

# Invisible Jim Crow: An Interview with Michael Tillotson

by

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*Michael Tillotson* is a graduate of Indiana University in Bloomington where he earned the A.A. and B.A. He holds the M.A. in Africana Studies from the State University of New York at Albany. He is a 2008 graduate of Temple University's department of African American Studies where he received his PhD. From 2008-2010 he was a Post-Doctoral Fellow in the African American Studies program at the University of Houston. In the fall of 2011 he joined the faculty in the Department of Africana Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. His articles have appeared in the leading scholarly journals in the field of African American Studies: *The Journal of Black Studies*, *Africological Perspectives*, *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, *The Journal of African American Studies* and the *Quarterly Review at the Institute of Race and Social Thought*. His latest book *Invisible Jim Crow: Contemporary Ideological Threats to the Internal Security of African Americans* is published by Africa World Press and was awarded the "Best Scholarly Book Award" for 2011 by the Diopian Institute for Scholarly Advancement. His current research agenda centers on the intersection of anti-egalitarian ideologies and their influence on the contemporary intra-racial social landscape of African Americans.

**Karanja Keita Carroll (KKC):** Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to participate in this interview. As a warrior-scholar within the discipline of Africana/Black Studies, it is an honor to have you participate in this interview with the *Journal of Pan African Studies* (JPAS) on your recent publication *Invisible Jim Crow: Contemporary Ideological Threats to the Internal Security of African Americans* (2011).

**Michael Tillotson (MT):** Thank you Dr. Carroll and the editorial board for offering me the opportunity to speak with you and the JPAS readers.

**KKC:** Can you explain to our readers the genesis of this book? How did it come about? When do you remember the first seed for this text was planted? When after did you see it blossom and do you believe it has been well-received from those within and outside of Africana/Black Studies?

**MT:** The title of the book, *Invisible Jim Crow: Contemporary Ideological Threats to the Internal Security of African Americans*, speaks to a vitally important area moving forward in the 21st century. Henceforth, after examining the contemporary zeitgeist of the Black American in the United States from 1980-2007, I set out to bring forth a text with content relative to issues and ideas that affect this population's unique reality. The book is a response to contemporary anti-egalitarian ideological conditions that needed illumination from an African-centered location. The work is concerned with cultivating collective agency, recovery, and transformation in the Black world. The ideas in the text provide information that offers an informed perspective so the reader can make enlightened decisions about the nature of reality for Black Americans in contemporary American society.

Institutionally speaking at the time of this interview, the text is being used at Cal-State Northridge, Temple University, the University of Pittsburgh, and the University of Chicago Charter School. The work is required reading for the National Association of Kawaida Organizations (NAKO) in New York. The information in the book is currently being cited by African centered thinkers in published works. There is an expanding cadre of community groups that are working with the text which is quite rewarding on many levels. Domestically, the work is experiencing active requests for lectures and presentations in both academic settings and community group forums. This reality dovetails with the credo of Africana Studies: "Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility."

**KKC:** You have forewords to this book by Molefi Kete Asante and Lewis Gordon. Can you explain how they both contributed to some of the major arguments discussed within this text?

**MT:** One cannot authentically examine the reality of contemporary African Americans without looking at the work of these two thinkers among many others. Their published works have held agency and the existential crisis imposed on the Black world in strict focus for quite some time. The corpus of their scholarship is congruent with my understanding and examination of anti-egalitarian ideologies and how this enterprise must be critiqued and challenged to bring about recovery and transformation. The positions they take, the questions they raise and the consistency in which they have maintained their positions, warranted not only my citing them, but also asking them to cast their reflections in the forewords as well as placing their imprimatur on the back cover of the book.

**KKC:** You outline both the neoconservative and neoliberal attack on African American life chances throughout this text. However, can you share some of the most recent attempts by both neoconservatives and neoliberals to attack the life chances of African descended peoples in America?

**MT:** In my current work, I am expanding outward from Chapter 4. I am looking at the role of the state as a political actor and its use of race neutral discourse as a rhetorical and legislative mechanism to set a social and political climate where race is no longer an appropriate discussion for policy analysis. I am examining the wide ranging implications of this anti-egalitarian movement on collective agency initiatives for Black Americans who live in communities with limited resources.

**KKC:** With the 2008 election of President Barack Hussein Obama, discussions of post-racism flourished throughout much of the news media and popular press. Do you believe President Obama has played any role in the neoliberal attack on the life chances of African Americans? If so, can you share with our readers your understanding of President Obamas role in this process?

**MT:** It is not completely clear whether the 44th president of the United States has played any *direct role*, but it might be fair to say that his presence as commander in chief has been used strategically to further the neoliberal agenda. It could be argued that many of his administration's policies have helped and to some degree hurt African Americans, so the question of proportion and balance is what should be in question intellectually. The book, *specifically* chapter 4, explores in great detail the post-racial construct and its existential dangers from a public policy standpoint if it is accepted wholesale and uncritically by communities of color in an American context.

**KKC:** In what ways do you believe the reelection of President Obama will contribute to the continued attack on the life chances of African American people? Or do you believe his second term will move against these attacks? Why?

**MT:** It would be difficult for me to predict what will transpire in his second term, but it's probably fair to expect individuals who see collective agency and identity in the Black community as a problem to continue to use his political success as a barometer or metric to neutralize and dismiss the need for a collective consciousness in the Black world. The difficulty in gaining consensus on questions and solutions unique to the Black world by Black people is a vexing reality, further exacerbated by the current political climate that has pejoratively labeled collective electoral consciousness in Black life "Identity Politics". This is problematic in public discourse because this label is not applied as often to other groups seeking justice in society in the 21st century.

**KKC:** In chapter five titled, "The Misdirection of the Contemporary Black Church" you spend considerable time discussing "The Word Church." Can you share with our readers your position on "the Word Church [as] a contemporary ideological threat to the internal security of African Americans" (p. 128)?

**MT:** One area of my work is centered on creating idea driven, agency oriented conceptual frameworks that cultivate collective agency among African descended people; therefore, I am interested in institutions that are able to promote that reality. The Black Church historically has been a primary location for Black agency. However, the common current in many churches today is the idea of prosperity ministries, or the "Word Church" movement. Chapter five maintains that the Word Church, in growing measure, has abandoned the idea of collective agency and has adopted an idiocentric worldview, which facilitates the promotion of an aggressive individualistic material quest for self-aggrandizement under the auspices of spiritual worship. The cited empirical data in the chapter illuminates the abandonment of the traditional emphasis on social justice by the Word Church to more concentrated efforts on individual material prophecies. One of the possible outcomes of the imposition of an alien worldview/theology system on Black Americans, could be a greater proportion of Black people suffering from materialistic depression, which is an identifiable mal-adaptive syndrome located in the literature of African centered psychology. Because of its concentrated emphasis on the individualistic and material world ideas, the Word Church is quite clearly a contemporary ideological threat to the internal security of African Americans. Chapter five illuminates the sophisticated ideological nuances that are located in the Word Church movement.

**KKC:** You posit that "The Black experience in America is housed in the twin ideas of resistance and agency" (p. 153). Can you explain this statement and explain how this understanding fits within the larger experiences of African people beyond the United States of America? This is especially important for our readership beyond the United States of America.

**MT:** In the panorama of human freedom concerning African descended people, whichever epoch one chooses, colonialism, enslavement, apartheid, Jim Crow or any of the numerous manifestations of the limitations placed on African people, you will see two primary functional responses: Resistance and Agency. Historically, these twin ideas are the constant narrative, the enduring quests that have given African descended people a common reality. As the book states: "This is the basic organizing principle located in the 16th century, to the systemic inequalities still present in the 21st century" (p. 153). One could locate Resistance and Agency with anti-colonialism efforts on the continent of Africa centuries ago, all the way forward to contemporary attempts to prevent the suppression of Black American voting rights in the last U.S. presidential electoral cycle of 2012. Resistance and Agency is a *constant* and *enduring* reality for people of African descent who are engaged in consciousness. I have always admired the Pan African congresses which brought African people from all over the world together to discuss and address their unique experiences with oppression under a common understanding of Resistance and Agency. Domestically, I have always appreciated the effort that took place in Gary, Indiana in 1972 which brought African people from all walks of life together to develop an independent Black political party...again concerned with Resistance and Agency. The twin ideas of Resistance and Agency are a set of common experiences that permeate the historical reality of people of African descent and are unavoidable in the quest for human freedom.

**KKC:** You introduce the concept of “Agency Reduction Formation” in this text. Can you explain the origin of this concept? What other conceptual precursors contributed to its development? And why is it an important component of your conceptual framework within *Invisible Jim Crow*?

**MT:** After exploring African reality in the late 20th and early 21st century, I was convinced that something was awry and decided a focused transformative hermeneutic was needed. Contemporarily speaking, although there are rare instances of state sanctioned mob violence, fire hoses, attack dogs, and physical manifestations of Jim Crow in main stream modern life against Black people, I was equally convinced that the negative disparities in the quality of life indicators for people of African descent could not simply be the *singular* result of members of this population not living up to their human potential. The x and y axis, i.e. independent and dependent variable, explanations on Black life put forth by the expositors of the anti-egalitarian project was too binary and simplistic for my understanding. Consequently, I set out to investigate the confounds, or the z factors, existing in the larger explanatory horizons of restrictive ideologies that could possibly explain the contemporary challenges of African Americans.

Agency Reduction Formation (ARF) is the theoretical construct that I developed as part of my response to the critical need for an African Centered Diagnostic. ARF is operationalized as: “*Any system of thought that distracts, neutralizes or reduces the need and desire for assertive collective agency by African Americans.*” ARF is a diagnostic tool of analysis to test a system of thought, a movement and anything in human existence that affects African descended people negatively. Its intended use is to expose ideas which are antithetical to the collective advancement of African people. The Agency Reduction Formation concept has wide ranging utility because it gives individuals concerned about equality, social justice, and human rights a definitive conceptual counter argument that exposes the dominative nature and hegemonic frameworks located in anti-egalitarian ideational structures.

**KKC:** In what ways do you believe both the African worldview framework and Afrocentricity work together to provide an accurate lens to not only analyze the lived reality of African peoples, but also provide solutions to our current realities?

**MT:** As vital parts of the solution set for contemporary questions, these two ideas have wide transformative utility. Studies indicate that the shift in large numbers of Black Americans from an Allocentric to Idiocentric, i.e. collective to an individual worldview, is one of the measurable factors in explaining the widespread disparities in the quality of life indicators in the Black world. In the United States, African centered theorists and its adherents for the last few decades have rightfully stressed the validity of a historically based indigenous worldview along with the critical reclamation of value constructions based on pre-colonial life principles and cultural systems for African descended people worldwide. As an approach to data and phenomena concerning African people, Afrocentricity has consistently called for a centered approach.

In relationship to these ideas, chapter six examines the plausible relationship between the saturation of the idiocentric worldview in Black cultural production and identity formation. The chapter examines how an alien worldview (idiocentric) pejoratively [inter alia] affects the construction of values which have possible negative influence on behavior patterns writ large in Black youth and many adults.

**KKC:** In what ways does this text contribute to the body of literature within Africana/Black Studies and the larger body of scholarship focused on the liberation of Africana peoples?

**MT:** The text centers on the intersection of anti-egalitarian ideologies and their influence on the contemporary intra-racial social landscape of African Americans. Consequently, in terms of the recovery and transformation sector of Africana Studies, the work adds to the developing corpus of literature in the nascent but growing sub-field that I have termed "*Agency Studies*." This area of study is committed to the intentional development of ideas that create epistemic fluency surrounding collective agency that contribute singularly and unapologetically to the well-being and internal security of African Americans. This new sub-field's ideational focus is limited to work that has applied implications. The authenticator of Agency Studies is the Applied Africana Studies practitioner. The operationalization of *Applied Africana Studies* is introduced to the academy in a peer reviewed article, published in the January 2013 issue of the *Journal of Black Studies*.

The text is a contribution to the action plan located in the African centered-organic tradition of solution centered scholarship that is translatable in a useable digestible form. The work examines and exposes a myriad of contemporary anti-egalitarian ideological frameworks that if allowed to fester unchallenged in the public sphere, may contribute to the further marginalization of African Americans. It is intended for those individuals who are interested in the life of the mind and who want to be on the trading floor of the market place of ideas concerning collective African agency, transformation and change.

**KKC:** How would you like this text to be used within Africana/Black Studies courses?

**MT:** The nature of the material in the book is best suited for undergraduate senior seminars or graduate level courses. Because the text has seven chapters which cover different and distinct ideas, it is not limited to a certain intellectual domain. It has wide application in Africana Studies courses including, but not limited to, those with emphasis on Political Sociology, Sociology, Social Psychology, History, Critical Theory and of course the nascent but growing field of "*Agency Studies*." In the 21st century one of the challenges for Africana Studies is: How does it continue to put forth a platform to re-insinuate its ideas back into the collective imagination and consciousness of the Black world for recovery and transformation?

This is the intellectual trajectory upon which the University of Pittsburgh's department of Africana Studies is currently being built under the visionary and forward thinking leadership of the chair Dr. Jerome Taylor, PhD. The text provides information that is useful to the core group of researcher citizens who are devoted to the herculean task of developing agency initiatives for vulnerable members of the human family and specifically the Black world.

**KKC:** Asante sana Brother Tillotson for participating in this interview and clarifying many of the ideas discussed in *Invisible Jim Crow*. A luta cotinua!

**MT:** Thank you and may the ancestors be pleased.