walls that divide academics from the “real world” are false and that the university is as much the real world as any other entity. Yet others have adamantly sought ways to maintain and strengthen the protective walls of the ivory tower insisting that what gets done in the academy is somehow more virtuous because it is cerebral. Michael Eric Dyson, the self-proclaimed “Hip-Hop Public Intellectual,” has emerged as a vocal radical who seeks to bring the intellectual work of the academy to popular/mass culture in ways that not only encourage political action in world communities, but that retain academic integrity at the same time. For Dyson, doing this involves getting one’s hands dirty and taking one’s work to sites outside the academy. He says “A kind of geography of destiny is linked to whether you occupy the terrain of the academy, specifically and particularly as an academic, you ought to stay there. We love to talk about transgressions intellectually, academically, but we don’t want to do it physically or epistemologically. We don’t want to actually do it.”

Dyson is by trade a preacher and a teacher. His books and articles appear in scholarly forum, religious forum, and popular press and address issues that range from critique of rap music to critical readings of Malcolm X to cultural theory to examining religious values. His voice is heard by many in the academy and many more outside its walls. It is to this end that Dyson works. He is clear: “I want to speak to the academy in very powerful and interesting ways, but I don’t want to be limited to the academy.” For Dyson, what goes on outside of the academy is of tremendous consequence, and in the conversation that follows, he is adamant about our need to talk about how matters of race and discussions of race affect people on both sides of the academic wall.

What many will find interesting about Dyson’s relational view of the university and the outside world is that he sees a great importance in the kinds of theoretical work that get done in the university. For Dyson, theory becomes the avenue by which important questions get asked; yet, he contends that those questions do not need to be asked in ways which deny non-academics access to the answers. At the forefront of Dyson’s agenda is a push for academic and mass-

cultural discussions to better inform one another. This gets done, he argues, through public intellectualism. For Dyson, the job of the public intellectual—the Black public intellectual, in particular—is to be a “paid pest” whose function is to “disrupt and intervene upon conversations in ways that are disturbing, that in their very disturbance force people to ask why they frame the questions in the way that they did or they make the analysis they do.”

For Dyson, disrupting notions of race and multiculturalism provide access to understanding how issues of race, gender, class, and culture get constructed. Dyson is critical of the market multiculturalism that inhabits American universities. He contends that the rough edges and discomfiting moments of race and multiculturalism are smoothed over in the versions universities promote; they lack the raw vitality and danger that should be associated with issues of conflict. However, he makes plain that the ways in which multiculturalism and issues of race are safely broached in classrooms are critically important. Dyson is clear that he would rather see conflicts of race break out in safe contestations in classrooms rather than not be discussed at all and that he would much rather see classroom approaches to race and multiculturalism than many of the violent ways in which race gets “debated” in the street. When he talks of the conflict of race and culture, his metaphors reflect this violence and his wish for race to break out in classrooms so it “wounds our most cherished expectations” of the safety of classroom multiculturalism.

What compositionists will notice immediately about Dyson is his acute awareness of how language comes to the fore in matters of race. He is self-conscious of the language he uses and the ways in which he addresses different audiences. But he is also cognizant of how theoretical approaches to understanding discourse and writing affect the epistemological ways in which race, gender, class, ideology get constructed. Dyson identifies this intellectual engagement with language as having powerful implications in redefining the relationship between the work that gets done in the academy and lives of people who live outside of its borders. Dyson seeks to make available the intellectual projects of the academy to the masses in accessible ways in order to enact change and re-envision how the world views race, class, gender, and the other constructs that shape our thinking about difference.

Q: In *Reflecting Black* you write: “The desire for literacy has characterized the culture of African-Americans since their arrival here under the myriad brutalities of slavery. Although reading and writing were legally prohibited, black folk developed a resourceful oral tradition that had cultural precedence in African societies. . . . Black folk generated an oral tradition that expressed and reinforced their cultural values, social norms, and religious beliefs. . . . Even with the subsequent development of literate intellectual traditions, a resonant orality continues to shape and influence cultural expression.” You are a prolific writer; your work appears in scholarly forums, major newspapers, popular magazines, religious forums, and so on. How important has

writing become in the tradition of black story telling, in shaping and influencing black cultural expression? How do you think of writing in the larger scopes of black narrative?

A: I think that writing has become extraordinarily important in terms of black storytelling and shaping and influencing black cultural expression, especially because of the centrality of narrative. The narrativity of black experience—the ways in which stories shape self-understanding and mediate self-revelation racially—is enormously powerful in narrative forms especially autobiographical narratives, which constitute the attempt of the race both to state and then to move forward to its goals as revealed in stories of “overcoming odds,” “up from slavery,” “out of the ghetto.” Narrativity is an extraordinarily important component of self-understanding and the way in which African-American peoples constitute their own identities, especially in this post-modern world. I think that writing *per se*—the capacity of people to reflect critically upon their experiences and then filter those experiences through the lens of their own written work—certainly shapes and changes self-expression in a way different from, say, oral expression. In other words, as Ali Masri, the Africanist, says, there is something extraordinarily conservative about the oral form because the oral form only preserves that which people remember and that which people deem necessary to integrate into the fabric of their collective memory. Whereas the written form contests certain narrow limitations of the oral form because it situates the writer and the reader in a trans-historical moment that allows the articulation of an extraordinary convergence of contested identities and conflicting identities. So for instance, when we’re writing, and we have a body of writing to appeal to and a body of writing against which we can contrast our own self-understanding, our own self-revelation, our own self-invention against what Foucault said, against what Ellison said, against what Baldwin said, against what slave narratives have been talking about for the last century and as we’ve recuperated them, it’s an extraordinarily different moment, because the narrative community there constitutes a wedge of interpretation that is provided by the writing, the very physical act of having the paper to refer to.

In regard to the creation of the self through narrative, it is much different when you have an oral community where people are relying upon memory, upon the texture of their memory, and to mediate their own self-understanding. So orality provides a different lens than it seems writing does as the very textured, embodied, in what, I guess, Haraway calls *material density*. The physical reality of the writing itself has a kind of phenomenological and epistemological *weight* levied against this memory because you can refer to the text. Whereas in the oral traditions, they certainly have a kind of genealogical effect: one passes one thing on from another, as opposed to a kind of Nietzschean or Foucauldian sense of genealogy. The oral reference provides a kind of artifice of invented memory that in one sense is *not* the same as in written work.

So I think that writing is very important, and it's very important in terms of the transition of African peoples from modernist to post-modernist forms. Writing is enormously important to try to figure out what the past is about, what the present is about in relationship to that past, and how the writing itself becomes a bridge of communication and connection between previous cultures and contemporary ones, *and* a way, of course, of reinventing the very character and texture of experience in light of one's own writing. Writing is as much about revelation as it's about invention. When one is writing, one is literally *writing into* and *writing from*, and I think that those poles of writing into and writing from—inscribing and re-inscribing—situates us in a kind of interpretive and performative moment that allows us to be the mediator, that is, “the writer,” to mediate between these two different poles of invention. I think that especially for African-American people who are preoccupied with this literacy, who are preoccupied with the articulation of a self through the narrative, writing becomes a most important avenue of both revealing and inventing the future of the race.

Writing becomes, in relationship to other narrative forms, a crucial aspect of connecting ourselves to an old debate about black intelligence, but it also becomes a way of unleashing and constituting different forms of self-understanding that are necessary if we're to move beyond the *mere* fixation on the oral and the *mere* fixation on the cinematic to talk about the legitimate concern of literate expression. I think black people have been torn in two directions here. On the one hand, we've said, “well that's about white folk and what they do, that's about mainstream society and culture, black folks' abilities to articulate self-identity and revelation and culture is about orality.” So, writing is not a central part of our own project. On the other hand, people have said, “no, *only* when we begin to write with a certain level of mastery with those narrative patriarchal codes in place, will we be able to exemplify our own specific form of mastery and intelligence, and therefore we will be, in one sense entering the modern world and able to, in a very powerful way, show that we are worthy of participation in this American project of democracy and that we're worthy bearers of culture.” What's interesting to me, then, is not to discard writing as a central project of African and African-American peoples. There have been all kinds of writings embedded in black culture from the get-go. And that one of the things we have to see is that it's a deeply racist moment, to suggest to people that writing is about an external tradition to African-American culture, as opposed to orality. And I think that it's necessary for us as *writers*. I see myself as a writer first and foremost in that sense: an articulator of speech, an articulator of ideals, and the way in which ideals are not only mediated through speech but constituted in very powerful ways through the very act of writing, the physical weight of writing, the intellectual and ontological self-revelation that is expressed in writing, as well as the constituting of narrative communities that weigh against racist arguments, against black identity and black intelligence and black culture—that stuff is very important.

We have to then figure out a way to link writing to a very powerful articulation of black culture, and this is where, for me, questions of authenticity come in. It's not authentic for black folk to write at a certain level; it's authentic for them to speak. It's not authentic for them to engage in intellectual performances; it's about the articulation of the self through the body. So all of these other narrative forms (cinema and forms of musical culture) have precedence in African-American culture because as Hortense Spillers points out, these are the forms that were demanded during slavery. Slave masters didn't say, "Come and perform a trope for us; come and perform a metaphoric allegory." Rather, "come and perform a song for us, and come engage in physical activity." We have to refocus activity upon black intellectual expression through narrative forms that become a way of black people extending a tradition and investigating a tradition that we have neglected. The best of black cultural scholars, of course, and literary scholars, have begun to force us to re-think these issues in light of notions of not only multiple literacy but the way in which most multiple literacies are connected to certain forms of cultural expression within black society.

So, I think that writing is central. As we move into this hyper-text and cyber-world, and the way in which the forms of expression are mediated not through people's physical writing but through exchange of information systems, I think that the recovery of writing becomes a kind of both nostalgic project—already ironically at the end of the twentieth century—but also an articulation of the necessity of still having a mediating agent. That is, the *writer* standing in, not only for a larger narrative community, but for intervening with his or her own viewpoints about what constitutes authentic real legitimate powerful black identity.

Q: You've begun to discuss technology, and recently, in contemporary composition scholarship there has been a lot of conversation regarding how technology affects writers. But there hasn't been much written about how technology specifically affects African-American writers. There are some who see cyber-writing and publishing as closer to oral communication than traditional writing and publication. Do you see this as a potential advantage for blacks and others? That is, how do you see the role of technology and writing being affected by or affecting matters of language and race?

A: There certainly are advantages to new technologies in terms of cultural expressivity for black people. There is the argument that black people are scared off by scientific technology and that the fears are deserved primarily because these new technologies are controlled by a bunch of white elites who have no interest in investing the requisite economy in black communities to expand the super-information highway into the black ghetto or into black communities to make sure it has an off-ramp into the inner-city. On the other hand, we need to examine whether or not these technical elites are reproducing narratives of technical proficiency that already stigmatize black people because of their ostensible exclusion from the regime of intelligence that they

represent. There are two things going on here: first of all, that new technologies can primarily increase the capacity for black people to become part of this larger “global” world—*global* with scare quotes there because part of globalization is about the reproduction of narratives with mastery that allow the expansion of information in ways that I think are very problematic. In the sense of a global village, that international perspective that black people are talking about, this allows us to tap into that flow of information—here again, knowledge is mobility. There’s only good for African-American peoples to be involved in, and communities to be involved in, this new technology.

One of the ongoing ironies and paradoxes of black life is that when we were still in our pre-modern world, America entered the modern world. African-American communities are in a modernist mode precisely as America moves into a postmodernist mode. Now, God knows, as black people enter into a postmodernist mode what mode that means the rest of American society is involved in, some post-post-modernist, which could be modernism. I’ve written that post-modernism may turn out to be modernism in drag. So what happens, then, is that for black people the attempt somehow to see ourselves related to technology is a historically specific one: the ways in which those technologies have been deployed against black bodies, against black intelligences. We see this breaking out everywhere. The O. J. Simpson trial was an example of black people’s resistance to certain forms of medical technology, feeling that this stuff had been used against us. The reason why so many people were willing to believe that O. J. was perhaps innocent—or at least not guilty—is because of the Tuskegee experiment where black folk had all kinds of medical/technological surveillance on their bodies. There’s a kind of inbred hostility towards certain technologies not because of their inherent capacity to do ill or good, but simply because of their social uses on black bodies. What we have to do is to uncouple or de-couple the relationship between technological advance and racial repression, because there’s a very strong tradition of that. Once we find ways to intervene upon those kinds of historically unjust and corrupt manifestations of technology, then what black people have to do is to seize the day if we’re going to be part and parcel of a new world where technology has not only shaped the nature of writing, but it’s also shaped the capacity of people to interact with one another.

In a larger theoretical and philosophical sense, if we say oral communication is closer to technology than traditional writing and publication, there are some arguments to be made on both sides. In one sense, absolutely right, because people have a kind of spontaneity about oral communication. If you’re on-line and you’re responding to a question being pressed to you, there’s a kind of textured dense immediacy that one has responding spontaneously to a question. Whereas writing is about re-writing. Writing is about re-invention. It’s about taking an ideal in certain linear forms and expressing a logic of inevitability that one either agrees with or disagrees with, that one is able to revise in light of a rejection of that sentiment. Because if you’re in

a semiconscious state, as many writers are while they're writing, and then find out "Oh, I really don't believe what I just wrote." You can revise that. Whereas in oral communication that is mediated through this new technology of being on-line, the possibility of that spontaneity is greater, but the capacity to revise, of course, once one has committed oneself to a statement, is limited when the other person immediately responds. Whereas in a written situation, there's a prefabricated consciousness that allows one to write, rewrite, revise, and then come at a multiple sense of understandings before one delivers what the definitive statement is that one believes. Now, in one sense, that's being interrupted by new technologies where one commits oneself with more immediacy. That's closer to an oral communication where orality is seen as the kind of spontaneous articulation of beliefs. But there's a different sense of orality that I think is much more profound: the way in which the oral tradition itself has already weeded out alternative visions of a particular story to become that oral tradition. When we talk about oral tradition versus orality, oral tradition says, there's a much more conservative estimation of what can survive transmission from one generation to another. New technologies explode that kind of oral tradition. New technologies explode the capacity of a thousand people to reflect on a particular instance of articulation. For instance, if I make a statement on-line that I think Michael Jackson's hyper-baric chamber was a way of preserving what has already disappeared: his race as a signifier for his own identity. If you're on-line, you've got a hundred people who are going to just argue with you, reaffirm that, give you alternative readings of that particular reality. That's a very powerful moment where indeed there's a communal sense of creating an ideal. The very act of creativity is predicated upon a kind of Lone Ranger metaphor or trope for self-understanding and invention of the text. At least on-line there's a capacity of interaction with a whole range of narrative communicants who are able to shape, re-shape, revise, or at least argue with you about what you think, and therefore it's not simply what you think; it's about the interaction between that artificial community. In *that* sense, this new form bodes extraordinarily well for a range of black people to get involved in this. In terms of language and race, this technology has the capacity to expand the boundaries of the American democratic experience into hyper-space in ways that are very positive. So that it's all for the good that black people are involved in getting on-line, e-mail, getting hooked up and wired, because that expands our capacity to talk about issues of mobility, of democracy, of arguing about the welfare reform, of getting tapped into resources that can help us re-think how we can get connected around the globe, or even around this country. That's very powerful.

On the other hand, to the degree to which African-American people are excluded from that process, there will be the rearticulation of this notion that technology and African-American identity are somehow not simply juxtaposed but contradictory. And that black people, with their refusal to, or

inability to, get wired in this so-called technological world, will be a kind of reassertion of a horrible, horrible tradition in the western world—especially in American culture—where scientific and techno-scientific processes have excluded black people and their lives have become the object of that techno-scientific culture and not the subject. One of the powerful things about this new technology is that it allows black people to extend their capacity for agency, to become subjects of that techno-scientific culture and not merely as objects. So, I think that it shouldn't be just an uncritical celebration; it should be some kind of cautionary note about the ethical limits imposed upon techno-scientific culture.

Q: You mentioned access, briefly. Could you speak to how class intersects matters of race when we talk about technology?

A: Yes. Well, there's no question that the folk who are getting wired and who are getting on-line more or less are middle-class black folk or black folk who have access to traditional forms of literacy through traditional forms of education through college and so on. There have been many attempts to try to get some of this technology into the inner-city, and we're just now getting people to use computers in the inner-city in ways that people were doing twenty years ago in suburban America throughout this country. So I think that class intervenes powerfully in race in terms of techno-scientific culture precisely because those African-American people who get hooked up, who get wired, are those who already understand the nature of the game, and the nature of the game is about manipulation of information. It's about reproduction of identity through techno-scientific narratives that allow people not only to control and dominate information, but allow that information to allow them to accumulate capital. Because the connection between capital and technology is being obfuscated by this ostensible notion of the democratic exchange of information among participants, and we know that's not the case. What is really the case is that a kind of specific class of people have had access to this technology. So I think that in that sense, class and race work against many black folk, and many brown folk, who really could take greater advantage of what's being offered on-line.

Q: You're very conscious of language. You seem to enjoy words; you play with them when you write: You refer to your "color commentary" on BET about the O.J. case; you pun with phrases like "Crossing over Jordan" in reference to Michael Jordan and "what a difference a Dre makes." You even use racial tension in the sounds of words when you play with alliterations like the "charm and chutzpa" of your son. You've also written that it is clear that "language is crucial to understanding, perhaps solving, though at other times even intensifying, the quandaries of identity that vex most blacks." You argue that, "Black culture lives and dies by language." It's a big question to ask about the relationship between race and language—an inquiry which your work regularly explores in depth. But could you talk about how language affects your own coming to terms with race?



A: Yes, well, that's a very powerful question. You know, that old Bible passage, somewhere in the Psalms: "I was conceived in sin and born in iniquity." I feel like I was born in language; I feel that there's a verbal womb, the rhetorical womb, that I was nurtured in. My mother, who was a highly intelligent black woman, appreciated literacy but was prevented because of being a female and the youngest of a family of five children born to a farmer in Alabama. I feel that from the very beginning, I was bathed in the ethos of linguistic appreciation. My mother talked to us and read to us. And then I went to church; the church is a very important narrative community for me, very powerful, not only in terms of the norms it mediates in regard to the stances one should take politically and spiritually, but simply because of the resplendent resonances that were there in terms of language. Hearing the power for articulations of black preachers, hearing the linguistic innovations of black singers, hearing the rhetorical dexterity of a revivalist who came to town to try to paint for us the picture of God dying on a cross and the differences that the death on that cross made, not simply telling us about a theology of atonement, not simply talking to us (in dry, arcane, academized, theological language) about the dispensation of God, talking about these deep theological concepts. They wanted to paint the picture; they wanted us to feel it. They wanted us to feel the kind of existential and ontological density of linguistic specificity. What I mean by "linguistic specificity" is that the language itself had a performative capacity, and the performative in the most enlarging and very powerful sense of that word. They not only were performing The Word from God, but they themselves, the words, were performing a kind of oracular and wisdom-tradition intervention upon our lives. That was extraordinarily important to me, because I got a sense of the rhythms, of the passions, and of the almost physical texture of language, of feeling the very visceral dimensions of verbal articulation.

In elementary school, my fifth-grade teacher Mrs. James (about whom I've written) had an extraordinary capacity to make black history come alive off the page, and she did so through teaching us painting and poetry. The poetry, especially, and writing our own stories was very important. Mrs. James encouraged us to see that there was a direct connection between the capacities for invention and self-revelation from prior black generations to our own. She made the capacity to be a linguistic animal a very real one for us and a very appealing one for us. Mrs. James taught us that if we're going to really be powerful black people, we're going to be intelligent black people, then we've got to be black people who did what other powerful, intelligent black people did—they wrote, they thought, they created.

As you say, I try to integrate a variety of perspectives about language in my own work now. Because I think that we should take note of what Derrida does with language and how he challenges straightforward traditional literary conceptions of language such as logocentrism. We've got to de-mythologize that through a kind of deconstructive practice that asks not simply, "What

does it mean?" but, "How does it signify?" Multiple valences and multiple convergence of meanings which contest in a linguistic space for logic have to be acknowledged as both an index of the political economy of expressive culture, but also, its situatedness and embodiedness and embeddedness in a real political context where words make a difference about who we are and what we understand and what uses those words will be put to. I saw that operating in the black church in terms of spiritual and moral differences, and I've now taken that lesson seriously in the so-called secular arena. I think we have to take Derrida seriously; we have to take Foucault seriously when he talks about the insurrection of subjugating knowledges and the ways in which those knowledges make possible different articulative moments within African-American expressive culture and writing. Also, I think we've got to baptize them, as I've tried to argue. I think that the baptism of Derrida or Foucault or Guattari or Baudrillard or Deleuze doesn't mean that we have a narrow nation-state articulation of the logic of American democracy or nationalism, that is, make them show passports because we Americans demand that foreigners genuflect before the altar of American identity. No; it simply means that we have to take the lesson of shading and of creating a discursive frame that allows the particularities and resonances of *this* soil, of the American and, in my case, the African-American soil, to dirty the language, to dirty the theory, to make more gritty the realities that so smoothly travel from European culture to American theory, especially as they are applied to African-American culture. I think that language is in itself a metaphor of the extraordinary capacity of identities to be shaped and reshaped, of the incredible convergences of different and simultaneous meanings of life that in some senses claim space within both our intellectual and moral worlds and the ways in which those of us who are writers, artists, intellectuals have to appreciate the extraordinary power that language continues to have especially in minority communities and in oppressed communities where language becomes an index of one's own status. It becomes an index of one's own attempt to create oneself against the world and to say to the world, "I do exist." And that's why, for me, instances of certain hip-hop culture have been incredibly important in mediating that reality especially for young black men and women who have been marginalized, not only within the larger white society and mainstream culture, but who have been marginalized even within African-American culture. Those linguistic divisions in black society continue to index deeper class divisions that we have not paid sufficient attention to.

Q: In the preface to *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, you write "The recycling of tired debates about racial and cultural authenticity abound. These debates have taken many forms in many different forums, but they all come down to the same question: how can we define the Real Black Person?" Obviously, there is also no Real Black Writer, but do institutional, mass-read texts—such as multicultural readers—that depict particular black experience attempt to construct a "Real Black Person" and a "Real Black Writer" in the name of diversity and tolerance?

A: I think yes, to answer that, and no [laughter]. Yes, in the sense that, you're absolutely right, one of the hidden logics of multiculturalism is an attempt somehow to elide or distort or at least obfuscate the incredible heterogeneity and the raucous diversity that is contained in black identity—or any minority identity. Multiculturalism is a concession to the need to package black identity for a larger world, to mainstream the particularity and specificity of black identity for a larger world, to be consumed. So in this case, multiculturalism is indivisible from the commodity fetishism and the consumptive realities of the American intellectual scene.

Q: Something like the Epcot version of culture.

A: There it is; that's exactly right! Multiculturalism at that level indexes the necessity to, or need to, or desire to cross over black culture in acceptable mainstream forms under the guise of accepting this reality that other voices must be heard. What's interesting about multiculturalism, however, is that there's a leveling effect in the sense that it says that there are interchangeable others that are being mobilized within the multicultural discourse. In other words, multiculturalism suggests that we have a relative equality of articulation within the space of American intellectual culture and that what we have to do is pay attention to equally objective and informative ways of understanding the world. I don't know if that's what was meant by all those struggles from Frederick Douglass to DuBois down from Sojourner Truth down to Angela Davis. That was meant in terms of appealing to certain literate and oral traditions within African-American culture to situate black life against the injustice and the economic inequality that was being perpetrated. I think that multiculturalism doesn't pay attention to the need to argue that these things are not all the same, that we're not all participating equally at the table. This is the problem of course, and as important as it is in my own understanding of the intellectual project of a person like Richard Rorty talking about conversation as if we all had equal access to the table, that there were no filters, in terms of class or race or gender as to who got to the table, who could get to the table to converse about differences. There's an enormous advance in saying that philosophy is no longer the tribunal of pure reason before which other disciplines must now genuflect in acknowledgment of philosophy's technical superiority or that philosophy is itself value-laden and theory-laden, that it's narrative-laden, that it is, as Rorty borrows from Derrida, a form of writing. It doesn't constitute a kind of disciplinary territory against which we must barricade other epistemological interventions, that is, philosophy is different from theology, theology is radically different from sociology, and so on. But they don't have their epistemological barriers reared that other outsiders must show intellectual passports in order to gain access through genuflection before their disciplinary terrorism.

On the other hand, to use that metaphor of conversation that Rorty got from Michael Oakeshott is to suggest that there is no political/economic analysis of who gets to get at that table, who gets to participate in that dialogue

about determining what is real and what's not real, what's important and what's not important, what's moral and what's immoral. I feel the same about multiculturalism that argues that there is a kind of implicit equality of means by which people have access to the debate about what gets to constitute real knowledge. And the reality is that it's radically unequal, it has tremendous marks of inequality, and those marks of inequality are marked in the very appropriation of marginalized minority discourses for the purposes of reproducing a hegemonic conception of what is real and authentic by using the name and the color of blackness to repress other dissident forms of blackness that challenge that narrow market multiculturalism that has been prevalent. In that sense, the Real Black Person is being put forth. Here is the authentic African-American being put forth, not only for the consumptive desires of a market multiculturalism that demands the Real Black, but it's the ability of this market multiculturalism to exclude the capacity of other legitimate, powerful black voices to challenge that narrow hegemony and also to suggest that there are alternative versions of even that conception that need to be taken seriously. In that sense, I'm suspicious. I think it's a dubious project to have this kind of corporate multiculturalism, this market multiculturalism that doesn't pay attention to the radical particularity and the specific heterogeneities that are being produced on the African-American terrain.

The institutionalization of black identity through multiculturalism is at least as problematic to me as those people who are critical of gangsta rap and the way in which gangsta rap presents this authentic black person to the narrative as black-as-thug or the ghetto as only about thuggerian thanatopsies and not about black school teachers working against the odds, young black ghetto residents trying to master their algebra through a hail of bullets. I think that the reduction to the Real Black person, the tropes of authenticity and the narrow conceptions of what reality is about, this template of ontological essentialism that really obscures the radical complexity and heterogeneity of black identity, is deeply problematic. Market multiculturalism and corporate multiculturism is really deeply problematic.

Q: Many people argue that the jargon-rich language of the academy is more obfuscating than illuminating for those outside of the specialized area of academic work. Yet, you write in *Between God and Gangsta Rap* that "The language of the academy is crucial because it allows me to communicate within a community of scholars whose work contributes to the intellectual strength of our culture. . . . The language of the academy is most important to me because it provides a critical vocabulary to explore the complex features of American and African-American life. The language of the academy should never divorce itself from the politics of crisis, social problems, cultural circumstances, moral dilemmas, or intellectual questions of the world in which we live." You continue, "As a public intellectual, I am motivated to translate my religious, academic, and political ideas into a language that is accessible without being simplistic." How do you see the

transition between academic discourse and more public discourses affecting your work? And, are there problems of translation when moving between discourses?

A: I see the transition from the academic to the public as a self-conscious decision to intervene on debates and conversations that happen in public spheres—a different public sphere from the academy because I consider the academy a public sphere—that have enormous consequence on everyday peoples' lives that I want to have a part of. The transition, however, is not smooth; the demands for rigorous debate within the academy are much different than those demands in the public sphere. Within academic, linguistic practices, there are enormous debates going on right now that are being prosecuted within the academy in the larger intellectual scene about the function of academized language. I'm not one of these people who—for obvious reasons, self-interest being the primary one [laughter]—jumps on academics because they don't speak for a public audience or that they cannot speak in ways that are clear and articulate, because those are loaded terms: *clarity*, *articulate*. As many other scholars—Henry Giroux, Donna Haraway—have all reminded us that language has multiple functions even within a limited context. To understand that is to acknowledge that there are a variety of fronts upon which we must launch our linguistic and rhetorical resistances against political destruction, against moral misery, and against narrow conceptions of what language does and how it functions. Being reared in a black church, being reared in a so-called minority linguistic community that had rich resources that were concealed and obscured for a variety of reasons, I think that I'm sensitive to the claim against academics and probably understand their defensiveness when they say, "We're writing for a specific audience." That's fine. I think that if you write an article that will be read by a thousand people, and that those thousand people gained something from it, there's an exchange of information, there's an exchange of ideas, there's a sharpening of the debate, there's a deepening of the basis upon which we understand a particular intellectual subject. There's no reason to be apologetic for that because that's a very specific function within a larger academic enterprise that needs to be prosecuted. If, for instance, somebody writes an essay upon a specific aspect of Foucault's conception or appropriation of Benthamite conceptions of the prison and they make clear the relationship between not only Bentham and Foucault, they also rearticulate our conceptions of the panopticon and how surveillance operates as it's extended into the black ghetto. That's all for the better and good—even if only a thousand people understand the language in which it's deployed and if only they get it. That means that some advance and understanding and exchange of information has gone on, and that's a legitimate enterprise.

The problem I have is we don't have a problem with brain surgeons who speak languages that only twelve people can understand. If the man or woman can save your life, speak the jargon; do what you've got to do; operate! We haven't got any problem with that. So, I don't have a problem with the similar

kind of precise, rigorous uses of language that happen in academic circles. The problem arises when the hostility is directed against those who are able to take the information, to take the knowledge, to take the profound rigor that is often suggested in such exercises and make them available to a broader audience. Now, necessarily giving up something in terms of depth for breadth is inevitable. I've written for *Cultural Studies* and *Cultural Critique* and journals that four or five thousand people may read, and I've written in audiences where a million and a half and two million people have read them. We have to respect the genre. We, as academics, have a deep hostility to those who are public; those who are public intellectuals are viewed necessarily as sell-outs. We have our own version of the authentic academic and the authentic intellectual. Authenticity is quite interestingly debated, not only within African-American circles, but it's debated within academic circles where people have their narrow conception of what the authentic intellectual is. And interestingly enough, from the late '80s with Russell Jacoby's book on the last intellectual, this debate has been fiercely prosecuted and interestingly enough around the black public intellectual. I think some of that hostility may be racially coded, but a lot of that hostility is coded in terms of these rigid territorial disputes. A kind of geography of destiny is linked to whether you occupy the terrain of the academy, specifically and particularly as an academic, you ought to stay there. We love to talk about transgressions intellectually, academically, but we don't want to do it physically or epistemologically. We don't want to actually do it.

Q: We resist the critique of being put in the ivory tower, but then we're the ones who insist on putting us in the ivory tower.

A: That's exactly right; it can't be better stated than that. We want to attack the ivory tower from the ivory tower. And what's interesting is that these bullets are boomeranging. We celebrate transgression, we celebrate this hybrid, we celebrate all of this migration and mobility, but when people actually do it, there's a curiously incredible resentment against that kind of movement.

Q: In his recent book *Political Correctness*, Stanley Fish questions "the possibility of transforming literary study so that it is more immediately engaged with the political issues that are today so urgent: issues of oppression, racism, terrorism, violence against women and homosexuals, cultural imperialism, and so on. It is not so much that literary theory critics have nothing to say about these issues, but that so long as they say it *as* literary critics no one but a few of their friends will be listening, and, conversely if they say it in ways unrelated to the practices of literary criticism, and thereby manage to give it political effectiveness, they will no longer be literary critics, although they will be something and we may regard the something as more valuable." In *Race Rules*, you write that "the university isn't all it's cracked up to be: an artificial environment removed from the lives of real people." But you also write in *Between God and Gangsta Rap* that "although the university has come under attack for its practiced irrelevance to the larger society, and its intrinsic

elitism, it is a wonderful place to be in the world.” You go on to say “The vocation of indulging the life of the mind is just as important as the ingenious accomplishments of basketball heroes and superstar singers, talk show hosts and movie stars.” Fish’s critique of public intellectualism insists on disciplinary discreetness. That is, that disciplines are defined against other disciplines: “we do this; you do that.” Fish argues that as university intellectuals we cannot be public intellectuals and as public intellectuals we give up our roles as university scholars. In essence, Fish argues that Michael Eric Dyson cannot be an academic and a public intellectual. Your critique of university sees the academy as inseparable from the “real world” and that our roles in the university are as important as any other vocation outside of the academy. How do you respond to Fish’s critique? And, as the university becomes more interdisciplinary, do you see, as Fish does, that interdisciplinarity is a threat to universities or do you see it as having a greater potential to intervene in public policy and the larger culture?

A: Well, I think that Stanley Fish is a real smart guy. I always listen carefully to what he says. I think that some of his criticisms are right on target. But I think that, at this point, I dissent. Because I think that he’s actually right to force us, to challenge us, to re-think the relationship between what we do and what we say. He’s also forcing us, even more poignantly, to take seriously that serving on a committee in the academy where you deploy Marxist language to de-mythologize class relationships is not the same as being involved in a labor dispute in the local AFL-CIO or talking about the interests of black workers on the line in Detroit. No question that he’s absolutely right. But that doesn’t mean, therefore, that the function of the intellectual deploying Marxist language to de-mythologize class relations is not, therefore, important. It’s a different kind of importance. As a black person in the academy, I don’t have the luxury of saying who’s more real than the next person. I don’t have the luxury of saying, “this is good and this is not good,” precisely because we just got here in terms of the so-called mainstream academy. I think the real point is that there are multiple sites for intervention on behalf of political interests, and in this Fishian universe and cosmology there’s this radical bifurcation between the *real* world in which people operate with political interests at hand, deploying languages to defend those interests and those who are operating in the academy who are being segregated in a different sphere of knowledge-production and consumption that has a difference in political interests. They both have a set of interests that need to be taken seriously. The academy is a public sphere; it is a deep and broad public sphere where interesting, important debates are happening. That’s from the perspective of African-American people, or at least this particular black intellectual, who have been closed out from that debate for so long. Knowing that we were closed out from that debate for so long means that we understood that what was going on there was important, because Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein (although dealing with simple scientific theories that have been

deconstructed by people back to 20 years ago who were dealing with theories about genetic inheritance of race) sold 400,000 copies of a book. Now in one sense, we know most people didn't read that book; the very existence of that book was a phenomenological weight to justify cultural prejudices about African-American intelligence. But what that also suggests is that black people understand that those debates have enormous consequence and significance upon African-American material interests. We already see the connection between the academy and the "real world," because the real world looks to the academy to justify its prejudices, to dress them up in scientific discourse that allows them to gain legitimacy and power. We have understood all along that even though twelve people may be reading that book, one of the twelve people reading that book ends up being a congressman; one of the other twelve people reading that book could end up being a policy maker; one of the other twelve people reading that book could end up being the director of an institute that has ability to determine resources for a whole lot of black people. We have to deconstruct and de-mythologize this radical bifurcation between the academy and the real world. Both of them are real worlds constituted equally by narratives of political interest that are being deployed to defend certain perspectives of the world. Truth and politics are deeply united in ways that, I think, Fish is not paying sufficient attention to.

What's important about interdisciplinarity is that it certainly threatens those people who have narrowly political interests about maintaining and preserving their bailiwick. And I think what's interesting is that Fish gives eloquent, but I think quite problematic, articulation to a narrower vision of the life of the mind than I would like. He gives us caution about thinking that those of us who indeed make Marxist or progressive analyses of forms of oppression as substituting for real work. It is itself real work. It performs an intellectual function that is both daring given the narrow hegemony of a conservative vision of the academy that prevails, and in itself intellectually important to the concrete interests of people outside of the academy. Before I came into the academy, I worked in two factories, and I was a teen father working and hustling at two different jobs. People in Detroit University and Wayne State University who were trying to think about the relationship between labor and commodity and wage and alienation and intellectual projects were very powerful and important to making substantive political interventions on behalf of those people and forcing those of us in that real movement to take seriously the life of the mind to defend our interests and to be conscious of the fact that we had interests to be defended.

Interdisciplinarity is really an index of this postmodern moment where we take the multiplicity not only of ideals and knowledges, but where we get to ask questions about who gets to control knowledge, for what purposes is it being deployed, and then finally, whose interests are being protected by a narrow conception of the life of the mind that is rooted in academic disciplines that pay no attention to what other people in other disciplines are doing and



other people in other intellectual enterprises are doing. What's important is that it is the most powerfully artificial conception of the life of the mind to segregate knowledge in terms of academic disciplines. It argues against the best, most powerful traditions of Western intellectual enterprise that we have available.

Q: In *Race Rules* you write: "The anointing of a few voices to represent The Race is an old, abiding problem. For much of our history, blacks have had to rely on spokespersons to express our views and air our grievances to a white majority that controlled access to everything from education to employment. For the most part, powerful whites only wanted to see and hear from a few blacks at a time, forcing us to choose a leader—when we could. Often a leader was selected for us by white elites. Predictably, blacks often disagreed with those selections, but since the white elites had the power and resources, their opinions counted." You continue in *Race Rules* to discuss "who gets to be a black public intellectual, who chooses them," and why black public intellectuals currently receive the attention they do. However, in contemporary America there really are very few black intellectuals, and those that achieve recognition seem to be split into tiers of importance with the top tier consisting of you, bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker, and Cornell West, and then a second tier with a host of scholars such as Patricia Williams, William Strickland, Jerry Ward, Robin Kelly, Stephen Carter, David Levering Lewis to name a few. This suggests that the intellectual/academic world—which is still made up primarily of middle-class Anglo males—have constructed particular methods of gatekeeping (for example, graduate school entrance requirements, hiring practices, tenure, publication, speaking engagements) that "select" particular leaders to serve as "the representative" voice. More exact, having only a few black intellectuals is a product of the kind of oppressive strategies of management and containment maintained by the academy. What does this say about the small numbers of black public intellectuals and the possibility of the "radicalness" of public intellectuals such as yourself, hooks, West, and the others? Can you really be radical and affect change from the inside, when the institution has, in fact, sanctioned your radicalness? After all, you are a high-profile, well-paid member of the academy.

A: Exactly right. No question about it. No doubt about it. It's very difficult. And I think that it's necessary to acknowledge not only the accuracy of the critique, but furthermore, to extend the political efficacy of that accuracy by being self-critical. There's always a dimension of hubris in self-criticism because then you're pointing to how self-critical I can be and look how critically engaging I can be about my own position even as I consolidate my interest as a high-profile, well-paid Black intellectual. I face that problem head on. It is very difficult. And you're absolutely right in terms of the sanctioning of the radicalism that we express: it is being deployed within a larger narrative of co-optation by the American Academy that we criticize and from whose base we articulate our own conceptions of the world. So there's no doubt that it's

very difficult, but I think it's the inevitable condition that we live in right now, inevitable in the sense that this is the present condition under which we live as we fight for change from within and certainly from without. There's no question that we have to begin to raise larger questions and to really provoke a more profound analysis not only of our own subject positions but our own professional positions within the hierarchy of privilege and visibility that we presently enjoy. What's very difficult is to figure out how we both criticize our own participation in the Academy, in this regime of Black intellectuals who have been anointed, and at the same time maintain enough visibility and influence to have our voices make a difference. In that one sense, it is a very difficult project. Another way we can make sure that we undermine is to ask questions about whom we refer to in our work. What is interesting to me is when we read interviews with some of these high profile Black intellectuals you have mentioned, we get the same old names. In other words, there's a kind of narrative reinscription of fame and a hierarchy of privilege established within the linguistic practices of Black intellectuals. So that if we keep hearing about the same novelist, the same intellectual, even though they are deserving of enormous mention and enormous merit, what happens is that we feel they are the only important voices out there. And I think one of the most powerful things we can do as Black intellectuals, especially those of us who are highly visible, is to talk about those intellectuals whose work not only is different from ours and whose work may challenge ours, and whose voices would not ordinarily be heard if we did not mention them.

Q: You're leading into my next question: You write that "We don't speak for The Race. We Speak as representatives of the ideological strands of blackness, and for those kinships we possess outside of black communities, that we think most healthy. . . . we ain't messiahs." At the same time, though, you also write: "Equally worrisome, too many black public intellectuals hog the ball and refuse to pass it to others on their team. Many times I've been invited on a television program, a prestigious panel, or a national radio program because a white critic or intellectual recommended me. Later I often discover that another prominent black intellectual, when consulted, had conveniently forgotten to mention my name or that of other qualified black intellectuals. Ugly indeed." Do you think perhaps this is because those black public intellectuals who now have the spotlight actually do want to be anointed as spokesperson "to represent The Race"? And, how do you—if, indeed, you do at all—think the cult of celebrity, the protection of position as black public intellectual, works *against* a sort of "hand up for someone on the rung below" attitude? Do you see this "hand" as a moral imperative? That is, is it the moral imperative of those who have achieved the status of black public intellectual to help others into the same position?

A: There is no question that many of us Black intellectuals do want to be the "head nigger in charge." We do want to be the most visible, or as I say in my book, the "hottest Negro in the country." There's no question that to attain a certain

form of visibility in American culture as an intellectual is itself dizzying, and there is a kind of narcotic effect. When people like Oprah or Charlie Rose or Montel Williams call you up, or when you are invited to write op-eds for the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*, or when you're referred to as one of the leading voices of your generation, or in my case as the leading young, black, Hip-Hop intellectual, that is very seductive. It's very powerfully entrapping. First of all, it invites us to read our own press. Secondly, it invites us to believe our own press, and then thirdly it invites us to reproduce our own press—even if we consciously, through the rhetoric of humility, defer that to others or assign it to other onlookers or other sycophants who believe in the absolute integrity of our intellectual vision. I think there is no doubt that the temptation among any intellectual—especially among Black intellectuals given the small numbers of us who are able to survive and thrive to be *the person*, as Zora Neale Hurston said, “the Pet Negro.” We have to constantly resist that temptation by constantly making forays into, and interventions into, and excursions into those base communities that we say we represent or at least ostensibly speak for.

There is no question that one of the most dispiriting things that I've seen among Black public intellectuals is the kind of vicious, cruel snipping, the rhetorical attacks that I see being lobbied and the kind of pettiness behind the scenes. Now this is not endemic to Black culture. This is where I think Henry Kissinger is absolutely right, that the politics of the Academy are so vicious because there is so little at stake. So we are fighting for this small land. The topography of Black intellectual space in the Academy is so constrained and so constricted that we are indeed fighting over a narrow terrain. The vicious consequence of those kinds of contestations is that they do not produce good benefits for the people that A) we claim we represent, or B) we were put in place to represent or speak for. The inevitability of representation and the politics of representation are something we have to contend with. So, yes, not only are there many who want to be and who have a secret desire to be *the One*, we also prevent, by virtue of our fame and visibility, the kind of moral imperative that used to be “each one teach one, each one reach one” or lifting as we climb. There ain't much lifting as we climb, except lifting our own mobility, lifting our own stakes, lifting our own visibility. We are not lifting others, carrying those on our rhetorical, intellectual backs. The consequence is that it creates this hierarchy, this two- or three- or four-tiered system.

Q: You're very critically conscious of your role as black public intellectual. In *Race Rules* you offer a critical series of awards you call the “Envys.” Your purpose in these awards is both to critique black public intellectuals and to answer critiques leveled by black public intellectuals. Though many of these critiques are unrelenting in their criticism, you don't leave yourself out of your own attack, and you award yourself “The Spike Lee/Terry McMillan Award for Shameless Self Promotion” for your lobbying for publicity for your work. Nonetheless, you are critical of how other black public

intellectuals use the role of public intellectual and what they promote in that role. In light of your other comments regarding the “lone black leader,” and the “ugliness” of not nurturing other black intellectuals’ careers, is such criticism helpful?

A: It can be construed as a kind of self-congratulatory self-flagellation in public that only reinforces the very visibility that I claim that has unequally been cast on some intellectuals, including myself. I think I’m caught in a kind of endless night of the soul in being preoccupied with those levels of unfairness that prevent other worthy Black intellectuals from coming to the fore. In that sense, my criticism can be construed in a negative way. The positive way in which that criticism can be construed is in the ability of Black intellectuals to take this tongue-in-cheek. Partly what I’m saying is “lighten up.” This is not something that is going to ultimately change the world if we ourselves participate or do not participate in it. What I was trying to say in tongue-in-cheek awards is that we talk about being critical, but let’s bring some of that critical light upon ourselves. Let’s cast that critical acumen upon ourselves, and by doing so, let’s raise questions about the nature of our work, about the real limits that our work has, and the ways in which we are able to make interventions. We can be at least more conscious about the need to include others and to open up that space. The positive nature of my work can be that it will create a larger discourse space where people can say, “That was really funny, but. . .” or they can say, “That wasn’t so funny because these charges are on target because. . .” or thirdly they can say, “Well, even though Dyson is trying to promote himself *yet again*, what’s important about his critique is that it does raise very powerful issues about the nature of the kind of work where we give the voice of the Negro to a very few Black people, while the masses of intellectuals and academicians have no access.” That can be helpful if it produces a material effect of having people interrogate their own practices, of having people ask why is there a need to salute and anoint a few voices, and finally what the function of a gatekeeper is. What I want to raise out of this, if nothing else, is why is it that a few Black people are anointed to determine what other Black people receive. The very purpose of those of us who are so-called “radical Black intellectuals” was to raise questions about gatekeepers, about the intellectual Booker T. Washingtons who were able to dole out punishment or reward based upon their understanding of the political efficacy of a particular work or a particular career. That is the kind of thing we have to relentlessly interrogate if we are to at least raise the possibility of other voices emerging.

Q: In April of 1996, *Harper’s* published a conversation on race between Jorge Klor De Alva, Earl Shorris, and Cornel West. In this discussion, West argues that “when we talk about identity, it’s really important to define it. Identity has to do with protection, association, and recognition. People protect their bodies, their labor, their communities, their way of life; in order to be associated with people who ascribe value to them, who take them seriously,

who respect them; and for purposes of recognition, to be acknowledged, to feel as if one actually belongs to a group over time and space, we have to be very specific about what the credible options are for them at any given moment.” De Alva later says that “All identities are up for grabs. But black intellectuals in the United States, unlike Latino intellectuals in the United States, have an enormous media space within which to shape the politics of naming and to affect the symbols and meanings associated with certain terms. Thus, practically overnight, they convinced the media that they were an ethnic group and shifted over to the model of African-American, hyphenated American, as opposed to being named by color. Knowing what we know about the negative aspects of naming, it would be better for all of us, regardless of color, if those who consider themselves, and are seen as, black intellectuals were to stop participating in the insidious one-drop-rule game of identifying themselves as black.” You’ve written quite a bit about identity politics. How do you respond to this exchange between West and De Alva?

A: West is absolutely right in terms of protection, association, and recognition, especially as those three modes of response to the formation of identity have played themselves out within historically constituted Black communities. It is an implicit reproof of and rebuttal against Paul Gilroy’s notion that any notion of ethnic solidarity is itself to buy into a backwards view of Black identity. Gilroy has been especially critical of Black American intellectuals for what he considers to be their essentialist identities. Interestingly enough, those very Black intellectuals in America have written powerfully about hybridity and about identity and about the need to talk about the transgressive potentials of Black identity, of pulling into view what Stuart Hall calls postmodern identity. It’s a very complex navigation of a variety of possibilities and subject positions within a narrative of recognition. So West’s notion that it’s protective, associative, and recognition is about rooting it in a very specific context of how African-Americans have contested the erosion of their identities, the attack of their identities, and how identity politics at a certain level is a response to narrow, vicious stereotypes imposed on us from the outside.

Jorge’s response about seeing Black Americans in the public considering themselves Black as a kind of surrender to this “one drop rule” misses the point of history and the context of culture. History suggests that these are objective criteria—objective in the sense that they were socially constructed as the norm by which Black people were judged. So even if Black identity is up for grabs, it has a limit. It certainly is up for grabs as I’ve argued in my work about the fluidity of these boundaries of Black identity, but it has real historical and cultural and racial limitations. Jorge is expressing the bitter edge and a misled conception of this postmodern vision of Black identity. Saying Black identity is much more fluid, it has much more movable boundaries, that Black identity is a moveable feast of self reinvention is not to say that there are no bottom lines. As Elizabeth Alexander says, “Listen, I believe in de-essentialized, racialized politics. But there’s got to be a bottom line.” And the bottom line

is what are the material effects of the historically constituted notions of Blackness both within African-American culture and outside of Black culture. As the old saying goes, you can tell the policeman that race is a trope, but if he's beating your head and you're saying, "Listen, this is a historically constituted, socially constructed reality that has no basis beyond our agreement and consensus in American culture," that's cool, but your head is still being beat. So the material consequences of the association of race with Black identity with Black skin has to be acknowledged as a serious consequence against which we must articulate our understanding.

In this exchange between West and Jorge, what West understands is the need to ground the politics of Black identity in cultural specificity and in racial particularities that acknowledge the function of geography and of biology, even if we want to overcome and transgress against them. Whereas Jorge appeals to a language that is much more inviting in terms of interrogating Blackness as a historically constituted and socially constructed reality, but he does not pay sufficient attention to how blackness signifies in multiple ways in the public sphere. One of the most powerful ways it signifies is as a descriptive term to name people of color who have historically been constituted as Black, and therefore their identities are both invested in protecting that boundary of Blackness and also raising questions about its limitations at the same time. So, I would agree with West about the historical constitution of it and the social rooting of it, and Jorge about the need to raise questions about those boundaries but to link them politically.

Q: Composition, like many intellectual disciplines, has been engaged in its own version of the "theory wars." You are very careful in your writing to acknowledge the importance of academic theories—particularly postmodernisms and poststructuralisms. You write "At its best, theory should help us unmask the barbarous practices associated with some traditions of eloquent expression. But like a good sermon or a well-tailored suit, theory shouldn't show its seams." You also write in *Between God and Gangsta Rap* "with some adjustments, I think theory may help to explain black culture." What role do you see theory playing in race issues? And, could you describe the "seamless" theory?

A: [laughter] Hey man, I just write about these things; I didn't expect to get asked about them. Well, the role of theory in Black culture is a multiple one. First of all, I think theory should help us clarify what we take to be concrete experience, the relationship between so-called theory and practice. I think all practices are theorized and all theories are practiced at a certain level, not necessarily in a particular logical or linear order. The first function of theory is to make us understand that practices have components of intellectual aspiration that are sometimes obfuscated and often concealed.

Second, theory, in regard to Black culture, forces us to understand that Black culture is much more difficult, much more complex, much more multi-layered, and much more combative, even within its own boundaries than

people have given voice to. The need for theory is to name the different aspects and components of that contested terrain. For instance, say that Gates is trying to talk about the way in which signifying practices name certain rhetorical devices that have been deployed within Black culture from Blues culture down to other literary expressions; that is very important. But also what is important is that theory trying to help us understand the difference between signifying practices in Blues culture and signifying practices in Hip-Hop culture. So what is important is that the theorization of Black culture helps us comprehend elements that we historically have neglected, elements that have always been there that we have not sufficiently paid attention to, and the ways in which our own understandings of Black culture are already theory laden. That is, we never begin in a pre-theoretical density in terms of interpreting Black culture. We are already theorizing even if we do not have the official language of the academic proles to express that theory. People who interpret Black culture are already working with a theoretical base. What theory does is ask that to become explicit. Theory asks this pre-theoretical density, that is really an illusion and a mythology, to come out of the closet and to admit that it is already theoretical. I'm not suggesting that pre-theoretical poses that people take in response in terms of consciousness to culture. I'm saying that theory is always operating in terms of how people understand themselves in relationship to Black culture.

For me a seamless theory is a theory that does not have to display the most rampant forms of jargon ridden discourse to make its point. To intervene on that debate, of course, is not simply to say that there is no room for jargon. There is. So to me a seamless theory is the ability to express very powerfully, very intelligently, and very articulately an ideal that is very complex but in ways that broader people beyond your discipline have access to. That, to me, is a theory that may have some jargon involved, but mostly does not rely upon the old habits of thought that jargon signifies and forces us to break new ground in saying it in ways that a geologist who is educated may understand as well as a literary theorist who has training in the field. The importance of that is that a person like myself who has written for these different audiences gives up something when you do either one. What that kind of writing has forced me to see is that if I'm going to write for an audience beyond even my discipline, beyond my particular so-called training, beyond the people who speak a similar language to me, I then have to write in ways that appeal broadly to people who are intelligent, who are intellectual, but people who have some capacity for understanding language and who have the capacity not only to understand the language but to use it in ways that I may never have the opportunity to do. I want to reach them. The best, most politically efficacious use of theory is its capacity to show people things they did not know before in ways that they understand. That to me is a seamless theory, at least in terms of its linguistic practice.

Q: For many theorists of race, class, gender, and culture, notions of disruption become critical in the critique of traditional power structures. For instance, feminist linguists such as H  l  ne Cixous look to create awareness through the disruption of phallogocentric language. You write of black public intellectuals that they are “leaders of a particular kind. We stir up trouble in broad day light so that the pieties by which we live and the principles for which we die, both as a people and a nation, are subject to critical conversation.” However, in many of your discussions of black political figures and movements you are also critical of how disruption gets used. For instance you clearly juxtapose the militant disruptiveness of Malcolm X and the assimilative, non-disruptiveness of Colin Powell. Would you speak to the idea of disruption in the role of racial matters?

A: I think that disruption is a primary prerogative of those of us who are paid pests. I consider cultural critics and Black intellectuals paid pests. We are trying to point to the emperor not only having no clothes, but the imperialism that has a whole bunch of clothes and what it is dressed up in. I think our function is to disrupt and intervene upon conversations in ways that are disturbing, that in their very disturbance force people to ask why they frame the questions in the way that they did or they make the analysis they do. Disruption is not simply a kind of orgasm for its own sake, a kind of intellectual anarchy that has no political efficacy. Disruption has a political goal, and that political goal is to force us to interrogate practices through a different lens or to see them differently in the same lens. For instance, race may be the lens that people use, but if they begin to see different aspects of race differently because of the questions we raise, that is a very important function. We do not always have to do away with the very lens through which people see, although that metaphor itself gives us a kind of ideological purchase that is very narrowly conservative. In some instances we have to shatter the whole lens. Not only do we have to shatter the lens, but we have to shatter the paradigm of the lens, the ocular-centrism by which we understand knowledge. As Martin James has written about it in *Downcast Eyes*, this ocular-centric metaphor misses the way in which the other metaphors of knowledge can operate. We have to talk about hearing; we have to talk about feeling. Partly what we do then as a Black intellectual is to disrupt that ocular-centric metaphor whereby vision or blindness operates and the lens is important to talk about how we experience visceral realities phenomenologically that have been downplayed through, say, anti-feminist discourse. What we have to do is create a string of metaphors that give us a different interventional possibility onto the terrain of knowledge, and politics and culture.

That kind of disruption is very important in terms of race because of the way in which historically constituted Black communities have had to argue with, not simply intellectual paradigms of injustice, but the ways in which they have struggled against them in terms of their own bodies and movements that have gone on. So that Marcus Garvey’s movement, so that Martin Luther



King, Jr.'s civil rights movement, so that A. Philip Randolph's movement are very important sites and terrains of contestation that imagine a different space than an intellectual argument with inequality. It is putting forth a very powerful rejection and rebuttal of both stereotype and inequality through the embodied articulation of Black resistance.

But intellectually the disruption, too, is important in terms of racial matters where those of us who are called upon to think critically about race have to not only disrupt dominant paradigms, but we also have to disrupt the ways in which we settle into our own resistant paradigms that themselves become new orthodoxies. Disruption is quite unsettling precisely because we can never be settled finally in a position from which we would defend certain visions or attack certain versions of Black life for the rest of our intellectual lives. The kind of perennial, migratory possibilities, the kind of endless mobility, is what disruption is about. That is why it can never be settled in the hands of one set of intellectuals to talk about what Black culture is about. That is why the very nature of disruption is a critical necessity for interrogating Black practices and racial matters and has to always be changing hands. And it is not that we cannot have a long career in disruption, or a long career in interrogating race. It means that we have to have other voices that challenge us, even in our disruptive practices about what the function of our disruption is and the political absorption of that disruption into a larger trajectory.

Q: There's a xeroxed poster on a colleague's door in my department; it is of a photograph of an old, wooden sign that reads "We Serve Whites Only. No Spanish or Mexicans." The sign was posted in 1949 to enforce the Jim Crow laws in San Antonio, Texas. On the xerox copy, some one has written "History is not just black and white." Though you certainly make an effort to discuss race—particularly when you discuss issues of violence—in terms of Latinos/as, Koreans, Asians, and so on, your work on race deals mostly—as most work in race does—with issues of black and white. Could you discuss the black and white depictions of race in America, and perhaps speak to the (fewer than black) "other" race intellectuals?

A: I think that if we are asking what it means if the narrative frame is Black and White, it certainly buys into a very narrow conception, although a very real one, for Africans in the diasporate America. The Black/White disjunction was one that curtailed our own economic and social mobility, one that contained the potentiality for the destruction of our material interest and one in which we have had to exist in a kind of symbiotic relationship. This is why the work by theorists like James Scott, who talks about infra-politics and everyday forms of resistance and how it gets played out in African-American culture through the theorized relationship between the Black and the White, is so important. How symbiotically have Black people had to exist in relationship to White people? As Ralph Ellison said, we can't even imagine America without Black Americans, although White Americans have not

always taken that seriously. The Black/White disjunction is a reflection of the existential and economic and political realities that obtain for Africans in the Diaspora and their relationship to the mainstream. That is why James Scott's work is very important because you figure out how to situate yourself as a degraded subject in relationship to the overarching object of both your interests and the need for survival, that is the White majority, the White mainstream. And so much of Black culture has been developed in response to maintaining, preserving, and surviving *vis-à-vis* this dominant, hegemonic Other and the survival techniques that had to be marshaled in the face of that. This is how these infra-politics are talked about by people like Robin Kelly talk about in his book *Race Rebels* in which he talks about Black people on the bus in Birmingham and how, even though they were not involved explicitly in terms of racial politics, they were involved nonetheless in very powerful ways by refusing on that space of the bus certain racial meanings that were ascribed to them.

All this means is that the Black/White bifurcation has been one of necessity and survival for African-American people in this country. The depictions of Black/White among Black and White people have been about overcoming barriers to get to know one another. But really that White people must know more about Black people because one of the necessities and strategies for survival is that Black folk had to know White folk. You have to know your enemy; you have to know whom you are dealing with. Was it Fanny Lou Hamer who said that the mistake that White folk made is that they put Black people behind them and not in front of them? Because if they put Black people in front of them, they could have surveilled them in a certain way. But since they put Black people behind them, Black people learned all the secrets and strategies of White folk and how to please them and how to "get over" on them. So all that means that the Black/White bifurcation has been about *knowing* White people; there is a kind of epistemology of friendship. If you know White people, you will know better how to get along with them.

One of the real liabilities of simply seeing race in Black and White is that we begin to miss how race is being constructed and has been constructed around a number of axes that go beyond the Black/White divide. Even certain debates within Black culture and White culture are geographical. For instance, the Black/Jewish conflict is a geographical one at a certain level. It is going to be happening much more powerfully in New York than in California. Whereas in California the Black/White divide is challenged by the Black/Brown divide or the Black/Korean divide, not only in terms of Black/Korean and Black/Latino but Latinos and Whites and Latinos who are White, Hispanic as White and Hispanic as non-White, Hispanic as Black and non-Black. What it begins to introduce is that there is a racial millennialism that does not simply follow the axis of Black/White, but follows many more axes that force us—should force us—to rethink how we understand the Black/

White divide. It does not mean that the Black/White divide is not important or that it has not been crucial even as an analogy or metaphor for other minorities who have fought for inclusion in the larger circle of American identity and privilege. What it does suggest to us is that the Black/White divide misses how we try to impose upon other minorities substitute Black status as a minority.

Q: In the *Harper's* interview that I mentioned earlier, Klor De Alva claims that "with the exception of black-white relations, the racial perspective is not the critical one for most folks. The cultural perspective was, at one time, very sharply drawn, including the religious line between Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Protestants, Jews and Catholics, Jews and Christians. But in the course of the twentieth century, we have seen in the United States a phenomenon that we do not see anywhere else in the world—the capacity to blur the differences between these cultural groups, to construct them in such a way that they became insignificant and to fuse them into a new group called whites, which didn't exist before." If this is true, why has "difference" in America been reduced, at least publicly, to matters of color?

A: It's been reduced to matters of color, but it's more or less what's called "pigmintocracy." I talk about the difference between pigmintosis and pigmintification. Pigmintification means that you get adapted within the larger pigmintocracy, the regime of color that's associated with white skin. Within pigmintosis you get excluded from that regime of color. Color is so important because color was never a reference to itself. Color was a politically invested category that revealed our own prejudices and biases and the ways in which we distributed political and economic resources. Jorge is right that whiteness became a blurred distinction in America. Whiteness in America became a self-sufficient, or all-sufficient, category that wiped out certain distinctions: German, Polish, Irish. But they did survive in terms of ethnic and religious practices within American culture; I don't think he's right there. But the function of the racialization in America is predicated by pigmintocracy, that is the way in which goods are distributed according to one's own relationship to an ideal of color.

But color never was simply about skin tone. It was about the intellectual, ideological, and political dimensions of American culture that revealed our conflicts over issues of African versus European and American identity. I think that if we are literalist about this color thing, we missed the way in which a pigmintocracy was predicated upon a whole range of conflicted political and economic and social meanings that were themselves being mediated through this notion of skin and pigment. Skin and pigment become the more visible index of a regime and hierarchy of privilege and status that was associated with a different understanding of species. What I think Jorge is overlooking here is that there was what some people call pseudo-speciation, the attempt to divide and divorce black people from the quality and character of what it meant to be a human being. What didn't happen with all those other

different ethnic groups that came over to America is that they did not get pseudo-specified. They did not get written out of the dominant narrative text of humanity that included all white ethnics even if there was a hierarchy of visibility, influence, and privilege. Whereas with black people there was an attempt to rule them out of the race.

Q: In the Preface to *Making Malcolm*, you discuss an uncomfortable incident that occurred in one of your classes when tension between students about racial divisions erupted. Where does race belong in the classroom?

A: Everywhere and nowhere, I guess. Race and the classroom is an inevitable feature; it is the ineluctable product of the racialization of American society. To expect that the classroom will somehow be exempt from the racialized meanings that are just exploding in our culture is to have a sort of pedagogical naivete that is not only insular but is also destructive. Race belongs in the classroom where race belongs in society. I think about race in the sense that Foucault thinks about power. It's not simply about, as Weber conceives it, these structures of domination, these hierarchies in which we have power associated with certain positions. Power breaks out everywhere, Foucault reminds us, even among and between people who are themselves oppressed or marginalized. Race is a kind of fusion of these Weberian and Foucauldian perspectives. There certainly is a hierarchy of race where power is associated with White Americans and power is associated with being White and not Black, being White and not Brown, being White and not Red. These are objective conditions of race that we would do well to heed.

On the other hand, race breaks out in all kinds of interesting and unfastidious ways. It breaks out in uncomfortable and disruptive ways, just as we talked about earlier in terms of disruption. I think that race has the possibility to always surprise us. Like a camel on the loose, it has the capacity to do greater injury when we attempt to coop it up as opposed to when we let it run free. A classroom is an artificial cage for the animal of race, and race breaks out everywhere. That is powerful and productive because it wounds our most cherished expectations of what we called earlier "market multiculturalism." In African-American studies classes like mine at Brown, race breaks out in the most uncomfortable, but I think highly instructive, ways. In the conflict between this set of Black men who thought they knew Malcolm and had earned their right and privilege to define Malcolm for the rest of us, and to cage Malcolm up, not only did race break out but I think Malcolm did, too. The place of race in the classroom is precisely at the center of our conversations about a whole range of not only disciplines and professions but a range of issues and subject matters. It does not simply belong in a class on ethnic studies or African-American culture. Race belongs in a class on Aristotelian conceptions of inequality. Race belongs in a classrooms that deal with Neo-Platonic philosophy. Race belongs in every American classroom and in every American subject matter precisely because it is like what they call in logic the suppressed premise of so many syllogisms of

American democracy. Race is part and parcel of the very fabric of the American intellectual project and also at the heart of the American project of democracy and self-discovery. We would be well-served by being more explicit about it, and therefore taking it into account, rather than allowing it to inform our debates from a distance. By informing our debates from a distance, we do not get a chance to theorize race, we do not get a chance to explore race, and we do not get a chance to deconstruct or demythologize racist power to hurt and harm us precisely because it is excluded from our explicit articulations. That is where I think it belongs.

Q: A few running themes have started to evolve in your answers and I'd like to follow along with those, but I'd also like to change your metaphor of the wild animal in the classroom a little and ask, have we made race safe? Have universities done to race what may have been done to some feminisms by saying that we can talk about these discourses in universities, so long as this is what we discuss, and this isn't. Have multi-cultural readers that address race taken the thorns out of race matters by offering "here is an example of a discussion of race, feel free to touch it without getting stuck or tangled in it"?

A: Yes, there is no question about it. But that is the risk we run for the kind of progress we want. And the kind of progress we want is that we would rather people talk about it in denuded contexts that deprive race of its real vigor, of its real fierceness, of its rhetorical ferocity. We would rather have that than fights in the streets. We would rather have that than the riots in 1992. We would rather have that than the situations where Black or White or Other people lose their lives contesting terrain that has become deeply racialized but not theorized around race. Yes, there are trade-offs. But with the kind of conscientious objection to the war of multiculturalism which is fought with rubber bullets rather than real ones, we certainly want to introduce (excuse this violent metaphor) sharper distinctions between where the blood is really being spilled on the outside of these debates. There is an advantage to that. There is no doubt about the articulation of the real divisions that race brings, the real conflicts that it introduces. And they have to be touched on in our debates in ways that make us uncomfortable with our ability to so smoothly dismiss the differences that race introduces without paying the consequences. We do not often pay the consequences in our own classrooms, in our faculty meetings, in the Academy in general. That is why when we have racial representation by proxy that is one thing. But when real gays and lesbians show up, when real Black folks show up, when real Latinos show up, and they are not as nice and they are not as observant of the traditions of racial discourse as White liberals who set out 20 years ago, that creates real tension. I do not think we should gainsay those kinds of tensions. Those kinds of tensions are real, and they are instructive politically about the limits to which we are able to go in dealing with racial discourse, and more important, not only racial discourse, but racial transformation. So, yes, we have done that, but at the same time I'd rather have that kind of discourse against which we must fight

and that we have to deploy in service of defending a more radical, a more powerful, a more disruptive conception of multiculturalism than one in which the debates are handled in the street where bloodshed and violence are its only consequences.

Q: How do public intellectuals play into that then?

A: Partly we either play the good role or the bad role. We play into it in the sense that we extend the capacity for people to feel safe by saying, “Well, I’ve listened to Michael Eric Dyson or Cornell West or bell hooks and now I feel that I’ve gotten my multicultural booster; I’ve got the multicultural vaccination that protects me, that gives me a vaccination against any form of racism.” And that is obviously not the case. So we get used as these vaccinations and people feel that they are immune now to racist ideology and become much more problematic than those who have not been vaccinated, who do not give a damn about being vaccinated, and who resist it and who in their own honest expression of their feelings, talk quite frankly in ways that lead to more racial progress than those who feel that they have nothing to learn. We can end up perpetuating that by being used against our own will that way, but we can also disrupt that as public intellectuals by going on these shows and disagreeing with the common market version of multiculturalism by saying that it is much more complex, it is much more deep, and it is much more profound than that.

Q: What do you do then to keep race from being safe? What kinds of work—both public and academic—do you advocate in the face of such safety?

A: What I do is I preach. One thing I do, I stay in contact with people whose anger is much more meated and raw. When I visit prison—I have a brother who is serving life in prison for second-degree murder who’s converted to the Moorish Temple of Muslim Experience—and listen to him on the phone, and we talk about race rules, race realities, race differences, race matters, racial issues, and he gives me a hell of an interesting perspective: both of us coming out of the ghetto of Detroit and now living the proverbial difference of the professor and the prisoner. That reality of feeling the sharp edges of his own critique of people like me, and me specifically, delivers me from a kind of anesthetized, romanticized sphere where I’m somehow exempt from the very passions that I claim I want to represent in my work, and that I certainly do and hope to do.

Also, by trying to get involved with union movements and trying to get involved with black churches, especially where black people are concerned on the front line about issues of race and how their anger and their conspiracy theories come together and how even if intellectually I want to avoid some of the conspiracy theories that they have or the resentments that they nurture, I understand and feel what drives that. It reminds me of where I was as a poor black kid in Detroit or as a teen father who was hustling, who was thought of as one of these pathologized, nihilistic black kids. I try to bring that into the classroom by means of some of the subject matters that I deal with and some of the issues of race that I try to confront.

Q: There is an interesting division that gets played out in discussions of race and discussions of postcolonial theories. Jenny Sharpe, in her essay "Is the United States Postcolonial? Transnationalism, Immigration, and Race," argues that "when used as a descriptive term for the United States, *postcolonial* does not name its past as a white settler colony or its emergence as a neocolonial power; rather, it designates the presence of racial minorities and Third World immigrants." She goes on to argue that "an understanding of 'the postcolonial condition' as racial exclusion offers an explanation for the past history of 'internal colonies' but not the present status of the United States as a neocolonial power." With the noted exception of bell hooks, who looks at African-American writers, Gloria Anzaldúa who works with Latina/Chicana literature and cultural experience, and a few scholars of indigenous North American populations, there are very few who address the fact that much of the scholarly work regarding issues particular to the United States are in fact issues of postcolonialism. At the same time, the kinds of academic attention that U. S. scholars give to postcolonial theory is being given to the writers and the cultures of, for instance, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and so on, not to issues of the United States. What significance, if any, do you see in the academy refusing to validate the postcolonial nature of both the writers and the writing that has been and continues to be produced in the United State by peoples of color?

A: This is a problem of avoidance. This is a problem of linguistic and rhetorical and ideological avoidance of not acknowledging the degree to which this society's racist policies and practices are part of a deeper project of colonial and imperial expansion that happened on the backs of black peoples, on red peoples, and other native, indigenous peoples. But now, even as those scholars of color begin to interrogate its practices, the absorption of this discourse is put into a narrowly racialized frame that pays attention to black/white differences and so on without linking it to an international context of colonialism. When it does, it's only in regard to the presence of minorities in this country as opposed to its own practice. So partly what we're dealing with here is the self-identity of America as a colonial practitioner and an imperial power. What that signifies is the ability of America to absorb and redistribute dissent and the nomenclature that would name that dissent in ways that are less harmful. So that for America to conceive of itself as a colonial power, not simply *vis-à-vis* racial minorities, but as the expansion of its imperialist tentacles throughout the world, is so contradictory to its self-identity that people are discouraged from even talking about it in those terms.

What's also interesting is that during the '60s and '70s, people like Bob Blouner at Berkeley and other people who were talking about internal colonial theories, who were talking about the metaphoric relationship between America and colonial powers, were discouraged from doing so because it was said to be a narrow essentialist conception of the relationship between black and white or that it really wasn't exactly expressive of the caste dimensions between black and white in this country that happened in other

spaces and places. In other words, as close as we got to any sense of America as a colonial power was this internal colonialism talking about the ghetto as this internal colonized space that drew upon Fanon, that drew upon other third-world theories to explain indigenous practices within America but never as largely America's colonial power.

To talk about America as colonial empire and as a beast is to really direct attention from domestic projects of civil rights that were dependent upon the *largesse* and *noblesse oblige* of white liberals to make a go of our own state. This is why even Martin Luther King, Jr., when he began to talk about America as a colonial power, empirical power, *vis-à-vis* Vietnam, was criticized not simply by white conservatives but by black so-called progressives and liberals who were upset that he was pilfering off the resources and entities of the domestic situation for the civil rights movement. His world view was of a piece and of a whole. What's interesting is that we've been discouraged from seeing America as a colonial and imperial power because of deference to a domestic conception of civil rights that was narrowly insular, that was concerned about the project of African-American freedom within the circumscribed limits and the discourse of American rights as opposed to seeing American imperialism, directed against black bodies, as part of an international project of colonial containment that America was the supreme arbiter of. Partly, that expresses attention to domestic situations that people were worried about pilfering the moral energies of the black movement in deference to this larger international perspective that would then reroute our energies into expressions that would lose our specific interrogation of the terrain that we found ourselves on, which is an America dealing with civil rights. But the genius of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X was that they saw the international perspective. America has coded debates about race in terms of domestic territory and terrain alone that we've obscured the international connection of America as an imperialist terrorist. The colonizing impulses of America were somehow safely contained within racial discourses when America would acknowledge its own containment of black people within its own culture as a buy off, as a way of purchasing scholars of colors silence about her materialist expansion internationally. In other words, the degree to which we're able domestically to reassign privileges within the territorial domestic space obscures the degree to which we are these international colonizers.

Now, those who have—besides bell hooks and those you mention—are those other scholars on the periphery of so-called intellectual life within black culture. These are people who are also going to talk about conspiracy theories. These are folk who are black nationalists, who are going to talk about the expansion of the colonial project of American culture. So the high-falutin black public intellectuals don't really want to be associated with those black scholars on the margin who are willing to indict America for its imperialist expansion and its colonial project because those people are not seen to be at



the heart of the project of rights and debates within African-American culture. So the irony of that is that America buys silence from black scholars and other scholars of minority standing by rearranging domestic space. The kind of topography of colonial space within American society obscures the kind of recognition of colonial expansion outside the United States. Our silence and recognition of the international expansion of American capital and power is bought precisely because America is willing to throw us a few bones inside. So our internal colonization, which is expressed by our ignorance of this international situation, is a paradox and an irony. And I think that with the explosion of postcolonialist theory of Homi Bhabha and others and resurgence of interest in Fanon forces us to have this international connection that people like Malcolm and other marginal scholars within African-American communities have invited us to see for quite a while.

Q: You write in "Benediction: Letter to My Wife Marcia" in *Between God and Gangsta Rap* that "many black men and women believe that placing questions of gender at the heart of black culture is an act of racial betrayal, a destructive diversion of attention away from race as the defining issue of black life." You continue "I don't think race is the complete story. There's too much evidence that being gay, or lesbian, or female, or working poor makes a big difference in shaping the role race plays in black people's lives." In *Reflecting Black* you also write that "sex, race, and class have also caused considerable conflicts and tensions between groups who compete for limited forms of cultural legitimacy, visibility, and support." And, you write that you want to "help us to begin the process of open, honest communication about the differences within our race." I wonder about the critique that when race, class, gender, culture get discussed in the same breath that focus is denied to individual issues. You argue that race can't be looked at as an entity displaced from class, gender, or culture—that it doesn't exist in a vacuum—is this the same for gender? How would you respond to feminist theorists or class theorists who don't want gender or class swallowed up in discussions of race?

A: There are two things that are going on here simultaneously that I think we have to pay attention to. First of all, if we say that gender and race and class have their own intellectual integrity, that they have their own intellectual space from which they should be theorized, then I say "Amen." There are irreducible categories not only for social theorizing but for personal identity and for collective communal mobilization, no question about that. But if we suggest that they can somehow be divisible from each other, that questions of gender don't have any relationship to class and relationship to sexuality and so on, that is not the way it happens, because people experience themselves simultaneously. We have to say that questions of gender are implicated in questions of class, are implicated in questions of race and vice versa and all around. We should have specificity of analysis. I think the particularity with which these problems or categories of analysis or modes of identity manifest themselves have to be recognized and acknowledged and

therefore taken seriously. I would be the first to suggest that we can't subsume one of these under the other. That kind of subsumption of race under class is ridiculous. We saw this in the Communist Party in the '30s and the '40s in this country; we see this in certain orthodox vogue or Marxist traditions where people want to subsume issues of race under class. They have their own intellectual integrity, their own kind of intellectual vitality, and their own kind of ideological portfolio that allows the political consequences of them to be interrogated under specific kinds of intellectual interventions and interrogations.

On the other hand, I think that they are fused more, that they are more bloody than that, and they bleed into one another in ways that we don't always pay attention to. I don't think we can divorce and divide them in as neat a way as we can do intellectually, or theoretically. For instance, what do we do with a person who happens to be gay and poor and black or a woman who's lesbian and poor and black and a single mother? They don't have the luxury of a kind of pre-theoretical interrogation of their identity so that they can assign the most merit based upon what part of their identity has more consequence. There's a whole range of identities that are competing for expression, that are being constituted in this one body. What we have to say to feminist theorists who would say, "I don't want gender to be subsumed by race" is "fine, but I want gender to be thought of in relationship to race." Because then, what we might end up having is, say, white feminists who pay no attention to the effect of race. So that when they interrogate the O. J. Simpson case, they see Nicole's body as a white woman's body or a universal woman's body being somehow marginalized in regard to the discussions about race, that race trumps gender. But what about for black women who see race and gender operate simultaneously? They want to say to black men, "listen, you're not paying attention to the ways in which black women's bodies have occupied a segregated rhetorical space within African-American popular and intellectual culture." They want to say to white women "you don't understand the way in which race has privileged white women's bodies against black women's bodies and the discursive terrain that white feminism operates on has all but excluded the geography of black identity for African-American women." I think that there's a way of paying attention to intellectual ideological specificity and particularity while understanding that's an intellectual intervention while understanding existentially and phenomenologically the intervention of, the fusion of, and the bleeding of these multiple identities into each other has to be acknowledged as well.

Q: You make clear your conviction that conversations of race frequently silence the voices of black women. You write "I agree with critics who argue that the rhetoric of black male suffering is often cobbled together from a distortion of black female troubles. Thus, the very language of black male crisis erases black women's faces and bodies from the canvas of social suffering. It is simply not true that black men's hurts are more important than the social

horrors black women face.” You also write in *Between God and Gangsta Rap* “I think black women have learned, more successfully than black men, to absorb the pain of predicament and keep stepping. . . . I think brothers need to think about this more, to learn from black women about their politics of survival.” In your religious work, too, you have contended that black men must recognize their own oppressive action toward black women if they are to be able to honestly criticize other oppressive forces in their lives. Black feminist intellectuals—such as bell hooks—have also called on black men to be more conscious of the struggles of black women. Would you talk about the rift, if you believe one exists, that has evolved between black women and black men in contemporary discussions of race, and how we might productively proceed as academics concerned with both race and gender?

A: I think the rift has developed as a result of the long elaboration of a whole host of factors that have been in black culture and American society from the beginning of our pilgrimage on American soil. The rift between black men and women expresses the gendering of internal differences and dissension within black culture and the way in which the gendered manifestation of those tensions has a particularly lethal effect upon our own communities. The rift between black men and women expresses the differential treatment accorded black men and black women in the political economy of slavery and how the extension and expansion of that political economy of difference manifests itself now in the material effects and on the intellectual self-understandings of black masculine and black female culture. And even more particularly, the rift between black men and black women is a remaking of a divide-and-conquer strategy that was ingeniously employed to undermine any sense of consensus, a kind of unity of integrity or a solidarity of principle, that might have provided black people a way out of the divisiveness that was introduced as a means and mechanism to destroy a black people’s ability to come together and say, “We won’t put up with this.” We understand this now in our postmodernist, black space where tropes of unity and solidarity are highly questioned for good reason. The function of unity has to be interrogated for its ability to close out other voices and other visions that need to challenge that dominant hegemonic position within black culture. That’s all for the good. But one of the negative consequences of that, culturally speaking, is the inability of black men and black women to embrace each other across the chasm of gender. I think that’s an outgrowth of these political machinations to destroy any sense of unity and consensus among and between black people, to see their lives in the same boat.

What happens is that black men and women are often in the same bed, but at each other’s throats. The rift between black men and women occurs precisely because black men have uncritically incorporated this narrow masculinist psychology as a kind of foolproof, fundamental structure of our consciousness in terms of combating not only white racism but what we consider to be the unjust manifestations of that white racism in black culture.

Usually what we see as the most powerful rhetorical device to deploy against that racism is to see black women as the carriers of some particular strain or virus of exemption from white racism. As the story goes, black women are exempt from white racism because they have it better than black men. You don't only hear this in terms of black men, you hear it in terms of black women. Black women are less threatening; black women don't threaten white men in the same way. There's no doubting, I think, that given that we live in a patriarchal culture, in a way in which these codes of masculinity operate to legitimate certain forms of masculine power, that there is a specific dimension that black men occupy that certainly is a particular and special threat to white patriarchal power that black women wouldn't be considered to be.

There's no question that there's a hell of a difference in terms of specific manifestations of challenge from black men and black women. The underside of that argument is that it tends to privilege black masculine suffering over black women's suffering, as if they somehow almost genetically, or inherently, don't have the same kind of problems with white racism that black men have. And so you've got an internal resentment against black women. These things are at the back of the kind of collective imaginary of black masculine and black female identities being construed and constructed in one space, and this space happens to be the space of black American culture at the end of the century where racial millennialism is being refracted through the prism of this narrow patriarchal lens. That's why I understand black women's objections to the Million Man March, because it looked like warming up the same old patriarchal leftovers and feeding them to them as the new meal of black masculine identity, and that was really clearly a problem.

The rift between black men and black women has to do with the perception that black women are somehow exempt from the processes of white racism, that they are better off than black men materially, and that black men deserve to be talked about in specific ways because we live in this white patriarchal culture. The problem with all that, of course, as bell hooks and other feminists have warned, is that when we look at the liberty of black people and liberation through gendered lenses, we talk about not castrating the black man, not cutting off our penises because that is an exemplification of how the whole race has been treated. Those kind of gendered metaphors miss the specific forms of female embodiment and how black women have been differentially treated within a political economy of privilege that has undermined their capacity to come to grips with their own forms of particular suffering because they're not named with the same sort of legitimacy that black masculine suffering is. That means that we're living in a hell of a time of contestation and conflict between black men and black women.

The academy, then, can do several things. First of all, it can begin to interrogate how masculinity, like race, is this artificial and social construction. It can articulate that there's no such thing as a necessary black masculine experience that has to be felt or interpreted a certain way. What academics

can do is to begin to interrogate masculine identity as a gender. White people didn't have a race, and men didn't have a gender. Now men have a gender, and black men have a gender. The obsession with masculinity in our culture is an index of that. So what academics can do is help us understand the social production of gender and how it's constructed. Secondly, what they can do is help explain the obsession with masculinity in black culture and then begin to help map out a kind of cartography of masculinity and patriarchy that helps us understand why we are obsessed with it, why there are some good things about the obsession with masculinity, and why there are a whole lot of bad things about it. What we have to do as academics is to try to filter out the good and the bad and figure out how we can produce enabling understandings of masculinity and of gender. And third, we have to begin to not just leave it to feminist critics to theorize the negative impact of gender in black communities. Male critics, especially, and male academics, have to begin to think much more self-critically about the function of gender in American society and the relationship of gender and race and class and how the differences that gender would make in what we understand about race could help us in the long run. Perhaps if we begin to deconstruct and demythologize some of these narrowly masculinist patriarchal conceptions of gender and masculine identity, we could then move toward understanding and embracing different elements of our identities that could then be embraced in much more constructive ways.

Q: As a public intellectual, you invite criticism; you seem to favor the idea of keeping your work and the work of other public intellectuals meaningful and effective through criticisms. In *Race Rules* you write: "We all slip. And our critics should be there to catch us." Are there any recent criticisms of your work that you'd like to address?

A: There have been some insightful criticisms of my work. For instance, people were quite interested in *Reflecting Black*. This book of cultural criticism was one of the first that tried to join both theoretical acuity with pop cultural expression and to try to take those two forms not only of interrogation but of expression seriously in the same text. But at the same time, there was a sacrifice of a certain sort of intellectual acuity. I think that there is a risk involved in trying to join and fuse genres. But I wanted to take that risk because I don't want to have a limited audience. I want to speak to the academy in very powerful and interesting ways, but I don't want to be limited to the academy. I have colleagues and I know people who limit themselves to the academy, and the academy becomes exaggerated in its importance in their lives. As a Christian, who was taught to really be suspicious of any form of idolatry, I don't want to make a fetish of critical consciousness. I don't want to make an idol of the capacity to intervene intellectually in the world and make that my entire life and the academy the shrine wherein I worship. At the same time, I want to have a mold of criticism that allows me to be mobile, to move from the academy to the street to the world. I want to be able to speak to that world, and I want to have a language that is clear—with all the problematic

implications of clarity. I want to have the ability to be eloquent and clear and powerful and persuasive, because I've got a point to make, and I have a point of view. That point of view is worth more to me than what rewards I can reap in the academy; it's about making a difference in the lives of people who I meet and whose lives I intend to represent in my work, even if they disagree with much of what I say. Black poor people, black working-class people, black kids who are being demonized as nihilistic animals, black kids who are seen as somehow extraneous, unnecessary to America. I want to speak for and with them. I want to speak for intellectuals who feel that because they're theoretically dense and sophisticated that they have nothing to say. I want to talk about the need to read those books and to struggle with them; anything worth knowing is worth knowing in a very difficult way. I would say to that criticism, I may not do it as well as it needs to be done, but I don't think that the project of trying to fuse those two genres is itself indictable.

There are also the more harsh criticisms by people like Adolph Reed. That kind of vitriolic criticism is a kind of vicious gangster rap in the guise of the academy, not even having the integrity of gangster rappers who import all forms of signifying and tropes and metaphors that indicate that they are not literally true, that they are engaging in a kind of metaphysical realm and a metaphorical world that collides on occasion. They are really artificially invoking an arena of experience that even though real in the world, they themselves realize that they're removed from it, because they are thinking about, rapping about, speaking about, something that they know they are once removed from. So they use *bitch* and *whore*, they use *gangsta* and *nigger* in all kinds of interesting ways. But there's a kind of literalism about Adolph Reed that is quite disturbing and destructive, or scholars of that ilk or an Eric Lott. What is interesting to me about Eric Lott is that he feels free as a white scholar to use words like *troglydite* and to use terms like *caveman* and to use terms like *middlebrow imbecilism* in regard to a work. I think he's a very smart, sophisticated guy knowing the historic contingency of racial rhetoric and knowing the traditional content of racial rhetoric assigned to tropes and metaphors that analyze black people. I would have thought he would have been a bit more careful about associating that, not that he had to worry about some PC police that would rigidly restrict his rhetoric, but that he would be more cautious about the historical inferences of race in assigning certain tropes and metaphors to a person's work. That doesn't in any way take away from the legitimacy of his criticism of my work as not being leftist enough, that by being involved in the public sphere that you have to sacrifice certain radical dimensions. This kind of more-leftist-than-thou criticism has a limit in a way: in itself, it becomes cannibalistic. Authors feed off one another to prove that they are more leftist than the next person, and yet the political consequences of that kind of work is only to enhance the scholar's position. It has no consequences upon the material effects upon the lives of people that they claim that they speak for more powerfully than a person like myself: poor

black people, poor working-class white people, working-class people, and so on, or even radicals and progressives.

I think I've learned much from people who have taken issue with my work, who have said that there are certain sacrifices that one makes when one moves from the academy into the public sphere, and I think that's absolutely right. But my answer would be, then, you've got to do work for the academy that is important and that is integral to the perpetuation and production of scholarly, academic work. But, you've also got to do work that is accountable to a public, that also stands in need of the rich traditions of intellectual reflection that we can bring to bear upon those subjects. And my own mediating position then between the academy and the public sphere may never diminish the tension that I feel in terms of traversing those terrains and going back and forth. And I hope I won't lose that tension, because I think that tension in some ways informs and gives my work a certain moral authority and hopefully intellectual integrity that is if not always right at least is always intending to reflect those tensions in ways that help both the academy and the so-called public sphere. The public sphere needs the intellectual acuity of the academic world. The academic world needs the doses of material consequences and political effects that the public sphere can bring about. That's what I intend to do in my work: to bridge the gulf, to fuse the genres, and to swerve between the genres, and to really do something powerful in asking questions about how we can move beyond narrow disciplinary boundaries and narrow divisions between the "real" and the represented and get to the heart of the matter, which is to use powerfully clear work and to serve as a political interest that can be morally defended.

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