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## *Comment on Presidential Address*

### **Left at the Post: One Take on Blacks and Postmodernism**

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**I**f there is one thing that is not universal, it is the enjoyment of the material benefits of modernism. The postmodernists tend to confuse materialism (which is rampant) with material well-being (which is not). The liberating riches of postindustrial development have not entirely found their way into pockets of poverty in Anacostia, Bedford-Stuyvesant, or South Central Los Angeles. People in such enclaves are still struggling to capture a piece of modernity. If we identified with them instead of reflecting on reflecting, we would be reflecting on what can be done to help poor people lead safer and more secure lives.

Where you start really matters when it comes to takes on postmodernism. I learned much from Joel Handler's appraisal of the limits of postmodern scholarship and am largely persuaded by his conclusions. Yet my assessment of his address reflects my position as a black scholar operating in the particular material and political context of the white academy. Moreover, the lessons I draw from Handler's teaching pertain to my desire to be a participant in black public life.

Joel Handler devotes a significant portion of his address to discussing two sets of white-authored stories of black protest. The first set of stories, written in the 1970s, portrays blacks engaged in concerted public opposition to the regime of white supremacy, while the second set, written between 1990 and 1992, recounts the efforts of isolated blacks who achieve private victories against bureaucracies they do not hope to change. Handler prefers the first set to the second and speculates about the causes of the disparities. My appraisal of these stories is somewhat different.

In my view, blacks have never gotten as much credit as they deserve for systematically attacking white supremacy. Both

black and white scholars have failed to recognize the vibrant cultural and institutional connections that exist among black people and support myriad forms of resistance, large and small. If contemporary white scholars are relegated to glorifying black mini-rebellions, it may be that, as whites, they can no longer claim to be on top of or even privy to what blacks are doing in their own communities.

For blacks, the struggle has long been one of creating viable communities in which the institutions are stronger than the ideologies that denigrate them. To this end, black people of all classes are actively engaged in the development of a public sphere that puts blacks at the center of their universe. Whites either do not know what we are doing there or do not like what they see. In any event, blacks for our part are not nearly as concerned about what whites like and do not like as we once were. We are finding ways to get around meddlesome whites who try to tell us how to talk and interact with each other.

Postmodernism represents a choice for the participants in the black public sphere, one more rejected than embraced. Blacks have to be suspicious of any narrative that denies the existence of "Grand Narratives," given that white supremacy still constrains the lives of most of us. Similarly, any call for the recognition of multiple subjectivities cannot be taken seriously when blacks' subject status is still being undermined by stories that deny our collective struggles. However passé essentialism may seem to the postmodernists, it is increasing among blacks. There is a renewed interest in nationalism, but possibly as a reflection of the influence of postmodernism, it is not weighed down or conditioned with demands that everyone follow one overriding credo. Blacks do not seem to be searching for a single macro-ideology. The calls for community, commitment, and caring are fluid and the possible responses, many. Greater emphasis is placed on creativity in performing than in philosophizing. By performance I refer to actions by which blacks collectively create and recreate themselves in the pursuit of a vision of what a good life for all blacks would be like (Diawara 1992:7).

Consistent with postmodernism, there is lots of nostalgia. "X"s are everywhere and not just because Spike Lee is promoting a movie. But Malcolm X is not Marilyn Monroe; black nostalgia has a political purpose born of material need. The resort to historical figures is a response to the dominant society's invocation of black exceptionalism to create and contain black heroines and heroes of its choosing (Austin 1992:1772). We do not need any more bogus icons.

There are other things happening in the black public sphere that are not so good. Some of the blame for this can be laid at the feet of academics who have given themselves over to

the immaterial disabling reflectivity Handler identifies with postmodernism. First and foremost, there is no economic game plan for poor black communities. Both the antiwhite vitriolics of the strident Afrocentrists and the equal-share begging of the integrationists are beside the point. We particularly need a plan because the absence of material hope has produced a social and moral vacuum that is swallowing up our young. At the same time, however, too many black elites are solidifying their own positions by decrying the moral degeneracy of the black urban poor without painting a fair and realistic picture of their suffocating life chances.

Joel Handler's concluding remarks have especial significance for black academics. In the *Boston Review* Eugene Rivers (1992), pastor of a Pentecostal congregation, has issued an indictment stronger than Handler's directed at black intellectuals of the postmodern era who shirk "the responsibility [of] tell[ing] the truth about the condition of the black poor" (Rivers 1992:3). Rivers speaks from a perspective that is deepened by his immersion in a community of black Christians committed to serving and supporting poor struggling blacks in Dorchester, Massachusetts. According to Rivers, the crisis of moral and cultural authority affecting the least well-off blacks, who are facing economic obsolescence, is also taking its toll on black elites:

Our blind pursuit of integration has come at the expense of institutional and political autonomy. Because of that loss of autonomy, we are entangled in a web of inherited and unexamined ideological and political assumptions. . . . Living on borrowed assumptions, we now face moral and cultural obsolescence. In a tragically Proverbial sense, we are now elites bereft of vision. (P. 4).

Rivers compares "the elite intellectuals who prostitute themselves while contributing to a moral and ideological framework indispensable to the justification of inequality" with young drug dealers; both groups share the same moral decay, but the elites lack the dealers' candor. Rivers sees coming from the elites "no emerging, constructive theory, no nascent political program, no intimations of a plan of action. Just piles of denunciation of all conceivable 'isms' and 'phobias.'" Rivers's charge echoes a charge Harvard politics professor Martin Kilson has repeatedly issued: The "new class of [black] intellectuals needs to translate its discourse, whether conservative or radical, into a coherent organizational program with tangible benefits for ordinary people" (ibid.).

I am not in a position to blame postmodernism for black intellectuals' myopic failures to see connections among poor blacks or for their evasion of the systemic and macroeconomic sources of black oppression. But it does seem to me that they need to take a metaphorical journey back beyond the

postmodern and the modern to the premodern. They need to go “home” every once in awhile. “Home” is where the exclusion of blacks from the economic mainstream is most deeply felt and most graphically illustrated. “Home” is the situs of institutions that deal most effectively with poor blacks’ material problems. It is in the communities that black activism begins, and it is there that economic development must be seeded. I can understand that white postmodernists might be unable to make the trip in light of the great racial gulf that separates them from ordinary black people. But what excuses do black academics possibly have?

## References

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- Diawara, Manthia (1992) “Black Studies, Cultural Studies: Performative Acts,” *Afterimage*, p. 6 (Oct.).
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