The Lens of Blackness: An Anthro-Political Perspective

by

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Abstract

This paper is from research in progress based on an ethnography that analyzes the effects of imprisonment on three Afrikan/Black men, over 50 years old, who identify themselves as "political prisoners". Their narrative of incarceration is structured during the 1960s-1980s. I explored the men's perceptions of the cultural and social effects of their incarceration. Taking this approach I identified a broader psycho-socio-political context of incarceration inclusive of the black collective.

Keywords: cultural anthropology, cultural identity narratives, Amos Wilson, mass incarceration

Until we Reclaim Our Afrikan Time,
We, All of Us Afrikans, are Prisoners
And Not Accurately Discerning
The Causes of Our Incarceration,
We Are Assumed by Onlookers and Ourselves, to be Criminals
You know the World thinks that if you are in prison you must have committed some Crime
Our Imprisonment Indicts Us
We must break out
The Executioner Approaches
Time is of the Essence (Wilson, 1990, p.84)

Lens of Blackness

I came in contact with Amos Wilson when I first began this ethnography over two years ago, through the three Black male participants that I was interviewing. Amos Wilson mentions that one of the principal problems of the black-on-black criminal is his/her identity. In order for me to understand the men and their language, I needed an interpreter. Wilson's *Black on Black Violence*, along with his other works, became that interpreter. These books helped me to understand my own reality and context. In addition, I was now able to understand the participants and the language in which they conveyed their story. Unlike the men who were able to contextualize themselves, I found out later it was I who was in need of contextualization.

The dialogical process of the oppressed is done within the context of white supremacy and therefore even language can work as a tool of re-oppression against the oppressed. As I spoke to these men, I gained a different type of understanding and new education. They helped me develop a new language by helping me return to my blackness. I was looking through the wrong lens and was in need of a new lens. This new lens was the lens of blackness. Blackness is where everything begins and where it ends, blackness goes before the system of white supremacy. It goes before the product of racism; it returns one to an ancient time of knowledge, truth, and balance of the human realm (King, 2001; Moore, 2002).

Political Prisoners

Five years ago I was first introduced to the term 'political prisoner' by a formerly incarcerated Black man while at an academic event. As we spoke, he mentioned that he had been incarcerated over fifteen years. I asked what was his crime? He replied, "I didn't (don't) know but to be black. I am a political prisoner." I said, "No, what did you go to prison for?" He repeated again, "I am a political prisoner." Through his lived experience, he echoed what Chrisman (1971) had discovered through his academic study:

> The Black offender is not tried and judged by the Black community itself but by the machinery of the white community, which is least affected by his actions and whose interests are served by the systematic subjugation of all black people. Thus, the trial or conviction of a Black prisoner regardless of his offense, his guilt or his innocence, cannot be a democratic judgment of him by his peers, but a political action against him by his oppressors. (Chrisman, 1971, p.45)

By ultimately identifying themselves as 'political prisoners' the implication is that they recognize that America is a prison and their oppressor holds the key to their continued oppression, while the prisoner holds the key to his/her liberation.

It wasn't until several years later while collecting stories with the same narrative and context that I began to distinguish between a criminal and a political prisoner. As defined in the fiber of what is American, the embedded thought process is that to be black is the ultimate crime. In the words of Malcolm X, if you are black and born in America, you are in prison (1964). Thus, the criminalization process begins at birth for Black people engaged in the American experience.

Culture of White Supremacy /Societal Personality/White American Ego Complex

In *Black on Black Violence*, Wilson strips away the psychology of the cultural group of White people to reveal a collective, societal personality. The culture of white supremacy is constructed by those who identify themselves as white (Ani, 1994; Bradley, 1978; Fuller, 1980; Zeskind, 2009). They are the only group of people on the planet who long ago decided that their choice for cultural survival was the destruction of other ethnicities (Wright, 1984). How do we know this? Wilson recognizes that if you want to know a cultural group's psychology, look at their history (Wilson, 1990). For Wilson, a psycho-historical analysis of the collective European history reveals the following about the European cultural personality: (1) their colonization and rapacious exploitation of virtually all non-white peoples; (2) their scandalization and assassination of the character of Afrikan peoples; (3) their loosening of disease on vulnerable populations; (4) their development and use of weapons of mass destruction; and (5) their falsifying of the consciousness of the majority of the world (Wilson, 1990). This context is the cultural container for non-white people globally today. What does this mean for Black people today? Do they live in a society/civilization of someone else's mind or do they have the power to define their own cultural reality? The following data suggests that the power to define rests in the ability to define and re-conceptualize your own cultural and political worldview.

Methods

Participants

The three participants came from two-parent households. Their parents remained together during their entire marriage. By today's standards, they would be considered middle class, and upper-middle class. All of their parents were home and/or business owners. The participants were introduced to the criminal system by way of local police encounters before the age of 11; they were arrested or jailed by the age of 13. All began their prison sentences during their twenties for terms of 60, 20, and 30 years. All three were charged with robbery or theft which are considered economic crimes or crimes against property. Their incarceration took place during the 1960s-1980s. They have been under some form of penal management (incarceration, probation and/or juvenile detention) by the United States government for at least 40 years of their lives.

Procedures

The research began as an ethnographic study over a three-year period. The three participants were selected via various community re-entry grassroots events. Fieldwork with each of the respondents included their educational, community, family, and business activities. Field notes after a six-month period resulted in over 100 pages of observed participant activity. One-on-one interviews of (45) minutes to one hour were conducted over a six-month period with each participant resulting in ten hours of audio. Photographs were taken in the field to visually record their various familial, community, and organizational relationships. The first stage of the study was completed in conjunction with a class that took place over six months. The researcher and the participants presented the findings in a two-hour panel discussion.

Findings

This ethnographic analysis of the lived experience of incarcerated men that are reflective of the larger black collective revealed four themes: (1) functional invisibility, (2) prescribed roles, (3) layered identity, and (4) cultural displacement/replacement. These themes were generated from the content analysis.

Functional Invisibility

In *Black on Black Violence*, Amos Wilson (1990) highlights the Black criminal as inhabiting a space of functional invisibility. Wilson (1990) states that "In its peripheral, functional invisibility, the Afrikan American community contributes to the character, power, and self-concept of the dominant White American community" (Wilson, p.6). When does this process begin and what institutions within the systems of white supremacy advance this agenda? It is argued here that it is the institution of education that for a minimum of 12-15 years teaches the Black child the art of invisibility.

When asking the participants about their educational process, the following responses were given. Ahmir states:

> In going to school they didn't teach us anything about Afrikan American people and their contributions to establish America. If they taught us anything, it was we were always slaves, and as such a slave couldn't be nothing but be a slave, he couldn't do nothing but be the servant of a white person.

In addition, Omar comments:

> My mother would tell us that Jesus was white, but my father would tell us that Jesus was black as I am, and he was about my height, and he got the same kind of hair as I got. That is what I grew up hearing, but everywhere I would go, I never seen a picture of the black guy he talked about. I grew up with that kind of conflict, if the guy is black why they got him painted white. But my father couldn't get through, but in the books it was something different, white images, if it was in the book it gotta be true.

Very early the men were taught to be invisible while being offered a variety of prescribed roles to choose from in order to maintain the position of the oppressed and the position of the oppressor. As each of the men continued their journey of the oppressed, it was only later that they realized through self-knowledge that they were in fact supporting and reinforcing the system of oppression. They were emerged in the process of functional invisibility, identifying not with self, but with the negative roles (i.e., nigger, clown, buck, drug addict, negro, etc.) that are prescribed by the system of white supremacy and the very opposite of their human selves.

These different prescribed roles are what many Black males in America are living out in their daily lives and what they call 'identity.' It is only when one comes to recognize that the prescribed roles that they inhabit as their identity are indications of their identifying with the system of white supremacy that the misidentification process is revealed.

Prescribed Roles

This study defines prescribed roles as roles that are handed out by the system of white supremacy that maintain, support, or reinforce the system of white supremacy. These roles empower the system of white supremacy and disempower the Black community while ultimately constructing a cycle of self-genocide. Wilson (1990) further expounds on the societal influence and maintenance of social roles when he asserts:

> As long as Afrikan Americans perform according to the roles prescribed for them by the White American community ego complex; as long as they maintain their defined places, and form the background against which the preferred White American complex is projected; as long as they reasonably fit the self-serving stereotypes imposed on them by the White American complex, the Afrikan American community attains a functional invisibility,(*through socially prescribed roles*) a shadowy existence at the periphery consciousness of the White community. (1990, p. 6)

The oppressed choose one of these roles as a means of survival within the context of racism. In other words, this is how those who are oppressed navigate and deal with their oppressors. These roles, by necessity, are non-threatening and supportive of the agenda of the white power structure. The following statements that come from the direct lived experiences of some of the participants, illustrate how the participants internalized their prescribed roles. Omar asserts:

> Upon release from juvie, I really felt it didn't matter too much what I did, if they said you did it, you did it, if the white man said you did it, then you did it. But I found otherwise. I didn't see my family during the whole time I was locked up for those 11 months. When I was released I was almost 15.It really changed my whole mentality. I was a different person. I realized that for the first time that really stronger people will take advantage of you if you are weaker. From the time I was released from 15 on, I always carried a gun to protect myself.

Abdul states:

> Being thirteen, I saw the brother that was hustling. That was my attraction, my strength--the strength was the criminal. It said, no, you not going to treat me like this. America is a criminal society, so I'm a product of this society. I'm influenced by this society, because I learn from this society. Now even though we reach an age we know right from wrong, but now it becomes you make a choice of how you want to live your life. So I knew yes, it was wrong to take, but it didn't matter, because it didn't matter when they took from me, so I can take from them, so it didn't matter, so I became a product of that environment., I am shaped by that environment.

Ahmir provided more insight:

> One thing about the enslavement process, it was a socialization process. Everybody in a particular culture is socialized to a certain role. And these roles that you play in a particular culture speak to not only your identity, but the power you have. An enslaved person that is our identity. An enslaved person has certain characteristics, in other words you a slave.

While Omar elaborates:

> I went out, filled out applications, and tried to get a job, but they wouldn't give me a job, so this would be my job, becoming a criminal, that's how I handle it.

Some of these prescribed roles include but are not limited to: (1) the criminal, (2) the good negro, (3)the good nigger, (4) the star/entertainer, (5) the preacher, (6) the educated/mis-educated black, (7) the angry black woman, (8) the drug addict, (9) the welfare queen, and (10) the emasculated Black male (Banks, 2010). Being born into a criminal society, one would conclude that it would inevitably produce criminals. Criminality is an extension of white supremacy, while prescribed roles are mere reflections of the larger societal context or in Wilsonian terms the White American ego complex. The chosen roles that are adapted are only reflections of the society that produced them.

Layered Identity

For Black people in America, identity is dictated by the system of white supremacy/racism (Fuller, 1980). For these Afrikans, their identity far away from home changes and adjusts depending on the events in history, the various institutions of white supremacy, and the oppressor's agenda. When I began the initial interviews and asked the participants their names and how they would identify themselves, they gave an array of replies, such as "My *slave*/government name is David, Tom, Martin, my *prison* number is … and my *righteous* name is Omar, Abdul, Ahmir". Furthermore, they personally identified as "nigger" and political prisoners. From these descriptions, one can see that their identities are attached to institutions, events, and history itself. This is how they are representing themselves.

Interestingly, the men identify themselves as niggers. In their raw honesty and truth I had to admit I was a 'nigger.' What type of nigger was I? Was I the house nigger, field nigger, the white man's nigger, post-racial nigger, good nigger, republican nigger, democratic nigger, middle-class nigger, upper middle-class nigger, rich nigger, Christian nigger, American nigger, Afrikan nigger, Afrikan American nigger, or just a black nigger? I came to the realization that I was a house nigger wanting to be in their house, to be near them, to be approved and accepted by them. I had met three men who articulated to me that I was just another good nigger. The daughter of some field nigger from long ago trying to get off of the plantation called the system of white supremacy. *Are you still a nigger?* If so, which one are you? Once we are able to identify ourselves in historical context, we are now ready for a new education and return to blackness that transforms our previous thinking and creates a critical consciousness (Wilson, 1998; Fuller, 2010) the participants' responses reflect the beginning stages in the process of deconstructing and constructing a different knowledge of self. This process is evident in the following comments. Omar states:

> After being sent to prison, I went about trying to get information, trying to empower myself. God had a plan for me, and I had to discover what that plan was. I began to see some of us are really lost; really didn't consider myself lost, but I was.

When I asked Omar how did you come out of prison? He commented "I studied my way out." Similarly Abdul and Ahmir both contend that a new way of thinking critical to their transformation emerged. Abdul asserts:

> In order for me to change who I was, I had to change the way I thought, had to change the books I read, really the company I kept, so start with the books. So I started ordering books like Dr. Na'im Akbar, Elijah Muhammad. I educated myself, read the Koran, Dr. Welsing, Stokley Carmichael. The prison became my womb, you enter a spiritual rebirth. I was being born again.

Ahmir also reflects:

> The mind if given time will put things together, will put a story together about what happened yesterday, the day before and the day before, and if you allow it, it will reveal who you really are…if you haven't pushed down to deep, repress who you really are, and even then you can still bring that person up.

It is only when the Afrikan begins to honestly look at the reality of the Afrikan experience in America that he/she can begin the dynamic delayering process of constructing identity. The deconstruction of falsified thoughts and a reconstruction of original cultural thoughts assist in the return to one's authentic cultural self.

Cultural Dis-placement/Re-placement

In *Falsification of Afrikan Consciousness*, Wilson speaks to the sphere of European space and time and how as Afrikans our time is warped. European time propels the Afrikan forward by thousands of years. Currently, the Afrikan interacts within a framework of the last 500 years. Thus, time for the Afrikan within the European context is distorted. The current slave narratives continue to provide reenactments of a very small time scale on a plantation that lives off the lives of the oppressed. Mistakenly, the Afrikan in America begins their past with the Middle Passage/Maafa/Holocaust and goes forward into history as his-story. The contemporary idea of black history being framed within a month keeps people who identify as Black locked up in their present, not knowing their future, because they are unable to move forward from their past. Ultimately, the key to shaping identity is knowing when to shift positions on the landscape of time. This is what the men did. They began a process of self-transformation; they returned to their past, beyond 500 years, dealt with their present, reinterpreted it, and moved into their future, thus recreating their reality. This is the true educational process at work, one of self-knowledge. Ahmir eloquently depicts the above statement:

It is important to feed the mind with authentic culture, authentic knowledge. Afrikan people are taught false information from day one. One must begin to seek authentic information, authentic knowledge about self in kind. Only three things are important in life. Written on all the ancient Egyptian temples is 'know thyself.' And this is the number one principle the education system is supposed to teach, but it doesn't. Number two; know your authentic culture, how you are supposed to live, to conduct yourself as an individual and as a people, that's what community is about; and three, knowledge about your creator.

The other participants speak to the quest for truth in seeking the spiritual self. For example, Abdul states:

You can't isolate the truth; you can't place the truth in a particular place. You see truth transcends any place; truth is wherever you dwell. Truth can't be limited to time, place, or space; it transcends all of that. Truth is very clear from falsehood.

Similarly, Abdul opines:

There I came in touch with my own humanity. Prison just like slowed me down enough so that I can really see myself, my own self-image.

These kinds of quotes informed me about the transformation process that occurred with these men and how they regained their humanity. They transcended the system of white supremacy ultimately leading to their own liberation. They were released on time, their time. They took it; they dictated their space and time by collapsing the past, present, and future as their daily social packaging. Their identity now reflected no division of the human timeline. They became the now. History was now. History is now.

Upon release from prison each of the participants went on to pursue higher education. One obtained a doctorate degree and another is currently a doctoral student. They all went on to found and lead community organizations that are engaged in the process of the reawakening of the Afrikan mind. Two are currently writing books from a psychological approach focused on people of Afrikan descent within the American context. Another is a weekly radio show host discussing various issues within the black community. The researcher and the participants continue to do panel discussions before various organizations and institutions as I continue the process of returning to my Blackness.

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