

THE CULT OF SEPARATISM

Lost-found Asiatic Black people are, in fact, not members of that union or nation styled the United States of America.

—ERNE SMITH, *The Historical Development of African American Language: The Islamic Black Nationalist Theory*, 1994

Several years ago, an episode of the television crime drama *Jake and the Fat Man* focused on a black female detective played by Nell Carter, as a test run for a possible series. Watching that show was not usually how I chose to utilize my evening time, but I make sure to watch anything Nell Carter appears in. At one point the plot required Carter and her assistant to examine some antique Russian jewelry, and upon catching sight of it the Carter character was enthralled, whispering as the soundtrack welled up, "I love Russian history!" and proceeding to give an account of some obscure monarchical events in Czarist Russia.

It struck me as a false moment, and I wondered whether the script had originally been written with a white actress in mind. I couldn't help thinking of how very few black people I have ever met who were so passionately interested in a subject that had nothing to do with being black. I felt guilty for even having the thought, and considered it progressive of the writers, if they did write the script with Carter in mind, to portray a black woman as having such an arcane interest without making a point of it. But I also found myself thinking that if the writers actually supposed that such an interest was common among black people although unremarked by the media, they were in fact mistaken—they were less filling in a gap than pushing the envelope.

This was just ten seconds of a little TV show, of course, but the thoughts it stirred up stemmed from something much larger, a mighty current of Separatism in black American culture. Separatism is a direct product of Victimology. The sense that whites are an eternally hostile presence has encouraged a conception of black America as a sovereign entity. It would be one thing if within this entity blacks attempted to set up a kind of alternate, but equivalent, universe (as they often did in the first half of the twentieth century). However, because the detachment is

a response to perceived victimhood, the mindset of this sovereign world is refracted through the prism of Victimology, conditioning a restriction of cultural taste, a narrowing of intellectual inquiry, and most importantly, studied dilution of moral judgment.

Separatism may appear to be a simple matter of self-protection, but in practice it narrows horizons, holding blacks back from being the best that they can be. Briefly stated, Separatism both concretely and metaphorically keeps black people in the ghetto.

The Cult of Separatism is manifested primarily in three ways.

The Three Fruits of Separatism

Mainstream Culture as "White" Culture

Under the Cult of Separatism, expressions of mainstream culture considered "default" by most Americans of all colors are processed by many if not most blacks not as common coin, but as "white." This alienates many black people from some of the most well-wrought, emotionally stirring art and ideas that humans have produced, miring the race in a parochialism that clips its spiritual wings.

On a lunch date with a young black woman some time ago, I happened to be carrying a copy of *Jane Eyre*. For whatever it's worth, at any given time I am as likely to be reading Alice Walker or Gloria Naylor as Charlotte Brontë or Henry James; I read Tolstoy not out of a self-hating fascination with white people, but because the man wrote a crackling good and highly affecting story. (*Anna Karenina* so grabbed me that one day when I was reading it in Washington Square, the woman next to me said, "Oh, look, there are Anna and Vronsky over there" and I looked up fully expecting to see them gliding by the skateboarders and drug dealers in their bourgeois finery, so real had they become to me.) However, for my black friend, *Jane Eyre* was not a book, it was a "white book." "Oh, I'd never read something like that," she said, quite casually. She preferred to read only books written by and about her own people. That includes a lot of great literature, but the person who can immerse himself in the richness of James Baldwin but never experiences Tolstoy is like someone who thrills to a Haydn string quartet but refuses to hear one note of a Beethoven symphony. This person never tastes the whole meal.

Yet as I have already said so often, Life Isn't Perfect, and in terms of the world in general, none of us ever gets the *whole* meal. This woman

will live a full life despite missing out on "white" novels. But often this perspective ends up selling out black Americans.

For example, there is a magnificent complete three-CD recording of the original score of the musical *Show Boat*. It is marred at the beginning, however, when what is supposed to be a black chorus of stevedores sing stiffly with slightly British accents. This was a last-minute emergency measure. *Show Boat* was the first American musical to substantially address the tragedy of race relations, and includes a black chorus and a white chorus. Fittingly, a black/American chorus was hired for the recording, but walked out upon being required to sing the original lyrics of the opening chorus "Niggers all work on the Mississippi." The recording was made in London, and while using American performers, had recruited a British white chorus. On such short notice, the producers had no choice but to have them step in to sing the black choruses as well. The accent difference is not a serious problem in the passages for the white chorus, but it naturally stands out much more when these Britishers are supposed to be deep Southern blacks.

Over the years, the lyric in question has indeed been increasingly watered down for new productions in line with increasing racial sensitivity: "Darkies all work . . .," "Colored folks work . . .," and finally, "Here we all work . . ." by the 1960s. This made sense, but by 1988, with *nigger* safely quarantined as one of the most socially inappropriate words in the English language to use in real life, the producers thought that singing the original lyric could be perceived as historical in intent, and furthermore, the original line had a true-to-life power that none of the substitutions have. The "Niggers all work on the Mississippi . . ." line is sung not by a happy shuffling gang of minstrels, but by grim, overworked black laborers bitterly quoting whites' opinions of them; it is also an accurate depiction of the tendency for blacks to use *nigger* among themselves. Whether one calls this a therapeutic defusing of an epithet via appropriation, or evidence of underlying self-hatred (it is in truth both), the fact is that this use of *nigger* is undeniably *real*.

It is difficult to believe that anyone who actually watches a production of *Show Boat*, seeing how openly and sympathetically it treats the black condition, could fail to understand that the blacks singing this opening chorus "Niggers all work on the Mississippi" are eloquently protesting racism, not underlining it. This opening chorus portrays blacks giving vent to their frustration at their victimhood, surely something these protesters would champion. The only possible reason someone would misunderstand this lyric is, quite simply, not having had occasion to listen to

a recording, see a production, or rent a video. One suspects that these singers were only glancingly familiar with *Show Boat*, out of a sense that it is a "white musical"—"Oh, I'd never go see anything like that." As a result, they passed up an opportunity to lend one of black American culture's most precious legacies, the unique timbre and precision of our choral singing, to this monumental recording, instead leaving our ancestors portrayed by British whites unable to render the material in the authentic style.

This sense of mainstream culture as alien extends into academia as well. Manning Marable has explicitly urged black scholars to restrict their research to black issues, thereby explicitly deeming intellectual curiosity for its own sake to be inappropriate to black American people. Under this rubric, the black scholar is to study slavery, Africa, and social welfare, but never Russian history, *Jane Eyre*, or mainstream theater history. Many will see Marable as "concerned," a "serious brother," or "cool," but obviously it is a short step from Marable to "Oh, I'd never read that" and the *Show Boat* walkout.

Separatism also has a tendency to close black people off to foreign cultures other than black ones. I once met an aspiring black linguist who had spent two years in China without learning Chinese beyond what he needed to buy food at the market. Most people who spend two years in a foreign country come back speaking the language, and this is especially true of linguists, for whom the experience often serves as a basis for a career's work. This was the only linguist I have ever met who spent two years abroad without becoming bilingual, and it is not likely to be accidental that he was black. Separatism has a way of discouraging black Americans from learning foreign languages other than French and Spanish, spoken by many Caribbeans and Africans, and Swahili. In my lifetime, I have known only one black person who studied German (it was a required course), one (a Black Muslim) who took Arabic, and not one who took Russian, Chinese, or Japanese. Certainly there must have been some who studied the latter three (e.g., black political adviser Condoleza Rice speaks Russian). Nevertheless, it is significant that in a thirty-four-year language-centered life, I personally have never met any. What makes black people shy away from these languages—even in elite universities—is a sense that they are not "black" things. This particular branch of Separatist orientation has roots in segregation, of course, and was crystallized in the sixties as Separatism expanded into a general coping strategy. Now, however, this wariness of nonblack culture is too often a barrier sealing the black community off from enriching influences.

This linguist wanted to go on to do academic study of the Chinese sound system, but he will never be competitive—almost every other linguist studying Chinese has learned to speak the language.

The ghettoization of Academic Work

As the spawn of Victimology, Separatism shares with its progenitor a tendency to be allowed to trump truth in cases that require choosing between them. In this vein, a considerable amount of black academic work downplays logical argument and factual evidence in the service of filling in an idealized vision of the black past and present, which is founded not upon intellectual curiosity but upon raising in-group self-esteem.

Mother Egypt

"Afrocentric History," for example, is primarily founded upon a fragile assemblage of misreadings of classical texts to construct a scenario under which Ancient Egypt was a "black" civilization (was Anwar Sadat a "brother"?), raped by the Ancient Greeks, who therefore owed all notable in their culture to them. Professional classicists easily point out the errors in these claims, only to have their proponents dismiss them as "racists" for having even questioned them, neglecting in the process to provide actual answers. Indeed, to insist upon facts—or apparently, to master the complex classical languages in which the original documents were written—is "inauthentic." The goal here is not to weigh evidence carefully in order to unearth the truth, but to construct interpretations of evidence that bolster a pre-conceived "truth," like "Creation Scientists" whose objectivity is decisively crippled by a fundamental conviction that God must be the driver of the universe. Uninterested in any information inapplicable to the construction of the Afrocentric myth and closed to constructive engagement, these people may be many wonderful things, but one thing they are not is scholars. Yet they are respectfully addressed as "Professor" by gullible students, and one eminent black undergraduate profiled in *Ebony* cited a volume of this kind of history as the most important book she had read that year.

Ideally, an Afrocentric academia is conceivable in which people simply apply the tools of mainstream academia to illuminating black concerns. This is the vision most defenses of Afrocentric work are based on. However, in practice, the centrality of victimhood in the black cultural identity subverts this ideal. All too often, black scholarship is devoted not to general scholarly inquiry about black people, but a subset of this: chron-

icling black victimhood past and present, and to remedy that victimhood, celebration and legitimization of black people past and present. Because black people are no more perfect than anyone else and life past and present is complex, this abridged conception of academic inquiry inherently conflicts with the commitment of mainstream academia to striving for assessment as unbiased as possible. In this conflict between Victimology and truth, Victimology is naturally allowed the upper hand.

The result is a sovereign entity where the outward forms of academia—articles, books, conferences, symposia—are harnessed to a local set of rules: a Separatist conception of academia. In "black" academia, as often as not, comment is preferred over question, folk wisdom is often allowed to trump rigorous argumentation, and sociopolitical intent is weighted more heavily than the empirical soundness of one's conclusions. There are certainly quite a few excellent black scholars, but overall, Separatist academic standards are pervasive enough to make black conferences quite often perceptibly less rigorous than mainstream ones.

Many mainstream scholars would be, or have been, surprised at the sparseness of serious, constructive debate at many black conferences, unaware that because of the grips of Victimology and Separatism, this kind of debate would be superfluous to the proceedings, and even unwelcome. After four decades, many black academics have spent their entire careers in this alternate realm, and as such, have never been required to assess the full range of facts applying to a case, to construct rigorous arguments, or to address anything but the very poltest and most superficial of criticism. Here is the beginning of notions at the center of "Afrocentric History" such as that Cleopatra was "black," that Artstotle stole books from an Egyptian library that wasn't even built until twenty-five years after he died, etc. Moderate black academics are more likely to say of the most egregious Afrocentric work that "more work needs to be done" than to actually pin it as nonsense, which makes complete sense when we realize that the fundamental commitment of much black academic work is not assessment of facts and testing of theories, but chronicling victimhood and reinforcing community self-esteem.

Ask Me No Questions . . .

This problem is by no means limited just to the collection of people committed to "Afrocentric History"; it is seldom far from the surface in any scholarly setting in the realm of "Blackademia." At a conference on black performance in 1999, a black scholar from England argued that

whites' tendency to adopt black American popular cultural forms is evidence not of an identification with black people, nor of a desire for cross-cultural harmony or understanding, but of a desire to eliminate the black presence via co-opting what makes them unique.

Interesting idea, but hardly as obvious or incontrovertible as the operations of gravity. Does the white teen who likes Snoop Doggy Dogg want to eliminate niggers, or does he simply like the beat and vibrate in tune with the antestablishment attitude that has enthralled young Westerners since Goethe's Young Werther? Did whites stir the blues and jazz into their marches and jigs to create rock music because they were racists, or because blues and jazz are among the most sublimely intoxicating aesthetic creations humanity has ever known? Here in the Bay Area, I have noticed that white females of ages roughly ten to fourteen are fond of imitating black women's "sassy" "Uh-UHHH! . . ." accompanied by the pushing forward of an admonishing second finger pointed upwards, and waved back and forth in opposition to corresponding "sassy swivel" neck movements (tough to describe on paper—think of Aretha Franklin in *The Blues Brothers*). Perhaps I lack some exotic brand of insight, but I simply do not see subliminated hate in these little girls—on the contrary, they are expressing a joyous admiration of black women's trademark strength; it's the melting pot in all of its glory. Similarly, among the white male high schoolers and undergraduates I see who perform hip-hop, imitating "ghetto" gestures and intonation as closely as they can, what I see is a sincere admiration of a massively compelling art form. A lot of these kids will even say "Sometimes I wish I was black"—and I do not think that what they wish is that they could become black while real black people disappeared; what they wish—regardless of the fact that this would of course be more complicated than a fantasy dwells upon—is to *join* black people.

Some might disagree with me, but just as many would not, and the point is that there are obviously issues to be discussed here. Yet the scholar at this conference simply put forth his declaration that this kind of imitation masks racist hatred without a shred of support. To be sure, his point was rendered especially seductive by the densely elegant jargon in which academics in the humanities are trained to couch their thoughts. Furthermore, this was all delivered in a gorgeous Oxonian accent which, in all of its calfskin suave, also betrayed that he is extremely unlikely to have experienced any of the particular slings and arrows of a black American inner-city, or even middle-class, life. In general, there was not a hint of anything but Sir Alec Guinness in his demeanor, and thus his statement cannot have been informed by any personal discom-

fort with seeing "his" culture "co-opted." Indeed, put aside his references to "mimesis" and "negation," and all this guy was saying was "The only reason they imitate us is because they hate us." Preface the statement with "Yo," and its content remains exactly the same. Yet if "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" has any value as a general aphorism, his was in essence an extremely underargued thesis. Mainstream conferences are devoted not to tossing out colorful accusations, but to sifting and evaluating the ideas proposed by the participants. Yet despite this man's having presented no evidence or argument whatsoever to support his claim, he was heartily applauded several times, and was one of the hits of the conference—he could barely get out of the auditorium for coffee, so besieged was he by people lauding him for telling it like it is. (No, I was not jealous—I was just attending the conference, not speaking at it!) Because this was a black conference, making an argument was less important than reaffirming common wisdom, and to hear common wisdom dressed up in arcane words and an Alistair Cooke accent is even better, in lending it the air of scholarly authority. The *substance* of scholarly authority, however, was a distinctly lesser concern.

What was significant about this was that for anyone to ask this man to supply evidence for his point would have been as shockingly inappropriate as pulling out a tuba and blowing on it. His point was simply assumed to be true, or at least, by the more exploratorily inclined, "a valid point of view." But what this meant was that this was not a forum devoted to presenting findings or evaluating conflicting interpretations of data or events—i.e., properly speaking it was not an academic exercise at all. It was a rally, designed to reinforce the emotionally based sentiments the audience and participants came in with. After all, even if the man was right, mainstream academia is not inclined to convene conferences with the purpose of proclaiming what is already known. Political science conferences do not feature various speakers presenting nimble variations upon the point that "war is bad"; biologists do not convene to urgently remind one another that all forms of life are based on DNA. The Separatist current makes this kind of thing seem natural to conversers of many black conferences, out of a sense that actual academic debate is somehow "beside the point" for African Americans since our status as eternal victims makes our regularly proclaiming this, as it would be for villagers in Chechnya, a more pressing concern.

And make no mistake—the same priorities reign even without plummy accents and Judith Butler jargon. I once attended a conference where a black woman gave a paper taking issue with an article which, by

her reading, denied that black female speech had any unique patterns. After criticizing the author, with the unspoken implication that this writer was one more oppressor trying to deny black people their identity, the professor presented a few features of black female speech. In the question session afterwards, a white woman very politely pointed out that the author of the article in question was quite aware of the uniqueness and richness of black female speech, and that the professor's interpretation was based on a misreading of the author's phrasing.

Ordinarily in academia, the presenter would defend herself by making specific reference to the article and its argumentation. Here, however, was a conflict between the tenets of mainstream academia and the very different ones of black academia. The professor's sole answer was, "Well, I read it as denying the uniqueness of black female speech, and that was my interpretation." Period. It did not appear to even occur to her that an actual address of the issue might be germane. Unlike mainstream academics who come to a conference prepared to field criticism during question sessions, she considered herself to have done her job in simply presenting the list of black female speech traits—and at a black conference, she had.

Indeed, her presentation was constructed not as a reasoned demonstration but as a backyard "calling-out" of the author in the name of injured pride. She opened by reading a passage from the author's paper and then repeating it in a challenging intonation of mock disbelief, with friends in the audience assigned to shout back the phrase in the same tone of voice to evoke the black church's call-and-response tradition; she then did this with two more phrases. This was cute, but couching an academic paper as the prelude to a ghetto catfight renders one's presentation inherently immune to constructive discussion. To criticize it in any way, even politely, is to question not the lines of an argument, but an expression of cultural identity—and thus the person themselves. Indeed, the professor's set jaw at being questioned made it painfully clear that any further dwelling upon the point would be processed as a slight against her and her race, and the questioner was hip enough to intuit the conflict in traditions here and dutifully sit down.

Furthermore, the misreading was not due to the writing of the scholar under fire, quite clear by any standard, but was of a sort suggesting that this professor was not particularly well attuned to the basic nuances of nonfiction prose. The author she was criticizing is in fact a vocal and passionate advocate of minority rights and even is a minority herself; the article, for example, was based on an extended study of how language

was used to foil Anita Hill. The unavoidable impression one got from such a stark misreading of an actually rather simple article is that this professor was simply not much of a reader—at least of nonfiction and scholarly writing. This seemingly ironic combination of a doctorate with an ambivalent relationship to the printed page was not an accident: Chronicling victimhood requires less of a passion for the book than chronicling a whole picture, and one does not need to master as vast a literature to chart a victory as to formulate and test a theory.

One could see the Separatist academic tradition being passed on at the same conference when a student went up to the microphone and introduced himself as a "doctorial" student. We need not make light of the mispronunciation in itself—we all mispronounce the occasional word (I pronounced *albeit* as "all-BITE" until I was about twenty-eight). However, this particular mispronunciation was symbolic—the graduate student who says "doctorial" reveals himself as unimmersed in academia as a whole. The mechanic does not come home from the garage saying "curburetor," because being surrounded all day by people saying *curburetor* would get him on track after about an hour. In the same way, a graduate student in daily interaction with professors well-ensconced in the academic world, and immersed in books and articles tailored to scholars, is inevitably and unconsciously taught out of saying something like "doctorial." Predictably, this student was in a highly Afrocentric language and education program founded upon a conception of Black English as an African language with English words. This conception has no scholarly foundation and can only be imparted via personal tutelage by a small number of adherents or via a few unpublished pamphlets written by a Black Nationalist medical school teacher (quoted at the opening of the chapter). Yet the student was piqued that the conference attendees were giving this school of thought short shrift, either unaware that solid scholarship is backed by published work or convinced that racism has kept these ideas off the presses. One can only laud his aim of helping inner-city black students, but it is obvious that he will become one more black professor granted a Ph.D. with no conception of the meaning of scholarly assessment and debate. I would not be surprised to see him several years from now giving a paper and being offended at serious questions.

Hollywood's Depiction of Black People

Few topics reveal the Separatist conception of academia more vividly and regularly than popular entertainment, whose "academic" discussion

