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December 2006 Newsletter

American Demands, African Treasures, Mixed Possibilities

By Daniel McNeil

Abstract: In the 1990s, many Americans sought to cast themselves as heroic defenders of the liberal arts by condemning Afrocentricity. This paper reveals how many such profiteers and schemers were invested in Eurocentricity, but it also critiques Molefi Asante – the man who coined the phrase “Afrocentricity” – and points out his reliance on AfroAmericentric norms.

The usual response to a racist attack has been for the victim to reply in kind against the race of his opponent – not to question the dogma of racism (Gosset 410).

In *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism*, Lewis Gordon devised an intriguing exchange between a white writer and a Black writer. In the dialogue the white writer gets rather offended that he is “shut out” by Black writers who choose to write to Black people, letting Gordon’s Black writer respond with an eloquent version of “kiss my ass.”

Since white writers have more power in the dissemination and presentation of knowledge, I wonder why you even *bother* with me? Wouldn’t your self-righteousness be more productive elsewhere? You remind me of those folks who waste their time attacking afrocentricity – as if afrocentricity seriously has the political organizing elements of *Wretched of the Earth* or *Black Jacobins* (120).

Gordon’s Black writer might have had a similar response to Henry Louis Gates Jr. – America’s “most esteemed black scholar” according to journalists in the mainstream media (Hitchens) – who talked about planning a series of debates with Molefi Asante, the head of Temple University’s Afrocentric camp. Yet critiques of Afrocentricity have not only come from African Americans worried about (self-) segregation, as Gates Jr. is, or from white scholars of ancient

cultures tired of students asking them if Cleopatra was Black. Paul Gilroy, a Black British intellectual, engaged with Afrocentricity in order to locate its Americo-centrism and describe a reactionary Other that reinforced his commitment to “planetary humanism.” According to Gilroy, Afrocentricity relies on “a discourse of racial particularity that does not translate very easily to other circumstances and . . . expresses a distinctively American understanding of ethnicity, kinship and cultural difference” (“Between”). And, although Asante has denounced Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* as “mulatto consciousness” parading as “African consciousness” (*Afrocentric Idea* 178; “Afrocentricity”), such ad hominem attacks only work to justify Gilroy’s suspicion of the “dualistic thinking that risks attempting to reduce the world to a set of theoretical categories and is such a recurrent feature of the drive towards simplicity which so often unravels both anti-racism and internationalism” (“Nationalism” 68). While sharing Gilroy’s desire to challenge Asante’s ruthless use of binary oppositions, this paper also heeds the advice of Gordon’s Black writer and argues that many critics of Afrocentricity ignored Fanon’s commitment to honest intellectual work when they acted like profiteers and schemers during the early days of state-sanctioned multiculturalism in the United States during the early 1990s.¹

Several Afrocentric theorists have mastered positivist European science and rhetoric in Western universities, much like the native intellectuals stuck in the first stages of the schema Fanon outlined in *The Wretched of the Earth* (176). They also offer valuable advice to Eurocentric scholars that feel entitled to consider Africa an “Unknown land” unless it had relevance to Europe (Bugner 9), and discuss “true Negroid” types (Vercoutter 33). Dismissing the notion of a “pure Negro type” as an invention of the white imagination (*Painful* 39), Asante draws upon the one-drop thesis in the United States to argue, “the ancient Egyptians had black

skin, *whatever the meaning of that characteristic then or now; the fact remains the same*”

(emphasis added; *ibid.* 63). Even the more cautious Yurco found it necessary to point out, “some modern African-Americans, particularly those with mixed ancestry, will find that they look like some ancient (and modern) Egyptians.”

Rather than welcome attempts to develop and extend their field, Eurocentric writers considered it their “mission” to teach Afrocentrists about “real” history. In the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, letter writers opine,

The quaint belief that the ancient Egyptians were black is held only by some American blacks, it is not held by anyone who looks at the evidence. People who continue to believe that the Egyptians were black do so for emotional reasons, because they need a belief in a black superpower nation from Africa for reasons of ego and self-esteem (Long).

Elsewhere, Eurocentric writers relied on colonial binaries in order to attack “Afrocentrism” for “operating in an irrational, social and popular sphere, not a rational, scholarly or scientific one” (Owomoyela 173). Such critics often claimed to be worried about “excessive relativism” offering Afrocentrists an excuse to teach “myth as history,” condemning “ultra-liberal” policies that supposedly allow “extremist” opponents of freedom to flourish. In between the Cold War against Communism and the “clash of civilizations” against fundamentalist Islam, it seems that Afrocentrists became a useful target for Eurocentric writers hoping to warn their troops about enemies of individual freedom capitalizing on political correctness. To be sure, self-proclaimed defenders of the liberal arts like Mary Lefkowitz, a Professor at Wellesley and prominent critic of Afrocentricity, are celebrated in anonymous reviews at amazon.com because they supposedly offered “the truth . . . seriously truly researched works, not work of politics.” Feeding such idol worship, Lefkowitz even announced that she was inspired by an “outrageous” Afrocentric lecture to “speak out,” because “they” were given the opportunity to pollute university campuses with

talks that seemed “more like a political rally than an academic event.”² Just as Lefkowitz’s *Not Out of Africa* emerged in response to the battle for Black Studies programs at Wellesley, and the demands of the Task force in anti-racism calling for visible minority faculty to be hired there, so Arthur Schlesinger Jr. portrayed himself as an honest intellectual besieged by the immense forces of political correctness in *The Disuniting of America*. Yet Schlesinger received substantial support from the Whittle Corporation, “a purportedly education-orientated business that started Channel One . . . the Time-Warner conglomerate held a financial interest in Channel One, and that company’s *Time* magazine gave extensive publicity to Schlesinger’s book [*The Disuniting of America*], including a cover story in the July 8, 1991, issue that featured an excerpt from it” (Lipsitz 133). Copies of Schlesinger’s book were also delivered free of charge to various schools across America, so that students could learn, “history can give a sense of national identity . . . we believe *our* own [values] are better for us” (emphasis added; 137). If Schlesinger wanted to be honest with his readers he could at least note that European cultures offer a great deal in the way of relativism. Moreover, when Schlesinger argues, “to deny the essentially European origins of American culture is to falsify history,” he ignored the influence of Africa on American culture (lest we forget jazz and hip-hop), and provided a clear example of benign white liberals upset at Black demands and “disruptive” forces. In stating his view that Western societies have internal mechanisms for change (129), Schlesinger also omits to mention that *the* Western world is shaped by African cultures, and political change emerges through Black agency, not just the generosity of “fair minded” whites. As Asante notes, “to frame an argument in the context of the generous hearted doing something for Africans is to miss the point” (*Painful* 19); Black intellectuals such as W.E.B Du Bois unveiled their ability to live with double consciousness – as

Africans and Americans – and asserted the modernity of “New Negroes” at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness has not only been ignored by Schlesinger and other American historians with “gilt-edged liberal credentials” (Granatstein 89-91);³ contemporary journalists have also overlooked the “political” research of Du Bois in order to venerate Reisner, the Harvard professor and “father” of Nubiology. On the one hand, journalistic writers such as Aubin talk about Reisner’s “unconscious racism” and ignore his conscious belief in white superiority,⁴ in order to salvage his “greatness” (265). On the other hand, key Nubiologists such as Kendall erroneously claim that Reisner simply reflects “his time,” dismissing the work of Du Bois – the first African American to obtain a PhD from Harvard – as well as “New Negroes” such as J.A Rogers, an autodidact who worked to uncover a truthful account of Africa’s past during Reisner’s lifetime. Moreover, while Kendall minimizes Reisner’s premises in favour of his lavish research, he describes contemporary Afrocentrists as “ideological,” focusing on the premises and “black racism” of individuals such as Asante rather than their mastery of communication studies and linguistics.

Aside from attacking Asante’s insistence on the Nubian origins of Egyptian civilization, Nubiologists and Egyptologists have questioned Bruce Williams’s discovery of Nubian “royal” tombs that predate Pharaonic ones. Although Williams cautiously stated Nubian “participation” in the evolution of Pharaonic civilization (21), venerated Egyptologists such as Adams have dismissed Williams as an “outlaw.” To do so, Adams names “expert” supporters who sanctioned and helped to shape his paper, sought legitimation from a major professional organization (the American Anthropological Association), and used the “convincing I” rhetorical technique – repeating “I know” twice in one sentence (186). He also relies on an argument from silence and

found himself wondering why, “if there was an A-group monarchy, there was never any previous indication of it . . . in the best-known archaeological region in the world” (189)? Stanley Burstein provides a useful answer to Adams’s question, acknowledging that “lower (Northern) Nubia has become archaeologically the most thoroughly explored region of Africa,” but reminds us that the “potential for significant discoveries remains great . . . illustrated by finds such as that of a first century C.E. royal palace at Wad ben Naqa, a series of four processional shrines at Meroe, and the identification of remains of the sculptural program of the temple of Amon at Napata and the true character of the pinnacle of Gebel Barkal” (143). Moreover, Bruce Trigger notes the opposition to research in Islamic Sudan (Upper or Southern Nubia) where the ancient past belongs to *jahilia*, the age of ignorance before the Prophet (345). One can only speculate that Adams felt impelled to write in such a manner because he feared the outcome of reports about ancient Nubian “monarchies” in the popular press following a 1979 *New York Times* article (Rensberger). Yet accounts in a 1997 issue of *Time* magazine would assert Nubia’s synthesis of “overlapping civilizations – influenced by Africa, Arabia and the Sahara as well as by Egypt” (Macleod) – in contrast to Asante’s explicit demands for Nubia and Egypt to be seen solely as African or Black.

Asante’s characterization of “fluid cultures” as attempts “to forget culture,” along with his dismissal of the cultural outputs of Black and white fusions as “watered-down” productions (*Afrocentric Idea* 65, 207), have obviously invited critical attention. Although Asante does not wish to “deny a home” to people of mixed racial descent, he remains vehemently opposed to those who speak from more than one “spatial origin” – without a single base those who embark upon cultural exchanges are “just floating in the air” (ibid. 13). Considering it a negative thing to fly and look down on deep-rooted tribalism and those that insist on following (one set of)

ancestors, Asante also contends, “one must choose to speak from one place, as one can only speak from one place at a time” and that place is “centered” (*Painful* 78). Thus, in order to extend our analysis, we must also note the ways in which an investment in a Black/white binary has influenced Afrocentric views on Mesopotamian civilization.

Asante has adamantly dismissed the idea that Mesopotamia could be the cradle of civilization and argued that the Mesopotamians didn’t influence the ancient Hebrew, Greek and Ethiopian people as much as the Egyptians (*Painful* 20). As a result, it is clear that Asante has used Bernal’s well-known work, *Black Athena: the Afroasiatic Roots of Greek Civilization*, to show Egyptian influence on Greece, rather than draw links to Asiatic groups. Even when Asante and other Afrocentric writers have admitted the influence of Mesopotamia on other regions, they take great pains to show “at least some part of the indigenous inhabitants of Mesopotamia and India were blacks who originated in Africa, and that their culture developed due to the diffusion of African-Egyptian cultural traits to these lands” (Shavit 46-47). In other words, Asante’s belief that the world of America, “is black and white . . . two colors, two origins, two destinies” (“Racism” 127), a place where one is “forced to choose because the cultures are so vastly different in their projects and in their histories” (“Quick Reading”), shadows Afro(Americo)centric attempts to place other civilizations into Black or white camps. So, let us conclude by returning to the sound bites about Blackness and whiteness offered to an American public by academics such as Asante and Gates Jr.

Television history, employed by Gates in his PBS documentary, *Wonders of the Ancient World*, “while unquestionably powerful . . . is of necessity superficial . . . programmes have to be fast-moving if they are to retain their viewers” (Kershaw 16). Producers often assume that their history programs require a respected narrator and perhaps a charismatic interviewer, as

“problems of interpretation tend to muddy the waters, and to leave the viewer confused, baffled or at least unable to decide which of variant interpretations is the most valid” (ibid.). According to cultural critic John Fiske, lumpers (broad synthesizers favoured by lay opinion) are preferred to splitters (narrow specialists favoured by professionals) because television history, like soap opera and sport, should be open and full of contradictions so that it invites “viewer engagement, disagreement, and thus popular productivity” (191). Perhaps ignoring the need to challenge the continuing deference to professors, such as Reisner, who considered Black Africa to be without history, Fiske also thought that televised history “must not preach *or teach*” (emphasis added; ibid. 196). Yet his comments remain important if curators and “public intellectuals” are to be encouraged to present themselves as possessors of technical competence whose function is to assist subordinate groups to use elite resources in order to make authored statements within the public sphere (Bennett 104). In this fashion, one can applaud Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s attempts to use his position as director of the Du Bois institute at Harvard to encourage African Americans to enter Ivy League universities, even if one doesn’t support his desire to question Blacks of mixed parentage and/or Caribbean descent that “beat out” Black indigenous middle-class kids on the front page of *The New York Times* (Rimer and Anderson).

While noting Gate’s problematic use of the media, Asante’s own investment in authoritarian Afro(Americo)centricity – particularly his opposition to “the overextended concept of freedom of the press” (“Communicative Person” 25) – means that he finds it difficult to challenge Gates from a humanist position. Various writers have been struck by the “cultural elitism which so often seems to mingle uneasily with [Afrocentric] intellectual populism” in Asante’s publishing house, print journal and internet publication (Howe 105).⁵ Just as Gilroy glibly accepted the potential benefits of Afrocentricity in fighting crack cocaine (*Black Atlantic*

188), intellectuals such as W. Moses consider Afrocentricity (especially when tied to Egyptocentricity⁶) a somewhat extravagant folk tradition even if it serves a purpose in fighting a “contemporary tabloid culture, which is obsessed with rape, murder ... providing [a] cultural anchor in society where the bizarre is becoming normal” (43, 38). Other writers interested in humanism have ridiculed an emphasis on “pageants, pyramids and princes” used to inspire discipline in an Afrocentric flock, drawing on Dudley Randall’s poem *Ancestors*.

Why are our ancestors
always kings and princes
and never the common people?
Was the Old Country a democracy
where every man was a king?
Or did the slave-catchers
steal only the aristocrats
and leave the field hands
laborers
street cleaners
garbage collectors
dish washers
cooks
and maids
behind?
My own ancestor
(research reveals)
was a swineherd
who tended the pigs
in the Royal Pigstye
and slept in the mud
among the hogs.
Yet I’m as proud of him
as of any king or prince
dreamed up in fantasies
of bygone glory

In addition, many other researchers have documented communal systems in West Africa, the more egalitarian systems in Native American reserves, or labour unions in the United States, which continue to influence the political philosophies of African Americans (Marable). For such planetary humanists, there is little excuse for Afrocentric work that provides an extremely

conservative middle-class approach to Black education, and seems to minimize slave labor, class hierarchies, and women's oppression in order to inspire pride (Marable 18). So, since we began by noting the attempts to market debates between men like Gates Jr. and Asante, which farcically mimicked the battles between Biggie and Tupac for Hip Hop supremacy in the 1990s, it seems appropriate to end by unveiling the impact of Afro(Americo)centricity on rap artists such as Nas. To herald a twenty-first century Nas announces,

Be, be, 'fore we came to this country
We were kings and queens, never porch monkeys
It was empires in Africa called Kush
Timbuktu, where every race came to get books
To learn from black teachers who taught Greeks and Romans
Asian Arabs and gave them gold
When Gold was converted to money it all changed
Money then became empowerment for Europeans
The Persian military invaded
They learned about the gold, the teachings and everything sacred
Africa was almost robbed naked
Slavery was money, so they began making slave ships
Egypt was the place that Alexander the Great went
He was so shocked at the mountains with black faces
Shot up they nose to impose what basically
Still goes on today, you see?
If the truth is told, the youth can grow
They learn to survive until they gain control
Nobody says you have to be gangstas, hoes
Read more learn more, change the globe
Ghetto children, do your thing
Hold your head up, little man, you're a king
Young princess when you get your wedding ring
Your man is saying "She's my queen"

One can obviously point out various problems in "black teachers" like Nas or Asante who urge African American youth to achieve by venerating African monarchs, especially since Fanon warned us about a native middle-class that promoted heroes to manage the people and celebrated African civilizations without upsetting colonial binaries (158, 168). To be sure, Fanon was invested in heteronormative notions of national liberation, and may not be the best source for

individuals hoping to critique Asante's condemnation of gays and lesbians that supposedly place their "own physical needs above the teachings of national consciousness We can no longer allow our social lives to be controlled by European decadence. The time has come for us to redeem our manhood through planned Afrocentric action" (*Afrocentricity* 65). Nonetheless, there remains a clear danger that Black youth – not just Eurocentric critics – focus on Asante's superficial form Afro(Americo)centricity rather than Fanon's substantial critique of European colonization and the pitfalls of national consciousness.

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Notes

1. The reference to profiteers and schemers is taken from *Wretched of the Earth*, and Fanon's appreciation for honest intellectuals that refuse to be swindled in the early days of independence (142).
2. Ann Macy Roth also joins the cause of Lefkowitz, assuming that professional Egyptologists must "correct and improve the argumentation of Afrocentric scholarship . . . we all ought to help train these scholars" (emphasis mine), especially when Afrocentrists have an "increasing degree of popular acceptance" and mislead their "large audience."
3. To give one example of American historians displaying an "aggressive indifference" to Du Bois, no member of a leading American historical association named Du Bois or his research when asked to name a historian or historical works dealing with the American South (Roediger 8).
4. Reisner thought that Nubians were a "Negroid Egyptian mixture fused together on a desert fiver bank too far away and too poor to attract a stronger and better race" (Trigger).
5. Aside from *Asante Imprint Books*, Molefi Asante edits *The Journal of Black Studies* and hosts <http://www.asante.net>.
6. "To concentrate on cultures that are derived from Egypt, without discussing Egypt would be like trying to shoot the rocket without fuel" (Asante, *Painful* 85).

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