

## Black Americans and Africa: The Racial Hermeneutics of Popular Response to Keith Richburg

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### Theoretical Framework

In August of 1854, Martin R. Delany delivered a lengthy address to the National Emigration Convention in Cleveland, Ohio. Titled "Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent," the address underscored the depth of racism in the United States. Delany implored black Americans to consider emigrating to locations such as Africa and the Caribbean, where they would have unfettered opportunities to develop and realize their full potentialities.<sup>1</sup> The address is replete with illustrations of the virulence and pervasiveness of racism. In Delany's judgement, race had become perhaps the most critical factor in the shaping of human relations, both within the United States and on the international scene. As he poignantly declared, "It would be duplicity longer to disguise the fact that the great issue, sooner or later, upon which must be disputed the world's destiny, will be a question of black and white, and every individual will be called upon for his identity with one or the other."<sup>2</sup>

Delany's prioritization of race occurred after decades of affirming faith in, and propagating, the Protestant work ethic. After the convention, he spent the next eight years crusading for emigration. In his writings and speeches he drew attention to the ubiquitous nature of racism, and to what he perceived as a more sinister and troubling reality—a conspiracy by American whites and their Anglo-Saxon cousins to subordinate, subjugate and exploit blacks in the diaspora and Africans *ad infinitum*.<sup>3</sup> Race became, in Delany's judgement, the engine dynamo of global development, with the white race occupying the top echelons of the societal ladder, a position that conferred benefits and privileges of immense proportion, while blacks and people of color were confined to a life of deprivation and degeneration at the lowest rung of

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<sup>1</sup> Martin R. Delany, "Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent," in F. Rollin, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1868) 327-367.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* See also his *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (Baltimore, Maryland: Black Classic Press, 1993). This was originally published in 1852. See also "Political Aspect of the Colored People of the United States," *The Provincial Freeman* (October 13, 1855) and "Political Events," *Ibid.* (July 5, 1856); also "Important Movement," *The Weekly Anglo-African* (January 4, 1862).

echelons of the societal ladder, a position that conferred benefits and privileges of immense proportion, while blacks and people of color were confined to a life of deprivation and degeneration at the lowest rung of the ladder. This reality, therefore, mandated racial solidarity on the part of oppressed blacks. In order to conquer oppression, and escape perpetual subordination, Delany urged blacks to unite and forge a common front. He committed himself to the pursuit of this unity until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 compelled him, once again, to embrace integration.

In 1903, almost fifty years after Delany's speech, William E. B. Du Bois, in his seminal publication *The Souls of Black Folk*, reaffirmed Delany's critical insight in his now famous contention that, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of man in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea."<sup>4</sup> Du Bois's declaration proved prophetic, for no issue has dominated international relations in this century, and has shaped the relationships between peoples in different parts of the globe, particularly in the regions he identified, as prominently as race. Many analysts have in fact ventured the intimation that, judging by the state of contemporary race relations, particularly the ascendance of ethnocentric and cultural jingoistic consciousness on a global scale, race, and, *ipso facto*, the color line, will indeed become the substantive problem of the twenty-first century.

The concept of the color line has a deep historical pedigree. Some scholars trace its origin back to the dawn of enslavement in the New World. Color was, in fact, the defining essence of the Peculiar Institution from its inception in the seventeenth century to its demise in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The color line defined and shaped the relationship between masters and slaves, conferring human qualities and attributes to the former while depicting the latter as sub-human. Despite its historical depth, the color line has, however, been conceived and understood essentially in terms of a demarcation paradigm, that is, a concept that affirms racial boundaries. There has not been any attempt to probe its deeper ramifications. There are indeed hidden implications of the color line that, although not publicly acknowledged and proclaimed,

<sup>4</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903) 13.

<sup>5</sup> James Walvin, *Questioning Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

significantly shape the attitudes and orientations of those within the parameters of the line, especially in relation to others deemed external, and by implication hostile, to the racial group.

The concept of the color line implies the imperative of racial unity and consensus within the parameters of a distinctive racial category. Put differently, the color line is much more than acknowledging racial boundaries. It is also an affirmation of the pertinence of racial unity and consensus, of the need to further, within the racial group, monolithic and homogeneous values—a condition deemed fundamental to the struggles and survival of the race in what is perceived as a hostile world environment. Everyone within the racial group is therefore expected to subscribe to a particular worldview, to remain faithful to what are perceived as the needs, interests and aspirations of the group. This translates into avoiding any actions or utterances that would seem to compromise or erode racial solidarity. At all times, members are expected to contribute positively to furthering the corporate interests of the racial group and to be prepared and willing to defend the race regardless of the issues and circumstances. In essence, the color line is premised on absolute allegiance and devotion to one's racial group.

Delany boldly and more forcefully proclaimed and defended this broader dimension of the color line in his writings and speeches than did Du Bois. Actions or movements that seemed to efface the color line, or even compromise its authenticity, were often frowned upon and vociferously opposed. The color line was, therefore, conceived not only to draw attention to the potency of race as a factor in the shaping of public policies, but also to underscore the necessity and establish modalities for racial solidarity. Equally significant was that it was meant to affirm and defend a group's corporate identity built upon race and ethnicity. This broader dimension of the color line has, however, proven to be more idealistic and visionary. Though racism conjures up the color line, its very essence and existence depends on the attainment of balance or harmony within a racial group. In other words, the color line affirms the indispensability of racial harmony and consensus, a prerequisite for the sustenance and solidity of the line.

History, however, has shown a consistent muddling of the line. In order to sustain the line, its advocates suggest blacks must exhibit cohesiveness derived from shared feelings of love and confraternity.

Some observers contend that the ascendance of racism and the dysfunctional state of black America (measured by economic poverty, prostitution, drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, the alarming rate of homicide, unemployment, etc.) accord legitimacy to the color line. In essence, these negative and obfuscating circumstances/factors have become unifying elements that authenticate the color line. It becomes incumbent on all blacks to rally behind the line. For many, therefore, towing the line, faithfully advancing, and defending, at all times and under all circumstances, the interests and problems of blacks, becomes the litmus test of identity. It is this allegiance that establishes one's authenticity as a black person. It is also what distinguishes a real black person from an Uncle Tom.

The conviction of confraternity evokes anger and resentment toward those who, either through actions or utterances, appear to compromise and/or undermine the interests and aspirations of the race. Racism is presumed to be of such potency as to obviate any basis for a disruption or muddling of the color line. Intra-racial problems and contradictions are expected to be kept within, rather than made issues of public discourses that could potentially damage the image of the race and thereby provide the other group (i.e., the racial enemy on the other side of the racial line) ammunition with which to further malign and mistreat the race. The color line, therefore, mandates racial harmony, even if within the community the conditions and complexities clearly demand critical introspection and self-criticism. The color line harbors what amounts to a racial censorship and frowns at anything that smacks of self-criticism of blacks, especially where such criticisms are publicly aired by other blacks. Such self-criticisms, however justified, are discouraged because they present the outside world with the image of a black community in crisis and disarray, thus compromising the struggle at critical moments when the entire race is expected to stand together in harmony and unison.

Although the color line today is not officially proclaimed as vehemently as it was in the past, particularly in the militant sixties by such groups as the Black Muslims and Black Panthers, it remains nonetheless a defining characteristic of the black American struggle. As indicated earlier, its roots lay deeply buried in the past. At different times throughout black diaspora history, several individuals have been known to advance and defend the color line: David Walker, Martin

Delany, Henry M. Turner, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan, to name a few. In fact, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan has never made secret his advocacy of, and commitment to, the color line. His speeches are replete with calls for a defense of that line. Today, the construct is however much more forcefully articulated and defended within a broader intellectual and ideological movement—Afrocentrism.

Molefi K. Asante, the acclaimed guru of Afrocentrism, and former chair of African American Studies at Temple University in Philadelphia, articulates and advocates the color line in clearly unambiguous terms in his writings. In one of his books, *Afrocentricity*, Asante emphasizes the need for the development and defense of what he termed the “collective consciousness” of blacks.<sup>6</sup> He stresses the importance of racial unity and harmony, for, in his judgement, blacks remain dogged and threatened by self-abnegating and destructive hegemonic Eurocentric values. As he warns, “There can be no effective discussion of a united front, a joint action, a community of interest until we come to good terms with collective consciousness, the elementary doctrine of economic, political, and social action.”<sup>7</sup> Underlining the essence of the collective consciousness he writes, “Our collective consciousness must question writers who use symbols and objects which do not contribute meaningfully to our victory. *How could a black writer be allowed to use symbols which contradict our existence and we not raise our voice?*”<sup>8</sup> (emphasis added). In this last sentence, Asante clearly establishes the importance of intellectual vigilance on the part of blacks against black writers who betray the color line. Afrocentricity, therefore, represents the intellectual articulation of the color line in all its broader ramifications and implications.

It is within the context of the color line construct that I am going to analyze Keith Richburg’s controversial book, *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa*.<sup>9</sup> Published in 1996, the book immediately provoked anger and resentment among black Americans and Africans. In radio and television talk shows and on network news, angry

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<sup>6</sup> Molefi K. Asante *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1988) chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Keith B. Richburg, *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

respondents lambasted Richburg, accusing him of maligning and misrepresenting Africa and of displaying an ignorance of African history. Many called him a black racist, an Uncle Tom, someone who harbored a profound self-hatred and confusion of identity. One year after its publication, the furor over the book had yet to subside. On the contrary, it seemed to be gaining in intensity. Recently, members of "mainstream African American middle class groups" dismissed Richburg as "a self-serving Uncle Tom looking to make good with his white bosses...."<sup>10</sup> A black American critique describes Richburg as "someone with a penchant for assimilationism..." The author goes on to affirm, "a self-hating black man unable to call himself African-American denotes the classic identity crisis of the 'made in America' Negro."<sup>11</sup> A Nigerian reviewer describes the book as "one attempt by an African American to play into the laps of racism and justify centuries of fallacious indoctrination."<sup>12</sup> Molefi Asante, in a recent review, finds the book "offensive and obscene." He portrays Richburg as someone "caught in the spiral of psychic pain induced by... 'internal inferiorization,'" and asks rhetorically, "*would other people really be so hard on the continent or people of their origin?*"<sup>13</sup> (emphasis added).

Reacting to the barrage of accusations and condemnations, I decided against buying the book. If it is this bad, I told myself, I was not going to dignify it by purchasing it. I was satisfied with the reviews and commentaries of these other scholars and experts. Without reading the book I too became angry at Richburg for daring to malign and misrepresent my homeland, Africa. However, as the expressions of outrage grew louder and more intense, I could no longer control my curiosity. I felt I had to read the book. I dashed to the nearest Barnes & Noble Bookstore and purchased a copy. I carefully kept the receipt within easy reach, for I was determined to return the book after reading a few pages. My goal was simply to confirm what others have said. The result was, however, stunning and unexpected. Once I started reading, it was difficult to stop. I read the entire book in two days. I re-read several portions of it many times. My reactions were mixed. Instead of absolute anger and resentment, I found myself nodding in agreement with several

<sup>10</sup> "The Richburg Firestorm," *African Profiles USA* (July/August, 1997) 51.

<sup>11</sup> Aba Sackeyfio, "For a Self-Denying 'African'-American Journalist," *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> E. Chinyere Egbo, "Self-Denial and Retribution: Richburg and his African Past," *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>13</sup> *The Journal of Black Studies* (September, 1997), 129, 130-132.

of his assertions and findings while, at the same time, disagreeing with others. However, even where I disagreed I readily acknowledged his right to his opinions. The surprise for me was in discovering the reality and historical centeredness of Richburg's most controversial and provocative assertions and contentions.

There is hardly anything new in the book. Several scholars, past and present, have touched upon the themes in the book without generating the same degree of negative and schizophrenic reactions. I was, therefore, at a great loss in figuring out why the book provoked so much animosity. I soon found the answer in the theoretical construct of the color line. My objective in this paper, therefore, is to analyze *Out of America* and the negative reactions it provoked within this construct. In other words, I intend to situate Richburg's book and the responses it provoked in their proper historical, ideological and theoretical contexts. This entails, *inter alia*, establishing the historical validity of the claims and assertions made in the book, particularly those relating to three critical issues: the identity of black Americans, their relationship with Africa (i.e., the Pan-African tradition), and the African condition.

### *Out of America*—Critical Themes

*Out of America* deals with three critical themes. The first is on the subject of identity. Richburg uses his own background and experience in Africa to advance a definition of himself and of blacks in diaspora. The second, closely tied to the first, is a critique of the Pan-African tradition. Focusing on the activities of some black American civil rights activists, Richburg condemns what he perceives as their complacent and complicitous reactions to the problems and tragedies bedeviling Africa. In this respect, he undertakes a disguised critique of the Pan-African consciousness that inspired and shaped the attitudes of black Americans toward Africa. Third, and most importantly, he attempts an exposition, and offers a stinging critique, of the African condition—political, economic, social and cultural.

#### 1. Identity

In the beginning of the book, Richburg defines his conception of identity in unambiguous terms. In the "Prelude," he boldly stakes a slavocentric

position on identity. Rejecting Africa as a frame of reference, he posits slavery as the bedrock of identity for black Americans, its inhuman character notwithstanding.<sup>14</sup> According to him, "condemning slavery should not inhibit us from recognizing mankind's ability to make something good arise often in the aftermath of the most horrible evil."<sup>15</sup> He rejects "Mother Africa" and notes that he is grateful to God that his "ancestors got out, because now, I am not one of them. In short, thank God that I am an American."<sup>16</sup> Richburg goes on through the length of the book to explain his alienation and distance from Africa and Africans. When visiting Africa he felt strange wherever he went. He could not get Africans to accept him. However hard he tried, the cultural gap seemed to widen. Racial identity alone, he found out, could not bridge the cultural distance.

It is not clear, however, how hard he tried. Beyond the paternalistic and condescending posturing he adopted towards his Kenyan African employees—George, his office assistant, Reuben, his gardener, and Hezekiah, his housekeeper—it is unclear how hard he tried to actually get close to, and become acquainted with, Africans to the degree that would have inspired them to acknowledge him as one of theirs. Even when he appeared to be friendly to Africans, his subconscious manifested distance, disgust, distrust and condescension. Richburg then offered black Americans the benefits of his orientation and experience as a basis for rejecting Africa and affirming a slavocentric and Americentric conception of identity. He confessed to ignorance of adequate historical knowledge and awareness of his identity; he admitted uncertainty about his African connection, and supposedly went to Africa with an open mind hoping to discover the African dimension of his identity. As he acknowledged, "Nothing in my own past, nothing in my upbringing, has instilled in me any sense of what it must be like to be an African."<sup>17</sup> Given this critical void, he went to Africa hoping he "might find a little bit of that missing part of myself."<sup>18</sup> His experience was shattering and disappointing. Exposure to the complex and troubled realities of Africa completely flabbergasted

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<sup>14</sup> K. Richburg, *Out of America*, ix-xiv.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

him.

There are, however, two sides to his frustration. The first relates to the catalogue of woes associated with the African condition—economic decline and poverty, political and social malaise and decadence, rampant corruption, the undermining of democracy, the failures and excesses of African political leadership, the ascendance of ethnic chauvinism, and incessant violence. The second derives from the anger and betrayal he felt over attacks upon, and the killings of, United States' and United Nations' intervention troops and journalists who had come to Africa to help restore order. Several of the dead journalists were his close friends and colleagues. It is this latter attitude of Africans literally biting the fingers that fed them that drove Richburg to the state of pathological hatred. His reactions, however, combined both hatred and fear, and he "quietly celebrates the passage of (his) ancestors who made it out."<sup>19</sup> Projecting his experience and disposition, Richburg admonishes fellow black Americans to reject the appellation "African-American," for there is hardly anything really "African" left in them.<sup>20</sup> Centuries of sojourn in America have erased all those ancient connections. In his judgement, all immigrants—Africans, Dutch, Irish, Chinese and English—have become simply "Americans."<sup>21</sup> He seems to accord potency to the melting pot thesis, suggesting that America had already attained this condition. He describes the U.S. as a truly color-blind society, devoid of racial and ethnic "duchies."<sup>22</sup> He describes black American reaffirmation of a lost African identity as fantastical. To him, African was an identity that never really existed.<sup>23</sup> It appears that the hatred and anger he felt induced a state of historical amnesia. How else could one explain his piteous display of ignorance of elementary historical knowledge. As he insisted, black Americans were "sons and daughters of American soil."<sup>24</sup> Consequently, he urges all blacks to concentrate their energies on making America a better society and on realizing a multicultural society. He describes black American fascination with Africa as seductive, derived from alienation and powerlessness in America.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

## 2. Pan-African Tradition

Closely related to the theme of identity is Richburg's disguised critique of the Pan-African disposition of many black Americans. Pan-Africanism has been on the rise among blacks in the diaspora in the last ten years. The contention that blacks in the diaspora and Africans share historical and cultural attributes and experiences and, in consequence, ought to unite, harmonize and forge relationships that would advance and defend their mutual interests is gaining ascendance among blacks in the United States. This conviction is deeply rooted in history. Prominent blacks have advanced this position from the eighteenth century to the present. The legacy of this conviction is represented by the historic seven Pan-African congresses that dot the historical landscape since the 1900s.

The resurgence of this spirit has resulted in summit conferences between delegations of black American and African leaders. One such gathering took place in Libreville, Gabon, during Richburg's stay in Africa. Implicit in his rejection of the African identity is an equally forceful rejection of the Pan-African paradigm built on the notion of a shared identity between Africans and blacks in the diaspora. What he specifically deplors is the tendency among leading black Americans, due to their fascination with Africa, to excuse, de-emphasize, and, at times, to ignore outright the failures of, atrocities, inhumanities and crimes perpetrated by the African leaders with whom they fraternized at the summit conferences. These veterans of the civil rights struggles in the United States who have built reputations for opposing violations of humans rights and anti-democratic policies, particularly when perpetrated by whites against blacks, suddenly relapsed into a state of complacency when confronted with similar atrocious conditions perpetrated by other blacks, in this case Africans.

The Libreville Summit, organized by the Reverend Leon Sullivan, was attended by prominent black American veterans of the civil rights struggles, including Coretta Scott King, Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, Dick Gregory, Louis Farrakhan and Douglass Wilder. All of them remained in a state of dumb silence as they toasted, fraternized and embraced some of the worst dictators in the annals of history—Ibrahim Babangida of Nigeria, Valentine Strasser of Sierra

Leone, and Omar Bongo of Gabon. In fact, Jesse Jackson was said to have spoken glowingly of Babangida, characterizing him as a man of democratic ideals.<sup>25</sup> Richburg is also very critical of the elitist orientation and focus of these advocates of the Pan-African tradition whose visits to Africa always start and terminate with rubbing shoulders with corrupt and brutal dictators, far removed from any consciousness of, or insight into, the problems and plights of the suffering masses. As he points out once in Africa these veterans of the civil rights struggles in the United States "seem to enter a kind of moral and intellectual black box...." They hail dictators "as statesmen, unrepresentative governments are deemed democratic, corrupt regimes are praised for having fought off colonialism and brought about development."<sup>26</sup> These are the same leaders known to have boldly protested and condemned oppression elsewhere. When it comes to Africa, however, they assume a gradualist posture, advocating all sorts of excuses for not acting decisively against African despots. In Richburg's words, they behave "as if oppression comes only in white."<sup>27</sup>

### 3. The African Condition

The third major theme Richburg deals with in the book is that of the African condition, a condition that inspired the humanitarian efforts that compelled him and many of his journalist friends to advocate intervention in Africa, a condition that brought these journalists to Africa in order to expose the African situation to the outside world, with the hope of inducing timely and productive intervention. This same condition inspired the United States' and United Nations' forces to go to such troubled spots as Somalia. His sojourn in Africa took him from Kenya to Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Zaire and Sudan, amongst other countries. It was a particularly nerve-wrecking and emotionally draining experience.

In Kenya he witnessed violence, dishonesty and corruption. In Somalia he saw the horrors of civil and communal conflicts, and the killings of United States' and United Nations' intervention forces. In Rwanda he also witnessed the violence and horror of ethnic rivalry and

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

stood helplessly as mutilated bodies flowed down the river. These experiences induced in him pain, anger and frustration. He witnessed civil war in Liberia, and dictatorship and the crippling of democratic aspirations in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Cameroon. As he declared, "I saw an election stolen in Cameroon, an election rigged in Kenya, and an election annulled in Nigeria, and heavily flawed elections conducted mainly to ratify the status quo...in places like Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda."<sup>28</sup>

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, Richburg observed: the ascendance of ethnocentrism, and corruption on an unprecedented scale; leadership ineptitude and failures, collapse of the nation state, the peripheralization, impoverishment and gradual collapse of civil society; ascendance of primordial and micro-nationalist consciousness; widespread injustice, hypocrisy, lies, and deceit; crises of leadership and direction; extravagant and ostentatious lifestyles of the leadership; the systematic siphoning away of national resources by African leaders and their expatriation abroad to Switzerland, Britain, the United States, Belgium and France; the systematic snuffing of life from the ordinary citizens who are rendered powerless in the face of regimes of terror and coercion; the total destruction of education; and the absence of health care. The injustice and unfairness of the situation overwhelmed him. He felt helpless and soon realized that there was probably little the outside world could do to help. African leaders seemed bent on destroying their societies, and displayed callous disregard for the well-being of their citizens.<sup>29</sup>

If Richburg had any intention of embracing Africa, the specter of moral and political decadence and the horror of violence and communal wars completely destroyed it. The situation so overwhelmed him that it further alienated him. He could not believe that he had anything in common with people who perpetrated such atrocities. In anger, he declared his alienation from Africa, "I am an alien...I don't want to be from this place."

#### Analysis and Historical Contexts

There is indeed nothing that Richburg writes and says about the

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-169.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

condition of Africa that is new. Several scholars have highlighted these same situations in the same harsh language—George Ayittey, Wole Soyinka, Carl Lawrence and Patrick Chabal, to name a few—though not necessarily with the same rage and pathological hatred.<sup>30</sup> Everything he said is true. To some readers, his contentions sound exaggerated, but they are not. As an African who has lived through the conditions he describes, I can vouch for the authenticity of many of his observations. The problem with his analysis, however, is two-fold: First, the tone of anger and emotionalism tend to erode the strength and conviction of his ideas. But, I have no qualms about this. He has a right to be angry and emotional and to allow this state of mind to reflect in his writings. It is, however, the responsibility of an informed and intelligent reader to separate the anger and emotionalism from the historical substance. A more critical problem, it seems to me, lies in his attempt to use his gloomy findings as the basis of advocating a total black American rejection of Africa. In other words, his attempt to link the African condition to the subject of identity for blacks in America constitutes a fundamental flaw of his analysis.

In 1978, University of Chicago Sociologist William J. Wilson published his *The Declining Significance of Race*.<sup>31</sup> The book immediately ignited and provoked sharp responses from scholars who felt that Wilson was prematurely proclaiming the demise of racism in the United States.<sup>32</sup> Some twenty years after, his critics seem justified. A number of publications in the last ten years argue persuasively for the inclining significance of race—for example, those of Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson, Manning Marable, Jeo Feagin, Hernan Vera, Stephen Small and John Edwards.<sup>33</sup> It should be acknowledged,

<sup>30</sup> George B. N. Ayittey, *Africa Betrayed* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992). Patrick Chabal, *Power in Africa: Essays in Political Interpretation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994). Carl Lawrence, *Rwanda* (Gresham, Oregon: Vision House, 1995). Wole Soyinka, *Open Sore of a Continent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> William J. Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>32</sup> Charles Willie, *Caste and Class Controversy on Race and Poverty: Round Two of the Willie/Wilson Debate* (New York: General Hall, 1989).

<sup>33</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). Manning Marable, *Black Liberation in Conservative America* (Boston: South End Press, 1997). Michael E. Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997). Harlan L. Dalton, *Racial Healing: Confronting the Fear Between Blacks and Whites* (New York: Doubleday, 1995). Joe R. Feagin and Hernan Vera, *White Racism: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 1995). John

however, that there are other scholars who espouse a neo-Wilsonian thesis, insisting either that racism has indeed "ended" or that it really doesn't matter anymore.<sup>34</sup> This notwithstanding, more than ever before, many blacks believe in a fulfillment of Du Bois's prediction.

Race has indeed become the central problem of the end of the twentieth century. Among recent indices are the Rodney King episode, the O. J. Simpson trial, the Million Man March, the increasing visibility and assertiveness of right wing activism in official circles and in unofficial militia circles, President Bill Clinton's Race Advisory Board chaired by historian John Hope Franklin, the convening of village meetings on race, beginning with the one at University of Akron, Ohio, persistent attacks on affirmative action, and the systematic dismantling of the gains of the civil rights struggles. The above are significant gauges both of the inclining significance of race, and of the seriousness with which many in official circles view the subject. They also bolster the conviction among many that black Americans and Africans deserve, more than ever before, to unite in confronting mutual challenges and in defense of mutual interests.

This prioritization of the color line explains, to a large extent, why black American and African criticisms of Richburg's book assume such hostile character. Richburg's analysis seems to ignore or de-emphasize the reality and ascendance of racism, particularly in relation to his vision for the future of blacks in America. In an age distinguished by deepening crises of alienation and identity among black Americans and onslaughts on their rights and privileges (strong indications, to many, of the potency of the color line), Richburg embraces and espouses the American identity, disregarding indices suggestive of black rejection and alienation.

At some point in the book, he affirms the reality of a melting pot America. To him, America is a melting pot. A few pages later, he envisions a multicultural America, devoid of racism. Richburg in essence manifests the same fantasy of which he accuses black American leaders. While he dreams of a color-blind society, and a melting pot, and

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Edwards, *When Race Counts* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Stephen Small, *Racialized Barriers* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multicultural Society* (New York: Free Press, 1995). James L. Robinson, *Racism or Attitude? The Ongoing Struggle for Black Liberation and Self-Esteem* (New York: Plenum Press, 1995). James Meredith, "A Challenge to Change," *Newsweek* (October 6, 1997) 18.

joins other black conservatives in advancing a color-blind agenda, white conservatives, in official and unofficial circles and racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the white militia movement, betray, by their actions, policies and utterances, a vision of a future America that is anything but color-blind. In fact, they favor a color-conscious society where one race (i.e., the white race) will remain dominant *à la* tradition. Race does indeed matter. It seems equally chimerical on Richburg's part to describe the United States as a melting pot, and realistically envision a color-blind society under present circumstances.

The atrocious conditions Richburg encountered in Africa were never hidden from human sight. Black American leaders who visited Africa in the recent past—Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan, former D. C. Mayor Marion Barry, Rev. Leon Sullivan, etc.—are fully aware of the tragedies that Richburg writes about. Yet, one group chose to ignore these tragedies and instead focus attention on forging stronger ties with African leaders, the very perpetrators of the tragedies. Richburg chose instead to focus and report on them. What he did amounted to a crime, measured against the injunction of the color line. These other black American leaders have been known to return after every visit to Africa singing praises of African leaders and urging the American government to be conciliatory toward, and extend some concessions to them. Rarely has any black American veteran of the civil rights struggle gone to Africa and returned with a scathing indictment of the tragedies and moral and political decadence that starred them in the face throughout their stay.

In Nigeria for example, the last ten years have been hellish for ordinary citizens, particularly under erstwhile dictator Ibrahim Babangida and his late successor Sani Abacha, both of whom Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan had at different times spoken of with praise. Scholars, both indigenous and foreign, and other visitors have long drawn attention to the state of decline in Nigeria. The annulment of the June 12, 1993, election by Babangida and the harassment, arrests, and incarcerations without trial of hundreds of prominent politicians, pro-democracy activists and journalists by the late Abacha glaringly exposed the tragic condition of Nigeria. The list of those imprisoned included the projected winner of the annulled presidential election, Mashood Abiola (who has since died in detention under mysterious circumstances), former Head of State and current President of the

country, retired General Olusegun Obasanjo (who was released on the equally mysterious death of Abacha), Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, Obasanjo's one-time deputy (who also died mysteriously in detention), civil rights attorney Gani Fawehinmi, and activist Beko Ransome Kuti. Abacha's reign was marked by wanton disregard for human lives, a reality that the international community witnessed in the killings of Ogoni activists, including Ken Saro Wiwa. These ugly realities attest to the state of moral and political decadence of Nigeria, and underscore the tragic march of the country towards destruction; a doom that, in the estimation of many Nigerians, was averted by a divine intervention—the death of Abacha.

The majority of Nigerians today live well below the poverty line. The absence of a credible leadership left many Nigerians withdrawing into their narrow ethnic enclaves in search of comfort and reassurance. The last ten years witnessed the proliferation and amplification of secessionist sentiments and aspirations. That of the Igbos, once brutally suppressed, has been on the rise. The Yorubas, in the wake of political developments under Babangida and Abacha, loudly expressed similar aspirations. Minority ethnic groups in all parts of the country also clamor for greater political independence. The nation-state appeared to have lost the allegiance of its ethnic components and has been held together only by the threat of force and coercion. Nigeria was, however, spared disintegration by the timely intervention of General Abdulsallam Abubakar, and his prudent decision to return the country to a democratically-elected government. This picture of Nigeria is replicated in many other sub-Saharan African countries. Yet in the face of these glaring and woeful realities, black American leaders return from their trips to lecture the American public on how premature it is to expect democracy to thrive in Nigeria or any other African country. They urge caution, gradualism and understanding. While opposition groups and pro-democracy activists are languishing in jails and African masses are literally starving to death, black American leaders engage in shady deals of personal aggrandizement with the despotic ruling classes on the continent. One of the more recent incidents was the shameless and despicable acts of the Rev. Henry J. Lyons, President of the National Baptist Convention USA, who allegedly lobbied the Clinton administration and Congress to ease pressure on the military government of late Sani Abacha of Nigeria. He was allegedly paid a total of

\$350,000 by the Abacha government, a sum he deposited into a secret bank account. He became recognized as one of America's leading spokesmen of the late Nigerian dictator.

It is against this backdrop that one considers Richburg's cynical attitude towards black American-African summit meetings. While black American leaders are motivated by the injunction of the color line to ignore or de-emphasize the troubling realities of Africa in order to strengthen a Pan-African tradition, the African leaders they are fraternizing with are unfortunately ruling over tottering edifices. How anyone can ignore the almost total collapse of the nation state in sub-Saharan Africa and presume that by holding summit meetings black Americans and Africans can resolve their problems is mind-boggling. The truth is that most black American leaders subscribe to the color line dictum and would not condemn and publicly criticize African leaders however despotic and repugnant their personalities and policies. Instead of putting the blame for the African condition squarely where it belongs on the shoulders of the military and political dictators and their cronies, black American leaders seek external scapegoats—the old African nemesis—colonialism and neocolonialism. What is ruining Africa, they suggest, is foreign not domestic. This conviction explains their willingness to hold summit meetings with known dictators and violators of the very Pan-African spirit they profess to be upholding. To have criticized African leaders—such as Babangida, Abacha, Mobutu Sstrasser and Bongo—would have amounted to an intentional muddling of the color line.

Richburg, on the other hand, seems to have rejected the color line construct. He deplores the tendency by black Americans to blame every problem in Africa on colonialism, neocolonialism, racism or some other external factors. He abhors this victimization syndrome of blaming every problem on factors external to the African situation. He urges a change in orientation. According to Richburg, "if the race is ever going to progress, we might start by admitting that the enemy is within."<sup>35</sup> Although one condemns the tendency by black American and African leaders to emphasize and focus almost all attention on the external causative dimension of the problems bedeviling both communities (in consonance with the color line dictum), it is important, however, to acknowledge a certain potency to that dimension. The point being made

<sup>35</sup> K. Richburg, *Out of America*, 179.

here is the pertinence of acknowledging equally the internal dynamics of the problems. Applied to the African situation, this means conceding that African leaders also bear some, if not greater, responsibility for the present crises bedeviling the continent. It also requires that black Americans apply the same candor and self-criticism to their communities, and acknowledge culpability and complicity wherever necessary.

Unfortunately, this demand for open and honest self-criticism runs counter to the color line injunction and explains the tendency by black Americans and Africans to always cast their eyes elsewhere in search of causes of, and solutions to, their problems. The truth is that it is impossible to have anything meaningful result from the summit meetings until black Americans realize that the root cause of contemporary African problems lies within, that the culprits are domestic not external, and that the situation calls for decisive action. A good starting point is to discard the restraining force of the color line and confront Africa honestly and decisively. The situation calls for organizing the same kind of force and movement that was marshaled against apartheid in the eighties. Such a movement is direly needed against corrupt, cleftocratic and anti-democratic regimes in Nigeria, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Kenya, Gabon, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, and elsewhere in Africa where people are daily being trampled upon and dehumanized. Black American leaders need to move beyond rhetoric to activism in their commitment to democratic reforms in Africa. Africans and black Americans cannot, and should not, hope to deal effectively with any perceived external threats, or effectively harmonize in pursuit and furtherance of shared interests, until they turn inward and acknowledge both the structural problems and imbalances within their respective societies and, most significantly, their own culpability and complicity in the making and perpetuating of those problems.

The exhibition of complacent postures toward atrocities and crimes committed by members of one's racial group is reflected in black American leadership's responses to black-on-black crimes in the United States. There is always an attempt to locate the origins of the crimes elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> For example, black-on-black violence in New Orleans is

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<sup>36</sup> Anthony E. O. King, "Understanding Violence Among Young African American Males: An Afrocentric Perspective," *The Journal of Black Studies*, 28.1 (September 1997): 79-94.

epidemic and alarming. It is an issue that has received nationwide coverage. Yet, very rarely have black leaders organized to do anything about it. I have often wondered what the reaction would be if a gang of white youths should engage in a campaign of random drive-by shootings, systematically taking the lives of black youths. We would have seen Jesse Jackson and the NAACP lead a march through the city of New Orleans in protest. Johnny Cochran would have been here organizing grieving clients to initiate a class-action suit against the state government.

As a student in North America in the mid-1980s, this writer actively participated in anti-apartheid divestment campaigns. Blacks and whites organized rallies and demonstrations. People like Jesse Jackson, Stevie Wonder, Harry Belafonte, and many others were harassed and incarcerated. That was then. A white minority government was then oppressing blacks in South Africa. Today, there are no active voices on behalf of the suffering masses of Africa, even though many African countries are reeling under regimes and conditions far worse than apartheid. Why? Because blacks are now in charge. Instead of black American leaders engaging in a serious and organized campaign against internal racism, corruption, dehumanization and anti-democratic policies in Africa, several of them are neck-deep in shady deals with dictators and perpetrators of hideous crimes in Africa. Instead of decisive action they shamelessly plead moderation and understanding in order to stave off any meaningful intervention from the international community.

The depth of ethnocentrism, corruption and political and moral decadence highlighted by Richburg should alarm, rather than annoy anyone keenly interested in the future of Africa. These vices are rapidly eating away at the moral and national fibers of African states. For example, some thirty years after independence and nation-building attempts, Kenya, according to Richburg, "has still failed to create any real sense of national identity that could transcend the tribe."<sup>37</sup> Tribalism, or ethnic loyalty, remains the defining character of Kenya, as it is of most other African states. And, as Richburg rightly observes, the forces of divisions and ethnic intolerance are openly courted, perpetrated and exploited by African leaders in order to solidify their political positions. He also touches upon another critical dimension: the illusion of independence. He contends that African countries are only marginally

<sup>37</sup> K. Richburg, *Out of America*, 105.

free. What is popularly tagged independence, he avers, is essentially a transfer of power from colonial dictators to indigenous ones. There was no fundamental change in policy. Independence, therefore, did not bring an end to repression, brutalities and miseries that had characterized the lives of the majority of Africans under colonialism.<sup>38</sup> Political economist Immanuel Wallerstein described this as the "compromise of decolonization."<sup>39</sup>

Richburg's declared intention was to document the "unfairness" of the African situation, and to "give voice to the voiceless," to "tell it straight, just like I saw it."<sup>40</sup> He succeeds to a very large extent in doing just that—in exposing and highlighting the ugly realities that many other black American visitors draped in Pan-African robes choose to ignore. This notwithstanding, the novelty of his accomplishment lies more in his bold and assertive posture and nullification of the color line dictum, since there is nothing in his analysis that has not been addressed by others. This still leaves us with attempting to identify what it is about the book that provoked such virulent and pathological resentment from segments of the black American and African public. Part of the answer lies in his language, anger and frustration, and in his state of emotional disturbance—all emanating from his feeling of being betrayed by, and alienated from, Africans. The tone and language of his analysis suggest someone on the brink of mental degeneration. It is this condition that colored and shaped the historical facts he attempted to analyze. It is this state of mind that also inspired perhaps the most stinging attacks upon Africans by a black American (at least in recent memory). It is this state of mind that led him to commit some of his silliest historical errors, such as attempting to completely erase the African ancestry of black Americans. This is precisely what provoked some of the angriest responses. In nullifying Africa, the only positive identity blacks embraced as a countervailing force, Richburg also runs afoul of an unwritten injunction of the color line: as a black person, he is never to publicly air the dirty linens of fellow blacks. The crises and problems in Africa are supposed to be seen, heard and secretly lamented, not publicly

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>39</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Range of Choice: Constraints on the Politics of Governments of Contemporary African Independent States," in Michael F. Lofchie, ed., *The State of the Nations: Constraints on Development in Independent Africa* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 19-20.

<sup>40</sup> K. Richburg, *Out of America*, 165.

displayed and criticized. Richburg appears like a race-traitor for vilifying Africa, for publicly condemning the leaders instead of closing ranks with other blacks and Africans, and putting the blame elsewhere. In other words, he violated a cardinal dictum of the color line.

Contrary to the contentions of many critiques, Richburg did in fact acknowledge a bright side to Africa. He identifies certain bright spots: the demise of Kamuzu Banda in Malawi, relatively calm and democratic traditions in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Benin—places though not completely devoid of problems, but in a state of relative political stability.<sup>41</sup> He acknowledges decent, conscientious, hard-working, and courageous Africans. Everywhere he went, he encountered, "brave and anonymous Africans who displayed courage and self-sacrifice."<sup>42</sup> Yet, these bright spots and honorable individuals pale in significance to the pervasive culture of corruption, violence, and moral and political decadence that seem entrenched throughout the continent.

Critics have also persistently accused Richburg of ignoring the historical contexts of the problems he discussed. This is true. There are indeed historical contexts and antecedents to the violence, ethnocentrism/tribalism, corruption, and anti-democratic tendencies that are prevalent in Africa. However, it is pertinent to inquire as to whether or not Richburg was really unaware of the historical contexts. Is he really that ignorant of the historical contexts, or is his neglect a suggestion that we have flogged this dead horse long enough, and that it was time to begin to zero in on, and deal decisively with, contemporary and visibly domestic and African contexts?

Richburg's encounter with Africa made him realize how American he really is, and he became more appreciative of his American identity. This is certainly abominable to Afrocentrism, especially in an epoch when blacks are supposed to be African, and are deemed African, in all ramifications. Richburg's dilemma underscores the enduring and complex nature of the problematic of black American identity. There is a certain complexity to black American identity that is being suppressed under the veneer of Afrocentrism. A glance into history will reveal that Richburg is not alone in his reactions to Africa, and in his projections on identity. When renowned heavyweight boxer Mohammed Ali first set foot in Africa in the 1970s, he was reported to have similarly thanked

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

God that his ancestors caught the boat. There are other black Americans who have been to Africa and felt the same way but kept such feelings within and proceeded to present an outward appearance of consanguinity and solidarity with Africans. Richburg deserves commendation for transcending such hypocrisy. Personally, as an African, I feel more comfortable with him than with the hundreds of others who harbor similar convictions but would rather keep them hidden.

Richburg certainly has a right to define his identity the way he chooses. I have no problem with his alienation from Africa. What I find troubling is his attempt to deny other black Americans the right to define their own identity based on their own experience. If some black Americans choose to call themselves Africans, so be it. The historical facts exist for anyone interested in acquiring an informed knowledge of the identity question. Black Americans manifest complex historical experiences, which in turn evoke complex consciousnesses of identity. Many proclaim clarity on their identity, others admit to some profound level of confusion and ignorance. At the core of the complexity, however, lies different levels of socialization and experience in America.<sup>43</sup> Richburg represents one extreme. Afrocentrism represents another.

The contradictions Richburg exhibits on identity are rooted in the history of the black diaspora. Before going to Africa he admitted to very little knowledge of the continent, and certainly made no claims of identifying with Africa. In essence, he was not sure how African he was, if at all. A cursory glance into black American history reveals that there were many blacks who readily admitted to ignorance about their ancestral homeland and relied on the Europeans for this knowledge, which was usually skewed and negative. Even those relatively educated and informed black leaders who professed adequate knowledge of Africa were not immune from similar contradictions and ambivalence.

Several of the leading nineteenth-century black American nationalists boldly proclaimed their African identity prior to visiting Africa and declared themselves defenders of African interests and values. When they eventually encountered Africa, and came in direct contact with the shocking cultural realities and complexities and the inter-ethnic rivalries and civil wars (perhaps on a scale less tragic than

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<sup>43</sup> Hope Landrine and Elizabeth A. Klonoff, *African-American Acculturation: Deconstructing Race and Reviving Culture* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996).

what confronted Richburg over a century later), they reacted ambivalently. They became more appreciative of their American and Anglo-Saxon connections and identities, boldly proclaimed their cultural distance from Africa, and assumed the same paternalistic and condescending postures toward Africans, whom they proceeded to characterize as savages. Among them are the leading nationalists of the nineteenth-century: Martin Delany, Alexander Crummell, and Henry McNeal Turner. The contradictions and paradoxes of their nationalism and Pan-Africanism have been highlighted in several studies.<sup>44</sup>

Richburg's positive rendition of slavery is also not new. In fact, his glorification of slavery's outcome is a throw back to the nationalist traditions of Delany, Crummell and Turner, who equally glorified slavery as a civilizing institution. All three acknowledged the evil essence of slavery, while glorifying it, and reveling in its supposed potentiality for positive good—the civilization and enlightenment of blacks in diaspora. Richburg thanks God that his ancestors made it out of Africa to become enslaved in America, an experience that produced black Americans far removed from the barbarism of Africa. But for slavery, he would have been “one of them”—the dead, hungry and starving peoples of Rwanda. Richburg's reactions to Africa are, therefore, not fundamentally different from those of his nineteenth-century forebears. In fact, by drawing attention to the “good side” of slavery, Richburg fulfils Henry Turner's nineteenth-century prediction that someday the entire world would become appreciative of slavery. Turner once lamented humanity's failure to realize and appreciate the inherent benefits of slavery. In the future, he prophesied, humanity would develop a greater appreciation of the institution, that is, when the ultimate benefit of slavery is manifested in the upliftment of primitive Africa through colonization and Christianity. When this happens, Turner contended, “millions will thank heaven for the limited toleration of American slavery.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Bill McAdoo, *Pre-Civil War Black Nationalism* (New York: The David Walker Press, 1983). Gregory Rigsby, *Alexander Crummell: Pioneer in Nineteenth Century Pan-African Thought* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987). Edwin Redkey, “Bishop Turner's African Dream,” *The Journal of American History*, 54.2 (September 1967): 271-290; *Black Exodus: Black Nationalists and Back-to-Africa Movement, 1890-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

<sup>45</sup> Henry M. Turner, “An Emigration Convention,” in Edwin S. Redkey ed., *Respect Black: The*

There is another dimension to Richburg's positive rendition of slavery that ties in with contemporary debate on black American identity. He is, in effect, part of a tradition that, in the context of the late twentieth-century debate, is becoming increasingly bold and vocal in its appreciation of, and centering of, slavery. Richburg claims that black Americans do not need Africa to construct or validate their identity, because they possess a rich tradition spanning over three hundred years of tribulation and accomplishments in the New World. They have an identity made possible by enslavement. This slavocentric construction of identity substitutes slavery and America for Africa as the authentic experience that laid the foundation of identity for blacks in the diaspora. This rejection or de-emphasizing of Africa is echoed today by many others such as journalist Stanley Crouch, comedian Whoopie Goldberg, economist Glenn Loury and playwright Douglass Turner Ward. These individuals, in different forums, accorded preeminence to the American experience as the basis of identity construction.<sup>46</sup>

Richburg's experience in Africa left him angry, frustrated and devastated. Who would not be? Except of course those who feel the restraining grips of the color line, and who benefit directly or indirectly from the degenerate condition in Africa. Richburg allowed his emotions to determine and shape his interpretations of events in Africa. This is his choice but he paid a price for it. He made erroneous and silly statements that made him seem racist to many readers. He does not want to be identified with Africa, and proudly proclaims his American identity. This is fine. He has every right to define his identity. But he should also concede the same right to others. Regardless of one's disagreement with his emotional outburst against, and alienation from, Africans and choice of identity, Richburg's book falls squarely within the genre of black identity studies.

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*Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1971), 147.

<sup>46</sup> Stanley Crouch, "Who Are We? Where Did We Come From? Where Are We Going?" in Gerald Early ed., *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) 80-94; Glenn C. Loury, "Free At Last? A Personal Perspective on Race and Identity in America," *Ibid.*, 1-12.