Reprise
Conclusion by Way of Continuity

Discourse and Dat Course
Ann duCille, Skin Trade

Knowledge essentially functions as a form of power.
Valentine Mudimbe, The Idea of Africa

Epistemology
This chapter opens with a particular indebtedness to the work of Valentine Y. Mudimbe. Valentine Y. Mudimbe is a very learned man. He is a philosopher. His arguments, in part, mirror Dandi’s notions on discourse and power. He knows Philostratus and Hecataeus as well as he knows Sartre and Foucault. Mudimbe received the 1989 Herskovits Award for his scholarship. Yet remarkably, or maybe not so, he is seemingly unknown among the critics of Afrocentrism. Is Mudimbe an Afrocentric? Is Mudimbe Afrocentric? The far more important question, however, may be, does Afrocentrism become more “knowable”—more intelligible—through Mudimbe?

If the refinement of Afrocentrism has moved toward inclusion, if it is an examination of the “pluriversal,” as Keto puts it, then how does Mudimbe instruct us in its understanding? In some ways he does this by taking us back to our beginnings in this particular discourse. We are forced to entertain questions of epistemology and historiography, questions of culture and ideology. What Mudimbe does for us most
DuCille worries that this disjunction might be the fate of Afrocentrism if some forms of the discourse are allowed to dominate others.

While Mudimbe’s “Africanism” may be associated with the product of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonialism, I would maintain that its genesis is much earlier. Its beginning goes back to the first moment and the first act of resistance by those peoples who would be first defined as “Africans” in the modern sense of the term by their arrival on the Western shore of the Atlantic. In this context, Mudimbe is right, the colonial period did offer the possibility of “radically new types of discourse on African traditions and cultures.”

Just as Said argues of the Orient, Africa was invented by colonialism. This representation was, according to Mudimbe, an “organization,” an “arrangement” that transformed “non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs.” The task of this construction was to “re-generate” African space and consciousness to meet the exigencies of imperialism—that is, the “integration of . . . histories into the Western perspective.” This was the ongoing project of the last quarter of the nineteenth century through the 1950s. The result was what Sachs termed “eurocentrism,” a “forced deculturalization . . . on the world scale.”

Mudimbe follows a general concurrence that in the span of the late Renaissance through the early Enlightenment the West was experiencing the creation of a new epistemological foundation that by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries would have as its hallmark a significant anti-African bias. This bias had no more profound manifestation than in the sciences and philosophy, which granted to this “new epistemological ordering . . . a theory of understanding and looking at signs in terms of ‘the arrangement of identities and differences into ordered tables.’”

As Mudimbe explains this construction, “Africa was discovered in the fifteenth century . . . [and] the slave trade narrated itself accordingly.” Africa and the African became exceedingly “ugly” as the slave trade intensified; they became the epitome of “alterity [as] a negative.” The African became the essential “other.” Mudimbe continues, “We do know what is inscribed in this discovery, the new cultural orders it allowed, and in terms of knowledge, the texts that its discourses built.”

Much of the discourse was built on travel literature that was re-

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1. Mudimbe, Invention, ix.
2. Ibid., x.
3. Ibid., xi.
5. Ibid., 1.
7. Ibid., 12.
garded as proof of African inferiority. We have already been treated to the works of Schaw and Long. Works like these formed the core of what Mudimbe refers to as the “colonial library,” a library that was reflective of only one viewpoint, the European.9

The construction of such a corpus and the institutions to house it—what Lord Curzon referred to as the “furniture of empire”—was the building and reinforcement of what Mudimbe has termed “epistemological ethnocentrism.” It is an ethnicized determination of knowledge and its construction that exists right through the present and can even be seen in the works of liberal thinkers such as Carl Sagan.10 This epistemological ethnocentrism has a direct bearing on the inability to even entertain the notion of a “black” Egypt. And again we are reminded that colonialism is the “epistemological locus of Africa’s invention” and one of the forces key to the myth of the “inherent superiority of the white race.” This way of thinking is all in line with what Paul Ricoeur calls the notion of “universal civilization” that assumes a “European center.” That center assumes a “cultural monopoly,” a hegemony that allows for domination in multiple arenas, not the least of which is the construction of knowledge—the very determination of what constitutes knowledge and who is capable of its production.11

Foucault enters the discussion once more by reiterating the role of Enlightenment thought in the ways in which it “define[s] what knowledge can offer about human beings.” This new epistemology determined who was human through the discourses it produced—discourses that were then, and are now, in competition, contention. The construction of epistemology, the building of knowledge, is a way to chart history. It also embodies the recognition that “knowledge functions as a form of power.” This means that epistemology—the construction of knowledge—is interdependent on “systems of power and social control.” In effect, the “culture wars”—the struggle over what might be considered knowledge—is a struggle over power and social control.12

Historiography

Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that anthropology and history are, in fact, a “two-faced Janus.” If the “historical process [accounts] for the growth of knowledge,” then some of the new historiographies meet Lévi-Strauss’s criteria for “episteme radically opposed to Western norms . . . that could simultaneously undermine a totalitarian order of knowledge and push knowledge into territories traditionally rejected as supposedly nonsensical.”13 Here, Mudimbe, through Lévi-Strauss, has encapsulated the issue central to these culture wars. The Afrocentrists’ ire is directly related to what is nonsensical. From the standpoint of traditional academe, it has always been black folk, blackness, and the questions they raise that are nonsense and not worthy of discussion. This attitude is based on the physical biases that race as a construction of the modern age has provided as a way of knowing. Given this analysis, to entertain the history of, history among, or history by black peoples—peoples who have no history—is nonsensical.

Mudimbe asserts that the Africanist discourse is both “challenge” and “commentary” that is as old as the “invention of Africa.” If this is the case, then the historiographic treatments associated with Africa’s emergence, specifically in the era of modern slavery, push back Mudimbe’s Africanist chronology. These treatments also posit the “invention of Africa” and the beginning of new discourse, new historiography, and new epistemology with the landing of “Africans,” particularly those who were enslaved, in the western hemisphere.

This perspective satisfies Lévi-Strauss’s dictates at the same moment that it anticipates the emergence of Afrocentrism and Afrocentrism’s ability to undermine the current discourse and expand the boundaries of knowledge by asking what is, seemingly, nonsensical. Mudimbe might as well single out Will, Buchanan, Lefkowitz, and others by name in illustrating this contention. This new historiography and epistemology have been created to offer resistance to the “tyranny of history” and the “totalitarian order of knowledge.”

Mudimbe allows his interpretation of Foucault and Lévi-Strauss to “bring to African consciousness new reasons for developing original strategies within the social sciences.” Some Afrocentrists might take exception. Asante would argue the case of African centrality to Foucault and Lévi-Strauss’s consciousness; the notion that the postmodern, postcolonial moment was realized with the first act of African resistance in the “new world”—the “modern world.” For duCille, Mudimbe’s comment is indicative of the strains between postcolonial, postmodern theorists and Afrocentrists.

Yet Mudimbe’s way of moving to the “African prise de parole about philosophy and knowledge” is a reflection on the post–1970s “notion of epistemological vigilance” on the part of peoples of African descent. That vigilance has been the analysis of the “political dimensions of

0. Invention
10. Mudimbe, Invention, 15.
11. Ibid., 16, 17, 19, 20–21.
13. Ibid., 32–33; italics added.
knowledge and the procedures for establishing new rules in African studies" as imperatives to “strategies for mastering intellectual paradigms.” Key among these have been the ways in which African and African American Studies have addressed themselves to critiques of history and literature.

Mudimbe admits that “power is still the objective” in what he terms a “struggle for maturity.” This maturity can be read in several ways. One way, probably the most conventional, is the maturity that has come to Africa and peoples of African descent in the wake of colonization and imperialism. Another way of reading the terminology is to think of that maturity in terms of the entire modern project, a project of global dimensions whose refinement has allowed for the emergence of new discourses that have enhanced our senses of identity, singularly and collectively. The question of power, in this light, speaks to a more equitable distribution of the world’s resources. That this is one consequence is evident in the most recent discussions across the globe. What Mudimbe alerts us to is a way of recognizing these discourses. By way of recognition we must also come to grips with the genesis of these discourses and realize that they have a history.14

In part, that history has been illustrated on these pages. An object of these historical discourses from the very first resistances of the modern age through Woodson, Du Bois, Asante, Said, Mudimbe, and others, has been the decolonization of the “social and human sciences.” This project is what Paul Hountondji has called the “critical reinterpretation of . . . African history . . . destroying the classical frame of anthropology.” It is the overthrow of Lévi-Strauss’s Janus.15

The historical ramifications are important. As much as history, or the lack of it, confers identity, then the histories that began the modern age established particular historiographies and epistemologies. What these histories identified was what should be allocated to whom and on what basis. The contention over Egypt began there and remains there.

Mudimbe underlines this point when he tells us that scholars such as Obenga do not spring forth whole cloth. The prise de parole of Obenga’s generation was the issue of Negritude. This was a challenge to Galileo, Locke, and all others in terms of the epistemological changes wrought by the Enlightenment. The question that Mudimbe poses for us, a question quite similar to those posed by Asante and Said—questions that the works of Du Bois, Woodson, and others imply—is what does this movement represent in the sense of adding to, changing, or refining the construction of knowledge? What is the import of this movement, this struggle of the latest moment of the modern age? Might this newest construction of knowledge prove as important as the Enlightenment postulates themselves? Could this be the value of the contributions of peoples of African descent to the discourses on postcolonialism and postmodernism?

Examining Obenga again, Mudimbe cites his credentials. This process has often been the way that scholars of African descent begin an interchange, by asserting their right to speak by virtue of their credentials. There is no doubt in Mudimbe’s mind that Obenga is more than qualified to address the issues at hand. It is Mudimbe’s assertion that Obenga brings to the issues the level of refinement that they demand. Obenga brings to African history associations a critical view on Cheikh Anta Diop’s theses and at the same time, as director of a major research center in Libreville, fights for “an African perspective” and initiative in history.16

Engaging his “critical view on . . . Diop’s theses,” as Mudimbe puts it, Obenga wished to draw his American colleagues into a discussion of these issues during his stay at Temple. This is reflected in two ways. First is the way in which Obenga is referenced in the publications that follow his stay in the United States, the most prominent of which are the writings of Asante and Keto. There is a reverential tone given to the way in which Obenga is regarded. Second, the works themselves reflect a more critical tone; they are, in significant parts, critiques themselves. At first glance they may appear to yield little or nothing to their adversaries, but more nuanced readings suggest the ways in which Afrocentric/Africa-centered texts and discourse can be regarded as the opening wedge of a globalized discourse that engages historiography and epistemology within the space of debates centering on postcolonial and postmodernist theory and interpretation.

Mudimbe broadens this discourse by making sure that the African voice is included. He cites J. O. Sodipo, Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji, Engelbert Mveng, and Ngudu among the producers “of a body of works, which are both difficult, because of the amplifications that explain them, and extremely sophisticated with respect to the relationships between knowledge and power.”17 Mudimbe’s sources speak to the internationalization of the discourse. Roth has alluded to this by

15. Ibid., 37.
16. Ibid., 40.
17. Ibid., 40-41.
giving notice to the serious discussions of Afrocentrism found in French circles. The contemporary American sources also bear this out from Asante through Bernal. And though some of these same sources might see a certain reluctance among postcolonial and postmodernist theorists to embrace Afrocentrism, the links become increasingly clear with each new addition to these discourses. In addition to Mudimbe’s African counterparts are the European theorists whom he, Asante, and Kete invoke.

The question here, in light of all this, is do Diop and Obenga bridge the gap between Africans and African Americans in the exploration of similar issues related to power and the construction of knowledge? Do Mudimbe’s observations allow for the internationalization of the dynamics—do they illustrate the dynamics—that compel both Africans and African Americans and that at the same time animate discussion and critique from other sectors of the African diaspora as witnessed in Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic or Sidney Lemelle’s critique of Asante’s work? What we see here are the numerous possibilities for refining and enriching the discourse externally and internally.

If I am accused of overreaching in terms of the importance that might be attached to this discourse both historiographically and epistemologically, I am bearing witness to what Mudimbe defines as a “severe political and ideological confrontation.” In terms similar to those of Fishkin, Mudimbe argues that the combined elements of this discourse, from every corner, result in an interrogation of the “European tradition” and its relation to power. Afrocentrism jumps the barriers of “colonial discourses,” colonial propositions, and the colonial sciences.” The barriers become key to the necessity of knowing Africa.

The colonial necessity is readily understood. It arises from the need to invent (i.e., “the invention of Africa”) in order to arrange space, concepts, and resources. The ancient necessity for knowing Africa was imperative for different reasons, if Alain Bourgeois is to be believed. Bourgeois’s notions of the ancient need to know Africa are in line with all those scholars who have argued for an examination of Africa as a historical player on the world stage.

In La Grece antique devant la negritude, Bourgeois wrote in 1971:

Finally, what to conclude except that the relationships between Greece and Negritude, which one might a priori have thought to be

18. duCille, Skin Trade, 120-125.

negligible or almost nil, appear to be of unsuspected richness? It was necessary for [Greek] writers to show off their knowledge of Africa, which was, and necessarily so, limited and fragmented. In fact, they knew much more than one would have expected, and from what they knew, they made the best of it.

The necessity of knowing Africa was rooted in the idea that Africa was integral to the Greeks knowing themselves. This is certainly implied, if not stated, in many ancient texts. And it is underlined and reinforced in the modern conceptualization and invention of Africa; that is where Africa has been presented as the “paradigm of difference,” translated to fulfill a “political project.”

This political project has proceeded apace, in spite of the fact that since the 1920s, African scholars, and most notably anthropologists and historians, have been interrogating these landscapes and civilizations and reconstructing, in a new fashion, piece by piece, fragile genealogies that bear witness to historical vitalities that, until then, seemed invisible to students of African affairs.

Clearly, the historiographic range of this project can be extended chronologically simply by giving attention to the late eighteenth-through twentieth-century works produced by African Americans and other peoples of the African diaspora. These works are ancestors to A. Barthélot’s 1927 L’Afrique saphérique et soudanaise ce qu’en ont connu les anciens, just as Barthélot’s work is a precursor for Bourgeois’s, and Bourgeois’s is for Bernal. Barthélot’s work coincides with, and we must assume was influenced by, Negritude and its quest for a celebration of the “values of blacks’ historical and cultural experiences.” In fact, it is from this “intellectual and ideological background” that Bourgeois discloses and reactivates traces and designations of Africans in Greek texts.” As the scholars Bernal designated as his predecessors had indicated, the message that these works “unveil, which has been ignored, blurred, or muted by centuries of Western scholarship, is represented silently to a twentieth-century project: black is beautiful.”

Mudimbe has done two things for us here. First, he reminds us of Asante’s assertion that the African, in particular the African American, is critical to the postcolonial, postmodernist discourse. Second, addressing the issue of the refinement of the thesis, Mudimbe resurrects

21. Ibid., xii.
22. Ibid., 20.
some elements of the internal debate that has always existed among the generations that constructed this Africa-centered discourse. Focusing on the Négritude generation, a broad grouping that if expanded across linguistic and cultural lines could most certainly have included Du Bois, Woodson, Hansberry, and Snowden, Mudimbe examines and argues their intellectual and cultural pedigree.

Given their context, he concludes that their historical and cultural projects, their attempts to reconstruct knowledge, were "progressive," if not "radical." Their works revolved around Africa-centered intellectual movements that we recognize today as Négritude, and the Negro Renaissance, the New Negro Movement. Mudimbe legitimates the contributions and the gravity of those contributions to the current debate. It is clear that these intellectuals' efforts helped to shape the present debate, and that in itself obligates their inclusion in the historical and intellectual genealogy as full partners. Embracing Woodson, Du Bois, Hansberry, and Snowden, Mudimbe in his observations on the refinement of the thesis, includes Léopold Senghor, Bourgeois, Eugene Guernier, and, of course, Diop in a project that speaks to the "originality of Egyptian civilization" as an African invention.

Diop is the generational bridge. His origins and rhetoric are clearly determined by Négritude. The task, as he articulated it, set on this foundation, as well as other serious historical bedrock, illustrates the importance of his ideas and those of his diasporic contemporaries in the shaping of the current debate. The acknowledgment of Diop’s origins and the context out of which Obenga emerges dictates that the creators of Négritude, as well as similar intellectual movements, must be critically analyzed in terms of their contributions to the current discourse.

Mudimbe's restoration of these historical and intellectual personalities, coupled with his reading of Bourgeois, reflects a new historiographic and, therefore, new epistemological approach "to today’s discourse and perception of history." He leads us back to a basic Afro-centric concern: "[T]he African right to dignity enunciates itself in reactivating ancient texts and by interrogating the objectivity of history." The consequence of these interrogations by peoples of African descent over the course of the modern age has resulted in real historiographic and epistemological change:

The general movement in which the reactivation of Greek texts takes place is more than a simple revision of traditional scholarship. It signifies, in fact, the reversal of perspectives, which is the sign of a major epistemological rupture.

To be sure, among the major ramifications of this movement, from the time of David Walker to the present, have been controversy and struggle. These were staples long before Foucault and others. They are fundamental products of African and European interaction in the modern age. In many ways they are epitomized by the American experience, to the degree that, historiographically, the "real issue is not one of theory versus empirical collection. It is rather about the silent and a priori choice of the truth to which a given discourse aims." As Bernal put it, what is necessary is not simply the rethinking of the basis of "Western Civilization" but a recognition of the "penetration of racism" and "continental chauvinism" into all our historiography, or philosophy of writing history. And while Bernal may be clear on this point, Mudimbe feels that his clarity might be even greater if his reading of classical sources such as Herodotus was more critical, and if Bernal were able to recognize the "shifting philosophies" that "manipulate the information that we get from ancient texts." Mudimbe is speaking to historiography and epistemology in both directions, recognizing the biases of both ancient and modern writers and arguing that the ancient texts, as historical documents, are governed by their own epistemological contexts.

Critique

DuCille's critique of Afrocentric, postcolonial and postmodern discourses is hard-edged. It is incisive, not blunt. On one hand, DuCille cautions against an African American hegemony of the discourse and the problems that such a singular perspective might create. On the other, she is fully cognizant of the ways in which postmodern and postcolonial discourses have ignored or been ignorant of the African American contributions to the establishment of these fora. While she speaks specifically to the reinscription of "cultural dislocation" for African American theorists, the same danger awaits postmodernists and postcolonialists who fail to realize the "unknowing contradiction of the very cultural traditions they wish to celebrate." DuCille pushes for a recognition of the relation between Afrocentrism, postmod-

23. Ibid., 24.
24. Ibid., 24.
25. Ibid., 39.
ernism, and postcolonialism. This is, of course, a position that many Afrocentrists, including Asante and Keto, have begun to advocate.27

DuCille’s argument leads to the need to recognize that the terms of engagement for these discourses and their products are multiple and overlapping. Such a revelation identifies the relation between “postcoloniality and Afrocentrism as intellectual perspectives, as acclaimed and disclaimed discourses respectively.” At issue is the disjunction between the two, a disjunction that might be illustrated by Asante’s criticism of Said.28 DuCille reflects on that disjunction, opening her discussion of the perils and possibilities that face this intellectual activity:

What does it mean, for example, when Afrocentrism is dismissed as methodologically sloppy, anti-intellectual identity politics while postcoloniality is affirmed as theoretically sophisticated oppositional discourse?

She concludes that the “most critical factor may have more to do with the market than with methodology.”29 DuCille’s primary thesis is the commoditization of discourse and the ways in which color makes some discourses less “valuable” than others. She returns us to what has been visible since we posed the question of “why Bernal and not his predecessors?” DuCille points out the danger, in the internecine feuding of what should be allied discourses: “Although the designation ‘postcolonial’ may be new, the study of power relations between colonizer and colonized is not.” DuCille implies that the earliest of postcolonial discourses begin among peoples of African descent. She then proceeds to list the great names of the nineteenth century to make her case and to make the postcolonialists and postmodernists take notice. She also makes it quite clear that among her theorists and activists, women do not take a back seat. For DuCille, postcolonial and postmodern discourse can be recognized as an “elegant incarnation” of “resistance narratives,” a genre whose earliest forms included the slave narratives of the western hemisphere.30

It is here that DuCille issues a similar warning to Afrocentrists. What must be avoided at all costs is any brand of “Afrocentrism” that “perpetuates[s] the same divide-and-conquer ignorance on which imperialism has depended.” The necessity for recognition on both sides of this particular discourse is based on the realization that without such recognition we will see the continued use of postcolonial and postmodern studies to “reaffirm the European or Anglo-American center . . . [as] a form of intellectual imperialism that erases the line between the colonizer and the colonized.” In effect, this realization is an expression of the need for an “interculturally oriented African American Studies.”31

Of course, Mazrui presents the same argument when he suggests that Afrocentrism might require a much more refined “vehicle.” The vehicle in which Mazrui had in mind is Africana Studies. For Mazrui, the Africana model encompasses people of African descent no matter where they might reside in geographical and temporal space. As Mazrui puts it, this model also allows for the formation of alliances with other cultures and Western disidents. It allows for the creation of space in which postcolonial and postmodernist and Afrocentric “visions” might see how “remarkably similar” they are.32

On this point, Asante and Gates are talking to each other. Both recognize the centrality of Black studies as a historical and contemporary theoretical exercise that expands accepted epistemologies. It is a demonstration that there are other ways of knowing that, in the end, must and will be acknowledged. Gates concludes that the time has come when academe must give Black Studies programs their due . . . [T]he role of Black Studies in the academy has never been more crucial . . . in educating a nation that remains woefully ignorant . . . [W]e have only begun to glimpse its potential for integrating the American mind.

Asante concurs. He argues that the inevitable evolution of the Afrocentric perspective within Black studies “inaugurated[d] an entire system of thinking about social science and criticism, and pointed to the inherent problems of Eurocentric theory.” Afrocentrism within the context of Black studies, within the context of DuCille’s “interculturally oriented” African American Studies, or Mazrui’s expansive Africana Studies, celebrates another way of knowing.33

In this context, in the context of this mutual recognition and the knowledge it generates, the epistemological question is renewed: “[W]hat do we do with this knowledge? . . . To what use do we put

27. DuCille, Skin Trade, 121–122.
28. Asante, Kemet, 123–125.
29. DuCille, Skin Trade, 123.
30. Ibid., 124, 126.
31. Ibid., 129, 133–134.
this sense of our multiplicity, our interrelatedness, and our interdependence?” One possibility, DuCille suggests, is “[t]o teach one another about the white academy that both claims and disclaims us.”

Disclaimers

In using descriptors like “radical” or “extreme” the critics of Afrocentrism allude to a certain emotional quality, an imbalance, a dysfunction, that hampers the mental applications for even the most mundane task. By allusion, they argue, how can one expect serious scholarship to occur in an atmosphere so charged—an atmosphere that, if not characterized by derangement, is certainly suffused with anger? It is, in fact, anger that is supposedly characterized by the words “radical” and “extreme” in this case—an anger that is suppose to debilitate, that supposedly precludes rational, unbiased intellectual inquiry, that must be anti-intellectual.

Interestingly enough, Lawrence W. Levine has pointed out that the critics themselves are very angry people; in fact, they are people with a historical pedigree of anger relating to projects that seek a more expansive and inclusive history, historiography, and epistemology. Their critiques of the dangers of Afrocentrism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and so on, are almost interchangeable. As Said has pointed out regarding the “rhetorical figures that one keeps encountering” in colonial narratives, no matter the colony, they tend to read the same. They disregard the concessions they have made over the longue durée of this discourse to the fundamental ideas that the discourse promotes: the issues of Africa, Africans, and peoples of African descent; race; and the ways in which all of these have lent themselves to the construction of history and knowledge.

So in the end, works like Lefkowitz’s *Not Out of Africa* are ineffectual because they engage in the very “nonsense” that they deplore; and they do so in a manner that Levine has described as bereft of the intellectual and scholastic rigor of which they accuse Afrocentrists. They suggest the possibilities of discussing “responsible teaching and academic freedom” while characterizing their opposition as “flat-worlders.”

*Not Out of Africa* is indicative of a school of scholastic opinion that either denies or is ignorant of the historical processes that define what is currently called Afrocentrism. These scholars argue that there can be no interpretations other than their own. There is no recognition of the roles that race and imperialism play in the modern construction of histories about the past, ancient or otherwise. Lefkowitz and company believe that they can rely on the same ploy that they disdain. Lefkowitz evokes the same racism that she accuses Afrocentrists of by first dismissing the notion that their ideas might have intellectual merit and then assuming that Afrocentrists and Afrocentric thought constitute one, undifferentiated, monolithic mass. In the end, in spite of the endorsements of Gates and Snowden for Lefkowitz’s project, one is forced to agree with Asante: there is no “interest in understanding Afrocentricity” and the question of dialogue or discourse in these circles seems out of the question. For Lefkowitz, “an alternative way of looking at the past” is worse than the production of “pseudohistory.”

Yet it may be an apparition that dialogue and discourse are out of the question. There have been concessions; these, in fact, have been the source of dismay for many such as Lefkowitz and Windschuttle. These concessions signal the ways in which the institutions and the very act of doing history have been “undermined.” They are reflective of the deflections, however slight, that have occurred in the attempt to understand the various positions that wish to speak to history, to speak history, and to create history. So when we speak of these particular concessions, it is not in the sense of the capitulation of one side or the other, but in terms of the realization on both sides of the need to secure a new discourse.

First among these concessions has been the moderation of voice on both sides. In some spaces, the speech is not quite so strident. One of the best illustrations is a close reading of Asante’s later works in which he recognizes and accepts the validity of all perspectives including the Eurocentric. Both Keto’s and Mudimbe’s writings signal this as well, as does Roth’s argument concerning the possibilities of an Egyptologist/Afrocentrist dialogue. Her acknowledgment of French Afrocentrists invites an examination of Afrocentrism as something other than monolithic “nonsense” spouted primarily by American blacks; it also suggests that serious examination of American Afrocentrism needs to such as historiography and epistemology, and the contributions of peoples of African descent to these over the course of time. Given the evolution of the discourse and its variety, Lefkowitz’s attack is disingenuous at best in its focus on “myths of origin and cultural dependency, mystery systems, and stolen legacies.”

34. DuCille, *Skin Trade*, 135.
35. Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 9, 11. The “nonsense” of Lefkowitz’s position is that she clings tenaciously to the idea that she can craft a serious argument against Afrocentrism by illustrating it with examples that even Asante dismisses as not worthy of serious scholarship. Afrocentrism, as serious scholarship, is far removed from the questions of whether Socrates, Hannibal, or Cleopatra were “black.” A serious and critical reading of Afrocentric texts would reveal a concern for far more substantial and, therefore, consequential issues.
be placed on the intellectual agenda. This might be considered in light of the fact that nationally and internationally recognized scholars such as David Levering Lewis are using the same terminology to describe such subjects as W. E. B. Du Bois.

Even among the "hard-core" there are signs. Frank Yurco's comments indicate that there is recognition that Afrocentrists vary, and there are indeed those for whom he and his colleagues can muster some levels of respect.37 It is Yurco who inadvertently challenges Robert Pounder's assertion that there was no "significant role for blacks in Egyptian society" by observing that "many people today who consider themselves Afro-African or 'black' . . . would have no trouble finding physical types resembling their own in contemporary Egypt." I asked, when I first encountered this statement, if, given the iconography, African Americans would have any difficulty finding those same physical types among ancient Egyptians? That was certainly what Du Bois had in mind when he presented his findings. How much should we suppose the ancient Egyptian population has changed? What Pounder, Yurco, and others demonstrate is what Molly Levine has referred to as a "particularly perverse pedantry." I can only ask for whom?38

A cursory review of Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Roger's Black Athena Revisited also speaks to the concessions made here, though many are hardly ever overtly recognized by their authors. The attack on Black Athena seems content with the issues of chronology and linguistics. The "Africaness" and, to some degree, the "blackness" of the Egyptians has become almost, though not quite, a moot point. On this count, there is the preference to argue the insufficiencies of race as a scientific concept—something the predecessors of Afrocentrism did long ago and that leading Afrocentrists support. Or there is a resort to the specifics and the arcanity of anthropology: "clines" and "clusters." The general agreement, among all engaged, is that ancient Egypt is not what we had conventionally assumed it to be.

Black Athena Revisited, a much more solid piece of work than Not Out of Africa, cannot accomplish what Not Out of Africa wished to—it cannot bring closure to this debate; it cannot definitively put down the Afrocentrists. The contributions to this work are thorough and technical, but in the end they are unconvincing. They march over much of the same ground the critics covered with the first edition of Black Athena, and they hold it in the same fashion. Some are still quite indignant that any suggestion might be made of linkages between Africa and the formation of the classical world; others are querulous about who and what these "Africans" might be and how they might be even remotely related to those making the claims (African Americans). Others are simply dismissive—Lefkowitz perpetuates this attitude in Not Out of Africa, though the theories had substantive and historical support well before Lefkowitz put pen to paper or fingers to keypad. In large, we might be left to believe that little has been learned and that little has changed in the years following Bernal's raucous introduction to the Classics, Egyptology, and Afrocentrism.

Who and what Afrocentrists are other than interlopers has hardly been entertained. There has not been much apparent activity in the attempt to find a common ground. Black Athena Revisited upholds tradition. It is another attempt to stave off the "untutored," the "uncultured," the intellectually unwashed—the "black." This is done in much the same way as the interpretation of the texts celebrated as the canon has always done.

Yet Black Athena Revisited cannot put down the Afrocentrists because among its own legs there is innuendo and contradiction. This innuendo and contradiction are key to the ways in which Afrocentrism is helping to reshape the debate and transform it into a new discourse. This instability may be an inadvertent beginning of the hope that Roth raised concerning the cooperation between Egyptologists and Afrocentrists. While this project has not been engaged in any major sense, the impact of serious Afrocentric scholarship is being registered—if one is willing to take a critical look.

Substantive or not, the scholars presented in Black Athena Revisited have fundamentally missed the point when it comes to Afrocentrism. Quite possibly because like Bernal, in many ways, they wish not to see it. They prefer debate over chronology, linguistic form, or clines. Or perhaps it because they are incapable of conceptualizing it. They have not engaged the notion that history has many interpretations or, more important, that there are epistemologies, plural. There are many ways of knowing. If they had cared to engage Afrocentrism as a historical and intellectual phenomenon, they might have come across Du Bois's 1903 essay "Laboratory in Sociology at Atlanta University," in which he attempted to acquaint the reader with the notion that there might indeed be a "point of view of the colored races"—a space, a center, from which they might view the world, individually and collectively.39 Had

37. Frank Yurco, Correspondence with Eric King (July 20, 1994), 3.
they cared—if they care—to explore the intellectual history of Afrocentrism, they would find scholars such as William Leo Hansberry cautioning black scholars on the dangers of ethnocentrism. They would recognize in Hansberry and his work a parent to that of Du Bois and many, many others.

Yet it has never occurred to the critics of Afrocentrism to ask why these Afrocentrists (at least those that they choose to identify) are so radical; that is, why are they so angry? Perhaps, they might even inquire as to what it is that they are so angry about. Again, such a notion may be inconceivable, given the "center" from which such a question might be posed. From that center—the center of the Wills, Buchanans, Bennetts, Schlesingers, and Lefkowitzes of the world—these people have nothing about which to be angry. In effect, they have no right to be angry ("after all that has been done for them"). And such anger is ineffectual anyway, given that they have no intellectual, scholastic, or academic fora in which to express it. How could they possibly be angry; and indeed, angry about intellectual discourse? From such a "center" there is little hope for inquiry, for alone discourse.

The anger is not over the "blackness" of Egypt, or "stolen legacies" per se. It is an anger that concerns attempts to open dialogue, to broaden debate, to engage discourse, that have been dismissed historically and continue to be dismissed as I write. It is a dismissal that "radicalizes" "even some well-educated black professionals . . . to the odd tenets of Afrocentrism." They are radicalized because the historical response to their effort has repeatedly indicated that they are intellectually insignificant, marginal, and menial. Even like Snowden, they can be dismissed as necessity dictates.

Whose "necessity"? For many of the radicalized, it is not about fact. History is not about fact. It is about interpretation—hence, historiography: the why and how of writing history. Interpretation is the emperor's clothes. Will may pontificate about the Afrocentrist's rags, but it becomes clear, upon critical inspection, that Will and company are also historiographically and epistemologically naked. Their history, like that which they critique, has a certain transparency.

Who are these Afrocentrists, and why are they so angry? Du Bois describes their charge and its challenges:

In history and the social sciences the Negro school and college have an unusual opportunity and role. It does not consist simply of trying to parallel the history of white folk with similar boasting about black and brown folk, but rather an honest evaluation of human effort without transforming history into a record of dynasties and prodigies.41

As a student of American history and society, Du Bois understood the inevitability of an Africa-centered discourse:

The civilization by which America insists on measuring us and to which we must conform our national tastes and inclinations is the daughter of European civilization which is now rushing firmly to its doom. . . . [W]hat good can come out of it all? . . . Old standards of beauty beckon us again, not the blue-eyed, white-skinned types which are set before us in school and literature but the rich, brown and black men and women with glowing dark eyes and crinkling hair.42

The "old standard of beauty"? How far back does Du Bois wish to go? Is this the standard referenced by the same Herodotus who has been discredited by some who debate here: "[T]he Ethiopians . . . are said to be the tallest and best-looking people in the world."43 And, as Molly Levine might put it, what difference does it make? It seems that it makes a great deal of difference, especially in a world where the production of knowledge is predicated on the denial of some peoples, and then that knowledge is used to erect social structures and barriers that institutionalize and perpetuate that denial. In the very real and material sense, this epistemology and the accompanying sociology of knowledge guide and justify the resources to which any individual or group might have access. They dictate the quality of life and, in many cases, historically and contemporarily, the existence of life itself.

What difference does it make? The debate is political—political-economic, to be exact. It is contention over the allocation of resources and who is deserving of those resources. To believe that it is not—to argue that knowledge, scholarship, and the academy are without agendas, especially in the ways in which they constitute power—is to be disingenuous or deceitful, or both. The epistemology that is being contested revolves around the ways in which the production and construction of knowledge lend themselves to the making of such decisions.

Martin Bernal has spawned a cottage industry of which I am a part. The most recent pronouncements on Afrocentrism and Black Athena

43. Herodotus, The Histories, 211.
are clearly evidence of this. They also return me to my central thesis: the ways in which race has impacted the writing of the history of the classical period, the ways in which some scholars, because of their race, have had their intellectual production ignored, their ideas neglected; their intellectual lives shunted to a junction labeled "Blacks Only."

Mainstream historians, if I may use that term, have missed much of the historical nature of the Afrocentrists’ claims because they have failed to study the history—in particular the intellectual history—of black peoples, especially that of black peoples in America. Here, many Afrocentrists might be guilty as well in assuming that theirs is a project of twentieth-century ingenuity and dynamism, and not one of solid historical progression.

My position is not necessarily to prove the cases of scholars such as Carter G. Woodson, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, William Leo Hansberry, or Frank M. Snowden. Any critical reading of their works allows them to stand on their own merits. I am much more content to point to the plausibility of their arguments in historicizing, enriching, and expanding the discourse. Here, my agenda addresses a more profound and universal issue of modern academic life. That agenda centers on modern historiographic and epistemological construction. In particular, it asks, given the inquiries of Bernal, why have we not addressed in a similar fashion, with similar vigor, the entreaties of Woodson, Du Bois, Hansberry, Snowden, and the rest? It asks, what has been the impact of race on the writing of history in general and the writing of the history of the ancient period in particular? It asks that we riddle the sphinx.

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