

In retheorizing black subjectivity we have to also revise our understanding of the conditions that are needed for black folks to join together in a politics of solidarity that can effectively oppose white supremacy. Breaking with essentialist thinking that insists all black folks inherently realize that we have something positive to gain by resisting white supremacy allows us to collectively acknowledge that radical politicization is a process—that revolutionary black thinkers and activists are made, not born. Progressive education for critical consciousness then is automatically understood to be necessary to any construction of radical black subjectivity. Whether the issue is construction of self and identity or radical politicization, African-American subjectivity is always in process. Fluidity means that our black identities are constantly changing as we respond to circumstances in our families and communities of origin, and as we interact with a larger world. Only by privileging the reality of that changing black identity will we be able to engage a prophetic discourse about subjectivity that will be liberatory and transformative.

MOVING FROM PAIN TO POWER

BLACK SELF-DETERMINATION

Revolutionary black liberation struggle in the United States was undermined by outmoded patriarchal emphasis on nationhood and masculine rule, the absence of a strategy for coalition building that would keep a place for non-black allies in struggle, and the lack of sustained programs for education for critical consciousness that would continually engage black folks of all classes in a process of radical politicization. These weaknesses made it easy for racial integration to bring with it passive absorption of capitalist values and internalized racism. In the conclusion to *Night Vision: Illuminating War and Class on the Neo-Colonial Terrain* the pseudonymous authors make this insightful point: “The white ruling class wants Black capitalist government; it promotes, pays for and sponsors Black capitalist government. No matter what anyone’s hopes were, in fact today such Black government equals Black Genocide. . . . Just as imperialism not only wants to arm millions of Afrikan men indiscriminately and quickly as possible, but it’s offering them a taste of everything ‘white’ (even white women). This runs counter to all

the rules of colonialism because it isn't colonialism. It's neo-colonialism, the new kid on the block." Until radical black leaders offer strategies for black liberation that address more fully our current political situation there is little hope that we can respond in a meaningful way to the crises in African-American life.

Racial integration alone did not undermine the struggle for black liberation. It was diffused by internal weakness as well as the willingness on the part of white privileged classes to grant some black folks entry into mainstream capitalist power. Since sixties movement for black liberation emphasized a critique of capitalism, the need for black folks to maintain an ethic of communalism that would preserve, promote, and sustain an oppositional worldview and culture, it was important to the existing white power elite to destroy, corrupt, and co-opt radical black leadership. Assassinating black leaders, incarcerating others, infiltrating and undermining radical black organizations, were ways the dominant culture repressed militant black movement for racial justice. As more and more black folks entered predominantly white universities, the best and brightest in many cases never considering predominantly black institutions because the economic support available at white institutions was so much greater, the setting was ripe for neo-colonial co-optation of black minds. Today, a large percentage of the most radicalized black critical thinkers attend and/or teach at predominantly white institutions. Among professors those of us who are considered "stars" are rewarded with forms of work release (teaching fewer classes, assistants, time off) and huge salaries. Since many of us are not dedicated to teaching, no large body of students of any race has the advantage of studying with us and developing a more revolutionary mindset. The organized speaker circuit offers big bucks so that the

time and energy some of us might have once spent educating for critical consciousness in non-privileged and non-elite settings is usurped. We are as tempted as any other group of people by the promise of fame and unprecedented material reward. By speaking of the myriad ways in which insurgent black intellectuals are seduced and tempted to act in complicity with the very structures of domination we critique, my intention is not to be accusatory but to speak a word of caution—and while so doing, call for a renewed commitment to critical vigilance.

If insurgent black intellectuals and/or critical thinkers abandon education for critical consciousness that extends beyond the academy, we are in complicity with those corrupt forces that are creating a despairing environment where hopelessness and rage are the order of the day. It is this social context that allows conservative, narrow black nationalism to flourish. Galvanizing the energy of the masses easily becomes the turf of opportunistic nationalist conservative leaders who exploit the intense longing folks have for strategies that will enable them to respond to overwhelming feelings of economic and spiritual crisis. It is not a meaningful intervention for insurgent black thinkers to make fancy critiques of narrow nationalism if those discussions are not linked with strategies for progressive social change. Most black folks are not inherently more inclined to listen to and support conservative nationalist leaders. These are the individuals who are seductively courting that constituency. This will never change if progressive folks do not strive to speak to a wider, more inclusive black audience.

Many progressive black critical thinkers have abandoned plain speaking and adopted more abstract jargon. Like many of their white academic counterparts, they often regard folks like me, who continue to speak simply and/or integrate ver-

nacular styles into our writing and speaking, as lacking intellectual sophistication. This is especially the case when the issue is political terminology. Phrases like “black liberation struggle” and “black self-determination” may appear frequently in the literature and speeches of conservative black nationalists but are rarely present in the work of progressive black thinkers. Often these black folks, like their more conservative and liberal counterparts, are unwilling to use these terms because many white peers and colleagues respond negatively to them since they specifically address political solidarity among black people. Terms like “black liberation struggle” and “black self-determination” still accurately address the collective needs of black people. “Black liberation struggle” is a phrase that reminds us that white supremacy continues to overdetermine and shape the lives of most black folks, maintaining and perpetuating exploitative and oppressive forms of institutionalized racism that must be resisted if we are to collectively have any agency in relation to our lives. Despite class difference all black people are the targets, to greater or lesser degrees, of some form of racist assault. The less privilege an individual black person has the more likely he or she will bear the brunt of racist exploitation and oppression. “Black self-determination” is a useful term because it registers the acknowledgment that efforts to empower diverse black communities must do more than critique and challenge racism and white supremacy. They must also address ways African Americans, across class, can create radical liberatory subjectivity even as we continue to live within a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society. We cannot wait for an end to racist domination to create the conditions under which we live lives of sustained well-being.

Black self-determination is that process by which we learn to radicalize our thinking and habits of being in ways that

enhance the quality of our lives despite racist domination. It can become a reality for everyone only as we construct liberatory visions of social change that concretely empower us in our everyday lives. For example, there is no reason classes that teach literacy and/or critical thinking in conjunction with discussions about the quality of life should not be taking place at localized settings (housing projects, churches, etc.), reading groups, consciousness-raising groups, etc. These programs rarely happen because of the extent to which most black folks across class are embracing a vision of life that sees well-being as connected only to material possessions. Even though a large majority of African Americans live in poverty or situations of economic stress and deprivation, we are all socialized by television to identify with the values and attitudes of the bourgeois and ruling classes. When underprivileged black folks who are denied access to material success internalize this mindset, it makes their lives harder, more painful. It creates a gap between the concrete circumstances of their lives and their aspirations. Although they live in various states of need and deprivation, their dreams of success are often dominated by longings to be rich, to live in a constant state of material luxury. When these longings are coupled with other attitudes and values of white privileged classes absorbed from mass media, they are often unable to realistically draw on the skills and resources they possess that would enable them to concretely change their lives. Many of these folks easily become imprisoned by fantasies of the good life that make such a life synonymous with material extravagance. Addiction to such fantasies, to an ethic of hedonistic consumerism and the longing to project material success, leads to a mindset where criminal activity that will enable one to attain these goals is not seen as morally or ethically wrong. Television teaches that the white ruling

elites have attained their material success and power by abandoning ethical and moral concerns for human life and by embracing dishonesty, treachery, and the will to exploit everyone. These are the values many materially disadvantaged people emulate because they believe adopting them will enable them to transform their lives.

If television continues to be the primary pedagogical presence in black life, particularly in the lives of the working poor and destitute, our collective capacity to radicalize consciousness and to organize meaningful resistance struggle will be continually undermined. Black leaders who can galvanize energy to critique and attempt to suppress gangsta rap could be serving diverse black communities more if they were engaged in a critique of the role mass media play in black life—particularly television. They could be using their public power to create literacy programs and promote education for critical consciousness, while urging all African Americans, in conjunction with our allies in struggle, to turn off television sets, to demand programming that is useful for our lives, and to critically resist representations that undermine our capacity to be self-determining. These issues are rarely addressed by accepted black leaders because they do not appeal to mainstream culture. The crisis in black leadership in the United States is that there are so few progressive revolutionary black political thinkers who are accorded attention. Rather than our leaders emerging organically from various struggles where they represent the needs of black constituencies, they are more and more chosen by white folks. Even prominent people in conservative black separatist organizations gain their mass appeal because they are brought to our attention by white mass media and given access to huge audiences. Obviously white folks are not in any way threatened by their anti-white sentiments. Instead they realize that

if masses of black people follow conservative black fascists who are really as pro-capitalist and pro-domination as their white counterparts, African Americans are doomed. Let's face it! For example, the big difference between Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan is that one is a revolutionary and one is a fascist, one is anti-capitalist, critical of imperialism, the other embraces capitalism and imperialism. Now, should it come as any surprise which of these figures white mass media would support? Nothing is more revealing of the collective plight of African Americans than the growing political conservatism that masks itself as progressive nationalism in black life.

To recover radical political equilibrium, black folks must collectively seek self-determination. Yet that seeking cannot happen as long as most folks are either brainwashed so that they passively internalize white supremacist attitudes and values and/or embrace autocratic conservative black leaders who use the rhetoric of nationalism to opportunistically exploit and contain us. To open our minds and hearts to black self-determination we must commit ourselves to a process of decolonization, which means choosing to critically examine ourselves, both to divest of white supremacy and internalized racism as well as to commit ourselves to radical politicization. Every radical African-American critical thinker has undergone a process of decolonization wherein we study the work of progressive thinkers, black and non-black, who teach us about resistance. Looking at history without Eurocentric biases, we study to learn what racism is and how white supremacy is institutionalized. It should be obvious that the process of decolonization and radical politicization requires literacy. Without critical literacy, black folks cannot assume responsibility for ourselves. We can neither find nor create jobs that allow us to be economically self-sufficient and we cannot

effectively resist white supremacy in the arena of cultural production. We must not be duped into believing that many black people cannot read or write because they are poor. Those who come from poor and working-class backgrounds know that all of us can find ways to learn these skills if we want them, if we recognize how important they are. Mainstream culture bombards us with the message that only money matters and wants us to believe we do not need these skills. This thinking must be challenged. Rap is one of the few public discourses addressing young black people that at times encourages us to be literate, to read and study, to radicalize our consciousness. Until all black people address the educational crisis in black life, we cannot hope to attain collective self-determination. As long as progressive radical black folks ignore secondary education and fail to take the initiative to call for and demand progressive anti-racist, anti-sexist education for black children, and all children, our communities will be deluged by folks who see bourgeois patriarchal pedagogy as the only hope.

Black consciousness cannot be radicalized as long as the black bourgeoisie maintains its radical hold on the black imagination. Collectively, black folks could progress in our efforts to achieve black self-determination if we repudiated bourgeois values. The bourgeoisie knows this, which is why it wants all black people to believe that material success is all that matters. They do not want black folks of all classes to be critical of capitalism, to understand Western imperialism enough to not only challenge it but change our lives so that we are committed to living simply in ways that promote the sharing of resources and respect for ecological balance on the planet. Most black leaders in our society, male and female (with the notable exception of Malcolm X, who was consistently critical of capitalism, of the kind of material

greed that leads to selling out), are as obsessed by longings for material wealth and power as are the underprivileged masses. Many of them opportunistically take on whatever political standpoints will enable them to reach these goals and if they manage to attain them, then act as though our having been victimized by racism makes us have no accountability to those who must always go without in order for there to be a class of people who have far more than they need, who have wealth. African Americans who participate fully in the maintenance of capitalism and Western imperialism to protect their class interests are investing in the very systems of domination that keep white supremacy and racism institutionalized. Their complicity undermines black liberation struggle. To be anti-capitalist does not mean that black people should not strive for economic self-sufficiency or material well-being. It is a critique of excess. Committing ourselves to living simply does not mean the absence of material privilege or luxury; it means that we are not hedonistically addicted to forms of consumerism, and hoarding of wealth, that require the exploitation of others.

For many years liberation theology in the black church not only taught the importance of sharing resources but also taught the values of living simply. To be truly effective, contemporary black liberation struggle must envision a place for spirituality. This does not mean continued allegiance to patriarchal capitalist religions, or the institutionalized traditional black church. We can look to the teachings of religious leaders like black theologian and mystic Howard Thurman to both create new structures for the expression of spiritual and religious life and develop progressive strategies for transforming existing structures.

Lastly, black determination and black liberation will never succeed if we do not challenge and change sexism and sexist

exploitation and oppression in black life. This truth cannot be stated enough. A critique of patriarchy coupled with collective imagining of a world where black females and males are social equals would lead to such a profound transformation in black life that many of our internal wounds would be healed and we would be better prepared to resist white supremacy. The moment any black person embraces black self-determination, a repudiation of victim identity takes place. For at the heart of black self-determination is the political awareness that we must assume responsibility for constructively transforming our lives. While economic self-sufficiency is an important goal of black self-determination, it is not the primary goal. Significantly, a radical model of black self-determination is rooted in the oppositional conviction that it is concretely possible for black people to create meaningful lives irrespective of their material conditions. Our mindset is more crucial to achieving black self-determination than material privilege. Traditionally, black people who were able to grow their foods, to obtain control over their shelter and basic necessities of life, lived well in the midst of poverty. Black self-determination repudiates a vision of successful living that makes it synonymous with material privilege. Internalizing this notion of the good life is a form of Western imperialism which reinforces the assumption that the majority of people in the world (primarily people of color) live lives that are valueless because they lack material resources. Black self-determination enables us to construct oppositional worldviews, drawing on the diasporic legacy of black resistance and the liberatory knowledge of our global allies in struggle, particularly the wisdom of indigenous groups. It counters a narrow nationalist perspective by replacing a call to nationhood with a vision of revolutionary communities of resistance that may be formed by diverse races and ethnici-

ties in the interest of promoting black self-determination and the larger world project of global emancipation of all exploited and oppressed people. Clearly, it is black folks who have the most to gain from black self-determination so that many of these communities of resistance would be black even though they would not be based on a politics of exclusion. There is no monolithic black identity. Many black families have expanded to include members who are multiracial and multiethnic. This concrete reality is one of the primary reasons nationalist models seem retrograde and outmoded. While black self-determination is a political process that first seeks to engage the minds and hearts of black folks, it embraces coalition building across race as it is rooted in a sophisticated understanding of the way in which neo-colonial white supremacy works and what must be done to effectively challenge and change it. It also recognizes the importance of black people learning from the wisdom of non-black people, especially other people of color.

Significantly, since the project of black self-determination is not based on nationalist sentiment, it includes diverse black experiences and diverse black communities. Repudiating homophobia, heterosexism, class elitism, and every structure of domination that counters the growth of respect and communal love among black people strengthens political solidarity among black people in the interests of challenging and changing white supremacy even as we simultaneously work to immediately create the conditions in black life where all black people can live well.

If progressive communities of resistance promoting black self-determination were organized in every city in the United States, we would have a central institute. We would have workers for freedom who would go door to door and evaluate the needs of individual households and communities. Liter-

acy programs taught by schools on wheels would use critical pedagogy to teach reading and writing. A team of researchers (not all of whom would be black) would then devise a plan for each household to be educated for critical consciousness in ways that would allow them to gain access to the knowledge and skills necessary to change their circumstances. Drawing on the model of civil rights, and militant black liberation struggle, these efforts at black self-determination would emphasize engaging folks where they are rather than urging them to go out and join a movement that may not clearly reflect their needs (that larger mass organizing can take place only after individual consciousness has been changed and a commitment to radical politics has taken place). Black self-determination need not be a dream. The programs for change sketched here are the ones that those of us who have come from the bottom, who have decolonized our minds, who have gained economic self-sufficiency, have used. We know they work. They changed our lives so that we can live fully and well. That is why we want to share the liberatory power of black self-determination. Our freedom is sweet. It will be sweeter when we are all free.

BELOVED COMMUNITY

A WORLD WITHOUT RACISM

Some days it is just hard to accept that racism can still be such a powerful dominating force in all our lives. When I remember all that black and white folks together have sacrificed to challenge and change white supremacy, when I remember the individuals who gave their lives to the cause of racial justice, my heart is deeply saddened that we have not fulfilled their shared dream of ending racism, of creating a new culture, a place for the *beloved community*. Early on in his work for civil rights, long before his consciousness had been deeply radicalized by resistance to militarism and global Western imperialism, Martin Luther King imagined a *beloved community* where race would be transcended, forgotten, where no one would see skin color. This dream has not been realized. From its inception it was a flawed vision. The flaw, however, was not the imagining of a *beloved community*; it was the insistence that such a community could exist only if we erased and forgot racial difference.

Many citizens of these United States still long to live in a society where *beloved community* can be formed—where