

# Retrospective Analysis: The Movement Against African Centered Thought

by

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## Abstract

In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century one would be hard pressed to find two ideas emanating from the minds of African people more critiqued than Afrocentricity and the African-centered worldview. The academic world as well as outside entities all weighed in on the debate. Several scholars formed valid critical theoretical challenges to these ideas. However, an equal amount of individuals offered extremist views saturated with political and ideological dogma far outside the realm of authentic academic inquiry. Certainly, the world of scholarship welcomes all forms of thought provoking critique and analysis, but when it hinges on the suppression of African agency it moves beyond the pale. This paper will illuminate the political and ideological leanings of the staunch critics. This work will also examine the intellectual trajectory of their arguments and expose the anti-egalitarian positions located in their agenda.

## Introduction

In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century one would be hard pressed to find two ideas that emanated from the minds of African people more discussed and debated than the African-centered worldview and Afrocentricity. These two ideas received wide critique both from individuals inside the scholarly universe and from people and organizations who usually have other items on their investigative plates. *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *the Wall Street Journal*, *the Washington Post*, as well as pundit and commentator George Will from “Meet the Press” and many others represented a wide cadre of voices from outside the academic community.

This article does not suggest that examining intellectual projects is beyond the province of the aforementioned entities. However, what will be explored in this work is the nature of the political motivation driving a certain brand of scholarship and journalism which seeks to neutralize and suppress the emancipatory initiatives of African-centered scholars. This work will advance the question and illuminate the possibility that the wide range of attention paid to the African-centered worldview and Afrocentricity were predicated on anti-egalitarian ideals. In the academic community, critique and examination of ideas is welcome, because it may lead to new understandings and the advancement of knowledge. Notwithstanding, this should not be confused with a carefully crafted media aided campaign, designed to discredit scholarly positions which do not mesh with domestic nativism.

## **Agenda and Time Period**

The 1990s represented the dawn of a new day in American politics and social reform. The Republican controlled United States Congress of 1995 represented the first time since 1954 that political conservatives would have control of the congressional branch of American government. The renewed vigor and rise of Conservative political activism both in the public and private sphere, ignited a wide range of *anti-egalitarian loyalists*; devoted to challenging any and all things they believed were a threat to their isolated version of America. Adding to this mix was a burgeoning and re-vamped neoliberal ideology that is still today devoted to restricting ideas of community and collective identity which does not suit their developing distance from the progressive project.

This time period presented a social/political climate that was ripe for books such as: James Davidson Hunter's *Culture Wars* (1991), William Bennett's *The Devaluing of America* (1992), and *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991). Following in ideological lockstep were Robert Bork's, *Slouching towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (1996). Also, blockbuster best sellers such as: Richard J Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*,(1994) which rekindled the idea of Blacks innate lack of intelligence, and Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism* (1995) that espoused spirited rhetoric against structural redress of racial inequality in the United States. In retrospect it must also be noted that the climate had previously been set in the late 1980s with books such as *Closing of the American Mind* (1988) by University of Chicago professor Alan Bloom, which was a *New York Times* best seller. Bloom's text is an alarmist treatise about the demise of colleges and universities standards based on what he felt was a retreat from the "western canon." Other texts of this ilk were: *The Moral Collapse of the University, Professionalism, Purity and Alienation*, by Bruce Wilshire (1990), *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America*, by Page Smith(1990), and *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted our Higher Education*, by Roger Kimball (1990) just to name a few.

All of these books from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s contained a common thread, weaved by what the authors believed was good for America. The expositors of these tomes had decided on America's intellectual history and were firm in their belief in what writings made up the "great books." To them as a collective, anything that questioned this was a clear target for firm rebuke. The end result of these efforts was directed towards a return to the American scholarly tradition of times of yore and the social order of previous decades, presumably the 1950s.

During the same time period in the United Kingdom, the British were rebounding from and adjusting to the aggressive conservative agenda laid out by former prime-minister Margaret Thatcher who reigned from 1979-1990. The scholarly community on both sides of the Atlantic would not be immune to this ideological pressure nor would it rise above it. The early and mid 1990s protracted rightward shift in the US and the UK with their resultant anti-egalitarian ideologies set the stage for the concerted attack on the African-centered worldview and Afrocentricity. This new political era and its reward system must be taken into account when investigating the tone and tenor of the cacophonous critiques by the alliance of neoliberal and radical conservative voices. A battle was at hand and the war was real, but contained no steel bullets. This war as Jacob Carruthers reminded us... is intellectual.

## **Afrocentricity and the African-centered Worldview: A Response to Anti-Egalitarian Reality**

In terms of critical understanding it is vitally important to illuminate the distinctions between Afrocentricity and the African-centered worldview. It is not commonly known that these two ideas are *not interchangeable*, although they both see the end result as the liberation of African people. Danjuma Sinue Modupe's treatment of this subject in the text, *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (2003) is most instructive. He writes:

At this point it is necessary to make the critical distinction between two different schools of thought, one which utilizes an African world view as framework, and one which utilizes an Afrocentric philosophical perspective as framework. The latter I have termed the Asantean school of thought. The former composed predominantly of scholars who self-identify as Africentric, Africanity, and African-centered theorists and who are mostly in the areas of Black Psychology and African Personality Theory. As a phenomena achieved by a people over time, in response to nature and their physical environment, world view is for a people a way of making sense of the world based upon a people's particular historical and cultural development. However, world view allows for different philosophical perspectives, and different world views (such as European, Asian, and African world views) allow for different sets of perspectives. This, world view cannot be considered the same as philosophical perspective, and it is important to note that Afrocentricity claims to be neither a world view nor does it claim an African worldview as framework (p. 67).

Often times those individuals with a cursory knowledge of Africana intellectual tradition confuse these two schools of thought and rest their critiques on faulty theoretical assumptions so an effort here is being made for clarity. This work will exclusively examine the widespread response to Afrocentric theory and praxis. For a more extensive exploration of the African-centered worldview see (Ani, 1994; Jamison, 2006; Kambon, 1992, 1998; Myers, 1991, 1993; Nobles, 1991; and Sutherland, 1997).

## **Afrocentricity**

In a global context Afrocentricity must be understood as a robust response to exclusion, western hegemony and anti-egalitarian structural, institutional and systemic practices. Reflecting this reality historian Carter G. Woodson (2000) wrote, “What Negroes are now being taught does not bring their minds into harmony with life as they must face it” (p. 38). The saliency of Woodson’s point can never be taken lightly in the context of its profundity on the lives of Africans in America and on the continent of Africa. Woodson was stridently opposed to Africans in America being forced to learn information that did not represent their contributions to the world. Woodson (1922)

Negro students are taught to admire the Hebrews, the Greeks, the Latins and the Teutons and to despise themselves and all other races which are now subject to exploitation. Whatever is right. Nothing tending to question the present order of things is allowed to enter books adopted for classroom instruction, and teachers found discussing such matters are not tolerated. (p. 573)

With an understanding of Woodson’s forthright supposition, the development of an agency driven intellectual alternative for African descended people in the United States was clear.

Building on the intellectual ancestry of W.E.B. Dubois and Carter G. Woodson, in 1980 Molefi Asante addressed this problem by codifying the foundation for this enterprise with the writing of the book, *Afrocentricity the Theory of Social Change*. The need for a transformative idea that placed Africa at the center of analysis for African people was met by Afrocentricity. The Afrocentric project represents a response mechanism that addresses the hegemonic framework inherent in biased, historical, cultural and educational practices. The development of the Afrocentric idea arose at a crucial time in America. The driving force behind the Afrocentric project is the continued survival thrust and redemptive agency of African descended people all around the world. Asante (1998) writes, “Thus, I offer Afrocentricity as a moral as well as intellectual location that posits Africans as subjects rather than as objects of human history and that establishes a perfectly valid and scientific basis for the explanation of African historical experiences” (p. xii, xiii).

In the history of the colonial enterprise the idea of African people as subjects rather than objects is a rarity to say the least. It is this just demand for African agency that locates the Afrocentric idea as emancipatory. The quest for collective agency for most Africans in America is one of the ideas that congeal this population's historical experience. Analyzing and interpreting the African experience in the world is a herculean task. As a theoretical construction, Afrocentricity assumes a steadfast posture against all hostile hegemonic interpretations of African reality. Authentic Afrocentrists maintain that the history of *any* people should include their unique contributions to the world, without blind conformity to a dominant narrative that positions all things European as superior. Mazama (2003) makes this point about the nature of the Afrocentric idea, she maintains:

The Afrocentric idea rests on the assertion of the primacy of the African experience for African people. Its aim is to give us our African, victorious consciousness back. In the process, it also means viewing the European voice as just one among many, and not necessarily the wisest one (p. 5).

Mazama's position is congruent with Asante (1998) and is evident here, he states:

What has fascinated me is the manner in which most of my colleagues have written theory and engaged in the social sciences in relationship to African people. They have often assumed that their "objectivity," a kind of collective subjectivity of European culture, should be the measure by which the world marches. (p. 1)

## **What is Afrocentricity?**

One of the central themes that have remained consistent in the detractor's line of thought is a misunderstanding and or distortion of the basic tenets or characteristics of the Afrocentric idea. For the reader here are the basics as put forth by Molefi Asante (1999):

- *an intense interest in psychological location as determined by symbols, motif, rituals, and signs*
- *a commitment to finding the subject-place of Africans in any social, political, economic, or religious phenomenon with implications for questions of sex, gender, and class*
- *a defense of African cultural elements as historically valid in the context of art, music, and literature and a defense of a pan-African cultural connection based on broad responses to conditions, environments, and situations over time*

- *a celebration of “centeredness” and agency and a commitment to lexical refinement that eliminates pejoratives, including sexual and gender pejoratives, about Africans or other people*
- *a powerful imperative from historical sources to revise the collective text of African people as one in constant and consistent search for liberation and Maat (p. 4).*

With this knowledge the reader can go forth and discern for themselves how and when the detractors have misrepresented the aims of Afrocentricity. This is vital for intellectual clarity.

The gaze that Afrocentricity brings to the fore is crucial on many levels. While being positioned as universal, institutional arrangements have allowed the European project to act as a tent to smother the ideas, contributions and cultural realities that exist in the intellectual heritage and historical narratives of people of African descent. Afrocentricity sees this type of linear measurement as a signifier of hierarchical discourse which is counterproductive to the advancement of human knowledge. Asante (1998) writes, “In the spirit of pursuing the American quest, the Afrocentric idea is projected as a model for intercultural agency in which pluralism exists without hierarchy and respect for cultural origins, achievements, and prospects is freely granted” (p. xii). Like all human groups Africans should see their collective social and cultural histories represented in a way that is not based upon distortions of reality. In the book: *The Opening of the American Mind* (1996) Levine writes:

But distortion exacts a fearful price: it makes it impossible to discover the nature and meaning of our history and our developing culture; impossible to comprehend that literature and art have not been the monopolies of certain groups and cultures in the past, but have been dynamic and living entities that Americans of all sorts have been capable of contributing to; impossible to contemplate seriously the proposition that the genius of our nation has not been to preserve and disseminate a specific culture, be it “Anglo” or “Teutonic” or “Western,” but to demonstrate the possibilities of creating a truly interethnic and interracial culture which is more than a reproduction of any of its specific parts and which it owes its essence to its diversity.(p. 173)

Afrocentricity seeks to maintain diversity of thought and intellectual pluralism for all members of the human family.

## Critiques and Responses to African Inspired/Agency Driven-Intellectual Production

There are three primary fronts in the assault on Afrocentricity:

- Its right to exist as a scholarly enterprise
- Its adversarial relationship to the Western canon
- Its placement in public school curriculum

This work will primarily address points one and two. However, for a general overview to better understand the movement to neutralize and suppress Afrocentric education in school curriculum, see *Alternatives to Afrocentrism* edited by John J. Miller (1996) which consist of a collection of essays commissioned by the Center for Equal Opportunity in Washington, DC. According to the book, the monographs grew out of two conferences in 1993 and 1995 held in St. Louis, Missouri. The major sponsors were CEO, The Manhattan Institute and the Department of African and Afro-American Studies at Washington University (the text is informative, if one wants to learn the connections between funding sources, scholarship, political agenda and influence in the public sphere).

On February 10, 1992, the cover story of the *New Republic* magazine featured a picture of a Greek statue with a billed cap with the letter X on the face of the hat. The hat was indicative of the time period when many African Americans were once again celebrating freedom fighter Malcolm X as the iconic figure he has earned the right to be. The picture is instructive because one could surmise a mocking sense of irony juxtaposing these two ideas against each other. The old adage “a picture says a thousand words” is in full evidence here and one can be assured that this reality was not lost on the erudite editors of this magazine. Looking at this situation closely requires an understanding of both agenda and method.

In the book *The Mythmakers: Intellectuals and the Intelligentsia in Perspective*, Raj P. Mohan writes:

A drive for power was an essential component of the American definition. The intellectuals were that section of the educated classes which had aspirations to political power either directly by seeking to be society’s political rulers or indirectly by directing its conscience and decisions. (p. 34)

This passage is most helpful in understanding the ensuing role, mission, purpose and function of the attack on Afrocentricity. Marching to the beat of the social and political climate of the era (1990s), the New Republic article featured an obscure professor of classics Mary Lefkowitz and introduces her to an audience of grand scale. Moving beyond her insulated sphere of European classics she has now been hoisted into the forefront of the debate on Afrocentric theory and praxis. She was given media attention that is usually not reserved for professors in her field no matter the stature of their work. Because of the response to the New Republic article Lefkowitz became the lead *political* spokes person of sorts for the anti-egalitarian loyalists; an anointed voice whether she welcomed the position or not. The world of print journalism celebrates her again after the release of the book, *Black Athena Revisited*, where she and others who share her viewpoints critique the work of Martin Bernal (See, George Will-Newsweek, Feb 12, 1996 & Roger Kimball-Wall Street Journal, Feb 14, 1996). Five years later after her book titled: “*Not Out of Africa: How “Afrocentrism” Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*” was released in 1996, she re-emerges as a major polarizing figure in the debate on Afrocentricity. She was involved in several high profile debates. One notable moment was in 1996 when noted historian, Dr. John Henrik Clarke at a public debate in New York City, calls into question her academic training by stating, “I only debate with my equals all others I teach.” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lm4pzEY9ntA&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lm4pzEY9ntA&feature=related) (8:58). A veritable cottage industry against Afrocentricity was born that saved the careers of a few academics and jump started the careers of many others.

Lefkowitz’s central argument rests on the assertion that, as Asante writes (1999) “...Greece sprang like a miracle unborn and untaught” (p. 52). While her position may seem like a simplistic bifurcation to most scholars, her work received wide acclaim and acceptance by those individuals who simply refused to understand that Kemet later called Egypt (in North Africa) had any influence other than art and architecture on the intellectual heritage of ancient Greece. In the book *Not Out of Africa* in the preface she writes: “How could anyone suppose that the ancient Greeks were not the authors of their own philosophy and scientific theory?”(p. xiv). Authentic Afrocentric scholarship has not argued against “who” authored what the Greeks have written about themselves, but Afrocentrists have maintained that the Greeks have used ideas gathered from others and claimed them as their own; specifically the Africans in antiquity they studied with. In this statement one wonders if Lefkowitz is broadcasting the idea that the Greeks are beyond the realm of scholarly inquiry and challenge. The academic world exists on the institutionalized reality that all information is up for inspection. Surely, somewhere Lefkowitz has been made aware of this in her life.

Another idea worthy of investigation is how Lefkowitz develops her intellectual positions against the Afrocentric method. Afrocentric scholars were not alone in their amusement with Lefkowitz’s tactics. A fellow traveler and severe critic of the Afrocentric project, writer Stephen Howe reported glaring inaccuracies in Lefkowitz’s work as well. Howe (1999) writes: “Perhaps the most serious flaw in Lefkowitz’s book, however, is that its analysis of Afrocentric writings is almost as narrowly based as those of Hughes or Schlesinger” (p.11).

Howe is rightfully lumping Lefkowitz with the late historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Schlesinger was a Pulitzer Prize winning author, Harvard professor and widely acclaimed presidential historian and social critic. His book *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* clearly does not possess the intellectual gravitas of his former works and as Howe states is narrowly written. By Schlesinger's own high standards of scholarship the book appears hastily put together; perhaps to parallel and time its release with the existing political exigencies of the time.

The book is full of anecdotal diatribes about the coming storm and apocalyptic future of American education. Schlesinger believes that multiculturalism will lead to a fostering of "tribalism" in America. Showing none of the research energy or scholarly rigor of his earlier works, this book was nonetheless a national bestseller. In the epilogue on page (160) Schlesinger defends Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates right to call Afrocentricity "Voodoo Methodology". In another section of the book, Schlesinger recruits African American *Washington Post* columnist William Rasberry to make this point, "It is a questionable assumption that black children with only the vaguest notions of their African ancestry can be inculcated with African culture more easily than the American culture to which they are daily exposed" (p.47). This is an interesting statement on a variety of levels.

In terms of cultural inculcation certain communities would disagree with Rasberry. Somehow he forgets that many very successful groups in America spend time and resources to do, what he says is not possible for African Americans. Asians, Muslims, those of Jewish faith, Italians and other ethnic and religious groups make sure their children know their ancestral lineage, history and culture while at the same time encouraging them to realize the promise of America. Why Rasberry singles out African American children as not being able to benefit from the same model is not clear. What is clear is that by using a dissenting African American voice Schlesinger can claim objective validity while setting the climate against Afrocentricity.

When examining this political time period it is plausible to surmise that many of the attacks on Afrocentricity were cleverly crafted ideological covers for anti-egalitarian scholars, journalists and writers. Although he criticizes Schlesinger, it is generally understood by the academic community that Howe's book (*Afrocentrism: Mythical Past and Imagined Homes*) is full of name calling, low brow assertions and innuendo. For example, in part three of the book titled *Afrocentrism in the Present*, section 16 is called, "Wild Afrocentricity." In section 17 he names Molefi Asante the "Godfather" of Afrocentricity. Despite many instances of deliberate over the top inflammatory rhetorical slights throughout the book, Howe does make a few mature salient points about Lefkowitz. He writes:

An adequate and thorough investigation of Afrocentric views of history would have to trace their genealogies through a mass of nineteenth and early twentieth century black Americans writing about Africa, to take detailed note of such protagonists as Marimba Ani, Molefi Asante, John G. Jackson, Ron Karenga, Ivan Van Sertima and Chancellor Williams and-perhaps above all-to look closely at the most influential and intellectually substantial of them all, Cheikh Anta Diop. Lefkowitz does none of these things. (p. 11).

The previous reference is an instance when Howe demonstrates his intellectual acumen and knowledge of Africana intellectual tradition. Why in most other sections of the book, he reduces his scholarly capability to lower forms of vile insults and acidic hostile assumptions can only be made clear by understanding the previously mentioned motives and agendas of the anti-egalitarian loyalists.

In his writings Asante has made his intentions about the purpose of Afrocentricity loud and clear over decades. A pronounced goal and vision of the Afrocentric idea is the advancement of African agency. Wilson (1998) writes, "In some interesting ways the Afrocentric movement represents the resurrection of Black Power and is its transcendent" (p. 232). Afrocentricity is a project of restoration and reclamation of a righteous position for African people and a goal for all of humanity in a just world. Asante (2003a) posits, "Thus Afrocentricity is a philosophical perspective associated with the discovery, location and actualizing of African agency within the context of history and culture. By agency is meant attitude toward action originating in African experiences" (p. 3). Schlesinger never makes it clear why he and his followers believe that the Afrocentric project could "disunite America"? Unless by *disuniting* he believes that agency initiatives by people of African descent are disuniting and or problematic. Asante (1999) maintains:

Schlesinger sets forth a vision of America rooted in the past, where whites, actually Anglo-Saxon whites, defined the protocols of the American society and white culture itself represented the ideal to which others were expected to aspire. He loves this vision because it provides a psychological justification for the dominance of European culture in America over others. In his vision there is little history of enslavement, oppression, dispossession, racism, or exploitation. (p. 11)

In congruence with this position Wilson (1998) writes, "For no one knows better than this establishment the power ideology can generate when it imbues a critical mass of people with a rationale for action and revolution." (p. 231). This is an important consideration for those individuals looking for answers to why so many different types of resources were garnered, from so many directions, to wage the battle against the Afrocentric project. In the new millennium Schlesinger's narrow parochial vision for America is a dated dream that conjures up images and ideas that are best left in 1950s scrapbooks.

## The Subject Position Question

The anti-egalitarian loyalists whether they are devoted followers of the Lefkowitz doctrine or committed to the ideological dogma of the Schlesinger camp are lockstep in their aggression against the idea that African people should be subjects and not objects. Not allowing African people to be subjects whether that is located in history, culture or philosophy objectifies them to the point of permanent “other.” On the other hand it is strategic, because one must have a fixed subject position in order to develop an organic approach to social reform or social theory. It is worth noting that Afrocentricity *is* a social theory and does not live in the world of history and culture only. The Afrocentric position demands location in a writers text, but what is not as well known is that Afrocentricity has an emphasis on subject position in terms of building a political reference base for collective change. So in understanding Afrocentricity the fundamental question becomes, does Afrocentricity have a place in the political realm in so far as identity politics are concerned? This area is where deconstructionists and their cry of essentialism are problematic for the Afrocentric paradigm. Deconstructionists do not believe that ethnic essence or characteristics of a culture should denote a community. The notion that identity is fluid and has no firm place is counter to the Afrocentric method; so it pushes back against deconstructionism, postmodernism and any idea that neutralizes or de-roots ones sense of an African collective on both sides of the Atlantic.

One would not place scholar Paul Gilroy in the Afrocentric-center, but scholars Murphy and Choi (1997) employ Paul Gilroy (2000) to build on Asante’s position. They contend, “Paul Gilroy aptly describes this situation by declaring that “European particularism [has been] dressed up as universal,” thereby guaranteeing the success of a specific political and economic agenda” (p. 41). Murphy and Choi bring more attention to the possibility that many of the detractors of Afrocentricity have at the base of their intellectual positions, political interests that are in direct conflict with the agency initiatives of Afrocentric theory. Wilson (1998) argues, “Collective identity, consciousness, intentionality and solidarity are the key determinants as to whether a group recognizes the resources it has in its possession and whether and how it will use those resources” (p.39).

The Schlesinger position maintains that the American ideal is best and any notions outside of that are disruptive to national harmony. In tone and tenor this sounds a bit like the current Tea Party movement which contains a rather restrictive view of the American pantheon. In this contemporary moment a new generation of African-centered intellectuals, are showing great clarity and adeptness at understanding the motivations of the anti-African agency agenda. One emerging voice is Karanja Carroll of SUNY New Paltz who writes, “An *Afrocentric* methodology is problematic for Howe, Lefkowitz and Schlesinger because it challenges the foundation of European hegemony. By challenging this foundation, *Afrocentricity* is able to question Europe as the prototype of culture.”

[http://www2.newpaltz.edu/~carrollk/PHILOSOPHICAL\\_REFLECTIONS.html](http://www2.newpaltz.edu/~carrollk/PHILOSOPHICAL_REFLECTIONS.html)

## The Casting of Afrocentricity as Racialized Ideology

The campaign to locate Afrocentricity as a racial ideology versus an intellectual project was the die that cast it to the forefront in the culture wars of the 1990s and today. Anti-egalitarian loyalists and individuals of a certain ideological bend persist in their failing to appreciate the Afrocentric paradigm as a scholarly enterprise. The detractors painted Afrocentricity as a racial project in order to garner interest from various fronts. Locating Afrocentricity as a racialized idea drew widespread support from neoliberal and radical conservative intellectuals, journalists and education officials whose reactionary biases did not allow them to see the utility of Afrocentricity in a wider context for the human family.

In current academic circles Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates is generally known as being indifferent to Afrocentricity. Notwithstanding, this view does not reflect his earlier written and rhetorical stances, he writes (1992):

...the teaching of an aesthetic and political order, in which no women and people of color were ever able to discover the reflection or representation of their images, or hear the resonance of their cultural voices. The return of “the” canon, the high canon of Western master-pieces, represents the return of an order in which my people were the subjugated, the voiceless, the invisible, the unrepresented, and the unrepresentable. Who would return us to that medieval never-never land. (p. 111)

From this passage professor Gates appears to support the basic tenets of the Afrocentric paradigm as an intellectual idea. However, in a 1991 *Newsweek* story titled: “Beware of the New Pharaohs”, he locates it as ideology:

For a scholar, “Afrocentrism” should be more than wearing Kente cloth and celebrating Kwanzaa instead of Christmas (Kwanzaa, by the way was invented in Los Angeles, not Lagos.) Bogus theories of “sun” and “ice” people, and the invidious scapegoating of other ethnic groups resurrects the worst of 19<sup>th</sup> century racist pseudoscience---which too many of the pharaohs of “Afrocentrism” have accepted without knowing it.” (p. 47)

In this statement, Gates casts a wide net and attacks Afrocentricity, Professor’s Maulana Karenga and Leonard Jeffries in one fell swoop. It is not clear why Gates sends out conflicting messages to the academic world. However, this display of language and posturing places him in good stead with fellow travelers such as: Clarence Walker, Anthony Appiah, Paul Gilroy, Gerald Early, Stanley Crouch, Tunde Adeleke and others who sought to confine the Afrocentric idea to their version of essentialist “hyper-nationalist Black power ideology.”

As has been the case in an American context, historically, the loyalists can always be depended upon for their ideological dependability and cultural congruency. Their rewards in American society continue to bear that out in full view. By attempting to locate Afrocentric theory and praxis as a racialized essentialist paradigm, Gates et al. appealed to and garnered support from postmodernists, deconstructionists and the post-racialists who seek to destabilize the Afrocentric idea.

## **The Last Gasp**

The African world has always been replete with retrogressive individuals whose view of reality is out of step with the conditions that African descended people have faced. In most cases ahistorical analysis is usually the strong suit of this brand of thinker. Over ten years after most of the anti-African agency ideas and scholarship had been laid to rest, a book is published by the University of Mississippi Press that reveals many of the warmed over ideas of the past against Afrocentricity. With predictable anecdotal positions served up as fresh fare, the last in a long line of authors is Tunde Adeleke.

In order to understand this authors current position's a brief glimpse of his earlier work is in order. In a book titled: *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth- Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission (1998)*, he argues that Black Nationalism actually was in large measure a strategy to serve European interests while using Africa as a bridge. While a detailed book review is necessary to tease out the nuanced perspectives of any text, a snap shot is offered here so the reader can understand the ideological trajectory and imperatives of Adeleke, which may offer a clearer insight into his motivations against Afrocentricity.

In the book, he centers his focus on the lives of Martin Delaney, Alexander Crummell and Henry McNeal Turner. He writes, "It is not a historical survey of the origin and development of black nationalism, however, but a critique of the values and orientation of some of its notable proponents" (p. 8). It would appear that a disclaimer of this type is to tell his readers that he is about to wage a campaign of wide speculative conjecture. He goes on to say, "Consequently, this study is a critical analysis of the implications of the imperialist values and orientations of late-nineteenth century black American nationalism." (p. 10) He does this by looking at the lives of "three men." It would appear that an empirical sample of a larger group would be in order, but instead Adeleke relies on his personal interpretations and draws sweeping generalizations from examining the lives of *three men*. While it is generally understood that the men in question were the pioneers of the movement, it is still to some degree a stretch to base an entire work on this premise, particularly without firsthand accounts. Notwithstanding, in Adeleke s' view, that is enough to speak for an entire social, political and economic movement. He draws similarities between the "civilizing mission" of Europe and the developing Black Nationalist framework. He writes,

In furthering their schemes, however, these nationalists displayed ideological ambivalence by embracing the ideals of the dominant-Euro-American culture against which they (especially Delaney and Turner) professed to be struggling. The bond between black American nationalism and European nationalism extended beyond ideological compatibility to a shared imperialistic vision. (p. 10)

These are strong statements, particularly since any form of empirical analysis is absent from this text; but Adeleke apparently believed that this was unnecessary. However, as a historian one would have thought he might have relied more heavily on primary documents, but his use of them is sparse. He writes,

The depth of black American nationalist subscription to Eurocentric diffusionist ideals and cultural narcissism, along with the implications of this for black American conceptions of national identity, especially in the context of the diaspora, have not been adequately explored. Put differently, scholars have yet to fully explore how the imperialist inclinations of black American nationalists compelled identification with and support for policies that resulted in what many characterize as the second enslavement of Africans” colonialism. (p.26)

In the last sentence of the previous passage he says the words, “what many characterize as the second enslavement of Africans”, who is he speaking of here? Other scholar’s or African people; just where he draws this inference is not in the book. Here again a broad generalization without empirical support, specifically, enough to make an assertion of that magnitude.

The brief back story of his earlier work makes the agenda of his most recent book *The Case Against Afrocentrism* (2009) transparent on many levels. He starts with a cry to the reader detailing how he was victimized in 1992 at a conference for a paper he presented. He explains how his undeserved castigation was surprising and how disappointed he was that the conference attendees were not more empathetic to his views surrounding intra-racial disharmony between Africans on the continent and Africans in America (African Americans). His work displays many of the telltale weaknesses of his intellectual predecessors through a term he uses called, Afrocentric essentialism. In the book Adeleke drags old sets of bones from one grave to another. One would think that after reading all of the anti-Afrocentric literature from the last twenty years that Adeleke would have something new to say, but alas he does not. Calling upon the ideas of postmodernism, deconstructionism and post-racialism Adeleke locates Afrocentricity as essentialist. It is often brought to the world’s attention that people who practice Judaism are not deemed essentialist, nor are Asians who practice their many forms of cultural production.

The list is long of groups who proudly broadcast their racial, ethnic and religious essence without the essentialist claim being rained upon them. Maybe Adeleke knows that by concentrating on Afrocentricity he inhabits a “safe harbor.” Safe harbor being those spaces where ideas emanating from the minds of African people can be harshly criticized by another African *after* the idea is denounced by others outside of the group. Is this a way of gaining validation? The charge that Afrocentricity is essentialist is a dated proposition. With regard to the charge of essentialism Asante (1998) writes,

It is clear to me from my own study of history that cultures do exist and in fact persist for centuries with many basic characteristics hardly changed. This is the nature of human societies operating on the foundations of myths, history, and memory. The African American community is no different from others in this regard. There are certain essential characteristics that identify the contours of our African American community. These are immutable characteristics, in the sense of being inborn, but rather the fundamental outlines of what we regard and preserve as characteristic to our society (p. 13)

Afrocentricity bestows agency to African Americans by demanding that similar to every ethnic group in America, they be included in the negotiation of their historical and cultural experiences.

Adeleke honed his ideas for the book by traveling for comments and feed back from places such as: The Nordic Association for American Studies, the Blekinge Institute of Technology in KarlsKrona Sweden, the AfriKanistentag Conference in Vienne Austria, and the Cultural Citizenship and Challenges of Globalization conference at Deakin University in Melbourne Australia. His book does not mention travel to places with a wide variety of African American voices for feedback such as: the annual meeting of The National Council of Black Studies, where he could have received critical comments of a panoramic scale from a multitude of perspectives.

Like his predecessor Clarence Walker in his book: “*We Can’t Go Home Again: An Argument About Afrocentrism*”, Adeleke’s assertion’s make almost identical claims. In both cases the academic idea, that to make the better argument, to prevail on the merits of your position and support it with sound research escapes both of these authors and their works. The unsubstantiated positions taken in these books, by Walker and Adeleke push the reader to question the personal and political motivations of the writers, versus absorbing the criticality of their ideas. As the academic community assesses the work of the detractors one looming question remains; how does their work add to the sum of human knowledge?

## Conclusion

Clearly, Afrocentricity is agency producing because authentic Afrocentric theory challenges European intellectual hegemony by asserting the presence of Africans in their own experiences. Afrocentricity is resistant to alien master narratives, but unlike postmodernism Afrocentricity relies on African identity to give agency to African Americans. Afrocentricity affronts the Western canon at the level of intellectual as well as social-political discourse and is a tool, an instrument that resists the structural impositions of colonial thinking. Afrocentricity, deconstructs, and dis-empowers the major ideological pillars of the Eurocentric project, as that project relates to African people. It challenges the keys, the core, the deep structure aspects under-girding and unifying negative European cultural thought and behavior toward African people. The Afrocentric idea, therefore, is geared and directed towards restoring the collective sanity of African people, both in the Americas and on the continent of Africa.

The assault on Afrocentricity offers valuable insight into the political nature of knowledge production. It makes transparent the reality that scholarship which is produced in an unbalanced power-dynamic between egalitarians, and anti-egalitarian interests, serve as a barometer of the prevailing social and political climate at a given time in human history. Academic works do not exist in vacuums untouched by the winds of isolated interests, and the media's elevation of certain types of scholarship directed against the Afrocentric project serves as a clear reminder of this. Equally important is the fact that Afrocentricity like all other ideas must also be critiqued, examined and explored to determine its validity. This work does seek to have any legitimate idea go un-examined. However, in the case of the Afrocentric idea, what this work argues for is an objective critique, with clearly defined conceptual rigor that is not based on a political or hegemonic agenda. Therefore, fundamental questions arise such as: are the detractors who assault Afrocentricity against it as an intellectual enterprise, or are they taken aback by the mere idea of agency for African descended people that does not emanate from their intellectual, social and political platforms? Lastly, do scholars view the anti-Afrocentricity movement as a meaningful scholarly endeavor or should the academic community dismiss it as a purely political exercise?

Afrocentricity is alive and well as we enter the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is being studied at colleges and universities all across the world and in various capacities for human betterment. One could witness the robust fitness of the Afrocentric project by visiting the Centre for African Renaissance in South Africa. South Africa is also the home for Stanley Mkhize's training program at the University of Witwatersrand. There are new programs in Afrocentricity at the Universitario del Pacifico in Buenaventura Colombia and Africamaat programs in Paris France. Also in France is Menaibuc Editions, an Afrocentric publishing house. Located in Brazil is the Brazilian project, Quilombismo, articulated by Abdias Nascimento.

In 2010 in Philadelphia Pennsylvania the Molefi Kete Asante Institute was founded. Invested in the world of international politics is Afrocentricity International, the political and activist group of the Afrocentric movement. These developments bode well for freedom and thrust Afrocentricity into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with great fervor and possibility for African descended people and the entire human family.

Afrocentric theory is a vital response to anti-egalitarian practices. The politically inspired attacks against Afrocentricity are certainly not a suitable replacement for credible, detailed research and scholarly driven critical exploration of the ideas at hand. This work supports the detractor's right to critique Afrocentricity, because all scholars should be involved on the trading floor of the market place of ideas. However, when those ideas are saturated with reductionist ideology, scholarly elitism, and status quo self-interest, they are beyond the pale.

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