

Color-Blind Prophets and Bootstrap Philosophies: Straw Men, Shell Games and Social Criticism

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He is a man of words and ideas, and since I, too, find my identity in the world of ideas and words, where would I flee? I still endure the nonsense of fools with a certain patience, but when a respected critic distorts my situation in order to feel comfortable in the abstractions he would impose upon American reality, then it is indeed “in accordance with my nature” to protest. Ideas are important in themselves, perhaps, but when they are interposed between me and my sense of reality I feel threatened; they are elusive, they move with missile speed and are too often fired from altitudes rising high above the cluttered terrain upon which I struggle. And too often those with a facility for ideas find themselves in the councils of power representing me at the double distance of racial alienation and inexperience.

Ralph Ellison¹

Ralph Ellison almost always has something useful to say. In “The World and the Jug,” his celebrated rebuke of Irving Howe, Ellison offers an eloquent and passionate discussion of the moment in cultural politics when social criticism enacts a relationship between *representation as depiction* and *representation as delegation*.² For Ellison, Howe’s “Black Boys and Native Sons” exemplified the dangers involved if there is too much distance between ideas and images that are crafted at lofty social altitudes and life as it is lived on the cluttered terrain of political and personal struggle. When these ideas and images serve to underwrite structures of legal, political or cultural representation, then culture has become emphatically political, and the Shadow has subsumed the Act.

Ellison’s confident insistence on the texture, richness and sheer human opacity of African American life has allowed him to navigate provoca-

1. Ralph Ellison, *The World and the Jug* in SHADOW AND ACT 122-3 (1964)
2. Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, *Introduction - De Margin and De Centre*, 29 SCREEN 4 (1988).

tively between the devil of ethnic chauvinism and the deep, blue-eyed sea of American nationalism. His social and cultural criticism consistently reminds us of the political imperative to pay close attention to the powerful complexity that characterizes the lives and experiences of African Americans.

Ellison is especially worth recalling now, as we struggle towards a social criticism that does justice to the cultural and political conditions currently facing black populations. These conditions exhibit a bewildering good news/bad news character: nearly unprecedented levels of economic affluence and political prominence compete with astounding material poverty and new forms of political and social powerlessness. A broad black "middle class," fattened on affirmative action and the cultural pragmatism of corporate personnel offices, vies for our attention with a "black underclass" of crack smoking, "Pump" wearing, "Pimp Rolling" baby-making black male hooligans—or so the popular representation goes. At the same time, a post-Voting Rights Act explosion of black elected officials coincides with the ever-tightening stranglehold of capital on municipal and federal decisional processes. The result? African American populations characterized by significant class divisions with unclear consequences as well as a widespread deflation of political agency.

It is ironic that in the face of these deeply complicated circumstances much of the most forcefully promoted African American social criticism is burdened by an unfortunate superficiality. The widely accepted insistence on the social construction of racial meanings and identities has in the hands of writers like Glen Loury, Thomas Sowell, and Shelby Steele resulted in the "return of the repressed" liberal subject for whom race is a socially interesting but politically and economically irrelevant artifact. It is hardly surprising that after eight years of Ronald Reagan and two years "in the Bush" these color-blind prophets and bootstrap philosophers should receive especially energetic attention. There are three unfortunate elements that characterize much of their work.

First, "race" is often manipulated as an empty trope through vague references to a "black community," references that obscure more than they reveal the conditions, beliefs, and aspirations of really existing black people.

Second, this trope facilitates a peculiar shell game in which the social critic gains a certain measure of credibility and authority on account of his membership in this "black community." This authority and credibility bestows benefits in another community altogether: the professional academic or journalistic community. Finally, the critic garners kudos for his courage in braving the censure of this "black community" for dissenting from the community "orthodoxy"—an "orthodoxy" that is often little more than a discursive straw man.

These critics often promote what seems to me to be an especially cartoon-like characterization of political discourse in "the black community," a characterization that corresponds neatly to the mass media's narrow view of contemporary African American social criticism. The mass-mediated representation of African American social criticism is a bipolar characterization that reinforces a particular image of the demographics of the black population. This demographic image is one of a black population that is composed of a "risin'" black middle class and a "declinin'" black underclass.

Similarly, the mass media portray African American social criticism as a hybrid animal. On the one end of the beast are black voices that preach the evils of affirmative action and promote the virtues of a color-blind meritocracy—our color-blind prophets and bootstrap philosophers. At the other end is an anachronistic "traditional civil rights leadership" clinging to a politics of racial entitlement that is necessarily dependent on the racial goodwill, economic prosperity, and Democratic Party dominance of a bygone era.

The problem is that the media characterize the universe of African American social criticism in terms of two of its constituent discourses. Some of the most original and powerful writers in America today—social critics like Audre Lorde and June Jordan among others—are entirely excluded from this mass-mediated representation of "black political thought." Without the voices of black women and gay men and lesbians of color, spokespersons who are tantamount to servants of the mass media can monopolize the imagery of black populations and the political possibilities those populations represent. As Audre Lorde writes: "down the street/ a glassmaker is grinning/ turning out new mirrors that lie/ selling us/ new clowns/ at cut rate."

Prominent critics like Steel and Loury are often well meaning, with important and sensitive points to make. Their arguments are not necessarily specious or pernicious. These arguments are, however, often overshadowed by the picture of the "black community" that emerges from them. This picture both authorizes and draws credibility from the superficial representation of African American social criticism that is promoted in the "dueling talking heads" school of journalism, the abbreviated discourse of *Nightline*, *The McNeil-Lehrer Report* and *Newsweek* or *Time* magazines.

The article "Loving the Messenger" written by Stephen Carter and published in the *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* both relies on and contributes to a truncated misrepresentation of "black political thought." In the rest of this essay I will discuss Carter's article in order to illustrate the discursive practice that I am complaining about, and then I will consider the way in which attention to certain marginalized

black voices can help to expand our understanding and representations of black political thought.

In the review essay "Loving the Messenger" published in the second issue of the *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*,³ Stephen Carter joins a small but robust chorus of black intellectuals who bemoan what they take to be a crippling stifling of dissent within "the black community." Most often heard from high profile public figures like Glen Loury and Thomas Sowell, this complaint alleges the existence of a "liberal civil rights orthodoxy" within "the black community," an orthodoxy that confronts deviation with allegations of race treason.

Professor Carter's essay raises important questions about solidarity, dissent, and politics among and between black folks but these questions are obscured in his attempt to affirm his own bonds to particular intellectual traditions and communities. By focusing on an extreme case of intolerance—the treatment of Julius Lester at the hands of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst Afro-American Studies Department—Carter justifies his turn to an opposite extreme—academic mythologies of intellectual combat—for remedies. It is relatively easy to throw stones at those who would sanction and engage in purges, intolerance, and name calling. It is just as easy to promote pristine, sterile standards of conduct in public political discourse. Useful academic interventions in public discourse begin, however, with the recognition that real political communities exist somewhere in between free speech situation-utopias and fascist nightmares.

Lovesong: Becoming a Jew, Julius Lester's account of his conversion to Judaism, is the occasion for Carter's remarks.⁴ The text includes descriptions of several instances in which Lester was ostracized (and worse) by black folks unhappy with positions that he had taken on black-Jewish relations. Lester's account provokes Carter to consider

the link between [the text's] message and the way in which too many in the black community have chosen to isolate dissenters from the community's orthodoxy.⁵

To a certain extent all reviewers use the texts that they review as pegs on which to hang their own views, but in Carter's case this process is quite explicit. Carter insists that Lester's work can be read as an "allegory on the civil rights movement"⁶ and while he "would not contend that the story [he has read] is the one that the author decided consciously to tell"⁷ it is this "subtextual allegory" which grounds the "message" that Carter chooses to discuss.

3. Stephen L. Carter, *Loving the Messenger*, 1 *YALE J.L. & HUMANITIES* 317 (1989).

4. J. Lester, *LOVESONG: BECOMING A JEW* (1988).

5. Carter, *supra* note 3, at 319.

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.* at 318.

Carter takes Lester's central contention to be that

the civil rights movement will not recover its spiritual greatness or its momentum until the leadership of the black community once again preaches to the oppressed that only the inner moral progress of suffering individuals moves the conscience of the society around them.⁸

While Professor Carter doesn't take an explicit position on this "different and quite tantalizing theory" of the malaise of the civil rights movement, he does utilize the concept of "suffering" to focus his own attack on the "civil rights orthodoxy" that he believes underwrites black support for what he calls "racial preference policies." From here, it is a short jaunt to the horse that Carter really wants to flog: intellectual intolerance in the black community as indicated by treatment of those blacks who dissent from this "orthodoxy."

Carter's position goes something like this: contemporary civil rights advocates misconstrue the significance of black suffering, rest a "racial preference" orthodoxy on this misconception, and deal harshly with those blacks who dare to stray from this orthodoxy. The problem is that each leg of Carter's construction is infirm.

Carter rebukes contemporary civil rights advocates who adopt an exceptionalist attitude towards black suffering—that is, an insistence that "black people have suffered as a people in some special manner that touches everyone who is black and no one else." To Carter's mind they have foregone the lessons of their predecessors, who understood that "only the inner moral progress of suffering individuals moves the conscience of the society around them."⁹

It is perfectly reasonable to reject claims that black folks have cornered the market on suffering. The problem is that Carter offers no evidence to support his claim that this particular attitude towards suffering drives "contemporary civil rights advocates." Indeed, he pays no attention to the possibility that advocates of "racial preference policies" are driven by the infinitely more reasonable conviction that black folks have sustained a unique *injury* for which we need to be compensated. Nor does he consider the possibility that many civil rights activists may be driven by a vision of a society in which diversity, social harmony and some measure of egalitarianism replace social strife, inequality and mythologies of individual achievement.

We can and probably should argue about the legacy of slavery, just as we can and should argue about the nature of a just society, and Professor Carter is not unaware that such arguments can be relevant to the "racial preference policies" that he discusses. (He cites Charles Black's "elo-

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.*

quent defense” of such policies as an “obligation of citizenship, little different from paying taxes.”) Carter avoids such arguments, however, by caricaturing the “civil rights community” along the lines of the dated views of Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, the writings of Derrick Bell and the work of Harold Cruse. While there are most certainly some living black people who would own up to the views that Carter describes, it is nothing short of scandalous that he should, without even the skimpiest shred of evidence, claim to have unearthed the structure of some “civil rights orthodoxy.”

The problem is not that Carter has misidentified the orthodoxy. Although his claims beg for substantiation—data to indicate the breadth of this “orthodoxy,” or some indication of the influence of the works that he cites—“more evidence” is somewhat beside my point. The point is that, as with all arguments about consensus, Carter’s discussion of this “orthodoxy” ignores the complexity and multiplicity that should be the real starting point for contemporary African American social criticism. His representation silences (or more precisely, presumes the silence of) voices other than his and his antagonists’, and in doing so mutes the political possibilities that real differences within black populations create.

The point that Carter really wants to stress (hence the title “Loving the Messenger”) is the “link” between Lester’s message about suffering, and “the way in which too many in the black community have chosen to isolate dissenters from the community’s orthodoxy.” “Tragically,” he writes,

but perhaps understandably, the black community is one in which dissent is stifled. Evidently, a good deal turns on solidarity, on not revealing to the world that some black people who have thought deeply about the problems facing our community disagree with the consensus position on both the causes and the cures of the problems that bedevil our people.¹⁰

This issue of dissent, it seems to me, is a vitally important one, especially as it raises hard and uncomfortable questions about what it is that constitutes a “community” as distinct from a population.

It never occurs to Carter that “declarations of independence” of the kind embodied in the work of figures like Lester, Loury and Sowell necessarily stand in some tension to the idea of a community. Obviously I do not mean to endorse the type of “purge” that he and Lester describe. Nevertheless, such purges constitute an extreme whose polar opposite is a normless community that is probably better characterized as a “population.” In order for a community to be anything more than a population, it must have borders that are policed in *some* fashion. The hard questions seem to me to revolve around the measure of independence and

10. *Id.* at 344.

autonomy that can be reasonably sacrificed for the sake of community. How is respect for a community and its members appropriately demonstrated? Indeed, how is membership appropriately manifested?

These questions are thoroughly considered in some of the recent work of political theorist Michael Walzer. In *Interpretation and Social Criticism*¹¹ and *The Society of Critics*¹² Walzer develops his notion of the importance of "connected criticism." Walzer wants to construct a framework for thinking about the relationship between the need for a connected critic to respect her community and her need for integrity and independence in criticism. He insists that critics must "look for a way of talking in tune with but also against their new accompaniment. They need to find a place to stand, close to but not engulfed by their company."¹³

The difficulty for the connected social critic, then, involves engaging the historical, cultural and discursive norms of her community at the same time that she utilizes the distance that any real criticism requires. This circumstance produces the questions that the critic must address: What sort of authority can he claim? How much distance does he require? Where does he find his standards? What language does he speak? What motives set him to work?¹⁴

It would seem to be to Carter's benefit to ignore these hard questions, in favor of kissing babies and blasting terrorists. Playing a little fast and loose with the character of "the black community" offers powerful advantages. In his broad and easy generalizations and his constant references to *the* black community, Carter seems to rely on what I would think of as a minimalist conception of "black community," a conception of a community whose membership is defined (so far as I can tell) solely in terms of skin color and "common history." This is a conception that underwrites his own membership, and it is disingenuous in the extreme to ignore the fact that his clear presentation of himself as a member of "the black community" confers credibility and authority on his account.

At the same time, the burden of his essay seems to be that "the black community" is defined at least in part in terms of adherence to and enforcement of an "orthodoxy." Indeed, the only indications that he offers for what this "black community" looks like have to do with this orthodoxy; he makes no attempt to indicate how we would define this community independent of this orthodoxy. This is why I characterize his conception as "minimalist," and it is in this regard that "race" takes on the character of an empty trope.

Once again, the problem is not that he has misdefined "the black com-

11. M. Walzer, *INTERPRETATION AND SOCIAL CRITICISM* (1987).

12. M. Walzer, *THE SOCIETY OF CRITICS* (1988).

13. *Id.* at 26.

14. *Id.* at 27.

munity”: I do not want more or better evidence. The problem is that the fiction of *a* black community may very likely have become more trouble than it is worth. Without the kind of delineation that would necessarily acknowledge many different black communities, with different needs, different structures of membership and different histories, we are all too likely to wind up with another empty trope readily susceptible to being colonized by whatever racial representations happen to be close at hand.

At any rate, Carter uses Lester’s experience of dissent to ground a broader discussion of the “problem” of dissent within “the black community.” In doing so, he underwrites a perspective from which “dissenters” like Lester, Sowell, and Carter himself are held to be courageous in view of their willingness to flout what appear to be the norms of the community “orthodoxy”: norms that are considerably stricter than those that a minimalist conception would produce. Norms that, if they do in fact exist in the form that these writers suggest, would seem to have already effectively excommunicated them and rendered their critique an external one. All too often these “dissenters” produce critiques that stem from outside any “black community” of more than minimal definition but gain authority and credibility by masquerading as internal critiques.

This little shell game is nowhere more apparent than in Carter’s essay, when this *tenured member of the Yale Law School faculty* writes:

And of course, we must be careful, for our need for these free-thinking dissenters may prove to be greater than their need for us. The black “conservatives,” so called, are relatively comfortable in their academic sinecures, which is, after all, what academic sinecures are for. Despite the name-calling of their critics, they will not be silenced. And they should not be.¹⁵

If the game is to find Professor Carter’s pea, my guess is that most of the “black folk” with whom he professes community are going to put their money on the “academic sinecure” shell every time. They know very well that he probably couldn’t (and definitely wouldn’t) write as he does if he “lived” anyplace else. On the other hand, those who know no better than to automatically grant Carter authority in Negro affairs—those most akin to tourists in these matters—may not be quite so sure.

My money is with the black folk. Carter’s arguments for the importance and the integrity of dissent are moving in a relatively narrow sphere. But they are considerably more persuasive in an academic setting than they are outside the academy. Carter seems to want “us” to care passionately and seriously about ideas without ever losing the civility and sobriety of the seminar room. In seminars, with little more than grades or academic standing at stake, such immaculate concern may be possible and even likely. But when ideas and their promotion have real

15. Carter, *supra* note 3, at 348.

consequences for people's lives, it may in fact be entirely appropriate and even necessary to "be able to tell the good guys from the bad guys." Carter is correct to insist that "the critics are obviously angry at the dissenters, and their anger stems from a deeply felt worry about the consequences of the dissent." Dissent, particularly rabid dissent, from communal norms has real costs in the real world, especially when, in cases like those that Carter cites, the dissenters are not "pure intellectuals" (if such an animal exists) but clearly and emphatically *political agents*. These costs are both necessary and desirable if "community" is to have any real meaning and force with respect to political mobilization and power. Once again, the hard questions involve the relationship between the magnitude and the character of these costs on the one hand, and the self-understanding of the community on the other.

In focusing on an easy case at the extreme, Carter allows himself to avoid these questions. He writes as if this extreme case is the norm, justifying his turn to the opposite extreme for remedial measures. "Perhaps," he writes, "the time has come for a latter-day Niagara,"

for a new manifesto in which we who are black and choose to dissent might proclaim, in much the same terms that DuBois used, our right to think for ourselves. We must demand the right to comment on any subject, no matter how sacred to the orthodoxy. We must worship no authority as absolute, except for truth itself.¹⁶

In insisting on an absolute and unyielding commitment to "truth itself," Carter presents a conception of community whose methods and manners of enforcement are defined not in terms of important requisites for political mobilization and collective power, but instead in terms of what he perceives to be the needs of intellectuals. If he indicated any recognition whatsoever that *members* must *pay dues*, then we could argue about how large those dues ought to be. Instead, he offers an affirmation of his bond with a particular community of intellectuals that is poorly disguised as a vision of a democratic black community.

There is nothing wrong with Carter's trumpeting of his intellectualist allegiances. As he points out, that is, "after all, what academic sinecures are for." He needs, however, to recognize that the conditions and character of political engagement are quite different from those that most often accompany these allegiances.

It is naive if not disingenuous to suggest that all that matters is the promotion of truth. The suggestion that I will say whatever I wish, and that some understanding of truth is all that need guide me in this project is extremely self-indulgent. An unfettered search for truth is part of our mythology about the structure of intellectual communities, but it ought not be a part of our understanding of the structure of political communi-

16. *Id.* at 349.

ties. As realists we understand that ideas fired from high social altitudes enter an already politicized discursive field and will therefore have political consequences. Perhaps our understanding of ourselves as academics or as individuals requires us to shoot first and ask questions later, but if this is the case then we must recognize the personal and professional imperatives that drive this decision. Carter and Lester can and must be free to say what they wish, but they are not free to determine whose interests will be served by what they say, and their understanding of their obligations to the various communities that they inhabit must be negotiated with that fact in mind. I don't mean to suggest that this is an easy or obvious calculation to make; members can and probably should differ about their obligations to their common community. All I ask is that some attention be paid to the discursive context within which criticism will exist.

Carter's essay raises important and pressing issues that he all but ignores. His rather idealistic restatement of norms of intellectual engagement is touching, but worse than useless in addressing the real problems of developing and maintaining political communities among black people. There is, I think, a role for "black intellectuals" in this latter task but it is *not* to insist that struggles over programs, policies and, ultimately, communal norms, take place on *our* terms. Instead, it begins with efforts to understand the political terrain; we should attempt to understand the way in which historical, economic, cultural and political factors shape the possibilities for political community in any particular instance. We must begin on the ground, helping to build political communities out of the traditions and conditions which exist within black populations, rather than constructing philosopher kingdoms in the air.

I have neither the time nor the space to detail the locally specific factors which must condition critical interventions in political struggles involving black populations. There are, however, some general points that I believe ought to underwrite any attempt at African American social criticism.

Ultimately, effective social criticism ought to address the structure and functions of the state, but the first order political problem is always to mobilize and organize individuals: the development and sustenance of democratic agencies and instrumentalities for the assertion of control over the organization and distribution of social power.

I am referring to agencies and instrumentalities that can underwrite a democratization of access to two kinds of social power: social power as an output of the state and the economy (goods, services, privileges) and social power as a product of collective action (agency, political self-respect and political efficacy). These agencies and instrumentalities must include traditional political parties and labor unions, but they must also include consumer and community groups, cultural organizations and

other instrumentalities that can reach persons excluded or otherwise alienated from traditional avenues of political expression.

African American social criticism must also address the problems posed for political agency by what many consider to be a “postmodern” fragmentation of African American identity—a disruption of the coherence of racial identity along fault lines of gender, sexuality and economic and social well-being. This fragmentation (or perhaps just the greater awareness of fragmentation) promotes politically significant differences that must be carefully negotiated if democratic forms of African American political agency are to flourish. The representation of a black population bifurcated in crude class terms is a politically enervating simplification. Forms of African American political organization must evolve to accommodate the myriad differences *within* black populations. To cite what should by now be an obvious example, the days when black men made the political rules and black women made the coffee are so far gone that it isn’t even funny. The substance and the setting of political deliberations within black populations must continue to change accordingly. Equally important, the manner in which African American politics and political activity are depicted must keep pace with these changes.

If the fragmented materials of “postmodern” African American identity are to be forged into coherent political subjectivities, it will be in part because “race” is utilized as a category of political mobilization. This is undeniably a dangerous and problematic strategy since it is common for “race” to be utilized to obscure other social constructions like class and gender. This is a move that has historically cut both ways: white politicians use “race” to pit working class blacks and whites against one another, but black politicians use “race” to mobilize (and demobilize) black populations in the ultimate service of the imperatives of capital and patriarchy.

In spite of the dangers of strategies for an explicitly racial political subjectivity, it is ultimately naive and unhelpful to insist that “race” be completely expunged as a tool for political mobilization. Such an insistence willfully ignores the “cluttered terrain” of which Ellison speaks. Race is, as Ellison also reminds us, much more than *just* the white man’s dilemma, and there is something vaguely offensive in the suggestion that it can or should be reduced to political insignificance. Black folks *have* made a *life* on the horns of this dilemma, and it is unlikely that many of us will be willing to sharply distinguish that admittedly subjective and contested “racial” life from our political lives in order to “clean up” the rhetoric and practice of American politics.¹⁷ “Race” matters and will

17. “But can a people (its faith in an idealized American Creed notwithstanding) live and develop for over three hundred years simply by *reacting*? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them? Men have made a way of life in caves and upon cliffs, why cannot Negroes have made a life upon the

continue to matter, and to expunge it from political discourse and practice is to extinguish an indispensable (if sometimes unfortunate) flame of human interest and desire.

Since "race" cannot and should not be expunged from politics and political discourse, it is so much more important that it be handled with care and responsibility. Balancing the danger and the promise in the utilization of "race" as a tool for political mobilization presumes the maintenance of a distinction between "race" as an empty trope marshalled to organize power and "race" as a textured repository of cultural meanings and political aspirations. This is undoubtedly too neat a distinction with something of the hum of the word processor about it. But it will have to suffice if we are to view race as a socially constructed phenomenon that need not be exclusive or antagonistic. By "race as an empty trope" I mean to indicate uses of "race" that manipulate prejudice, fear and hatred—uses that are negative and exclusive. As part of a political language of identity, race can and must be constructed to allow (if not facilitate) personal and political exchanges: to deconstruct classist, sexist and heterosexist discourses and practices.

An Ellisonian sensitivity to the requirements of contemporary African American criticism can be found in the writings of black women like Bernice Johnson Reagon, June Jordan, Audre Lorde and others.¹⁸ Much of this work is characterized by three salutary elements. First, it recognizes the need for an African American social criticism that does justice to the multiple African American subjectivities borne of the post-Civil Rights Movement era. Second, it focuses this criticism on the possibility of building coalitions that reach across race, gender, sexuality and economics and culture. Finally, it is aware that such coalitions are indispensable because civil rights problems are not *minority* problems, but are, instead, majority problems of power and powerlessness that involve international oppression and environmental degradation as surely as they involve racial or sexual discrimination.

In their efforts to develop what they call a "theory in the flesh," the editors of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* attempt to respond to the often contradictory manner in which race, class, gender and sexual orientation interact in constituting personal identity and interpersonal politics. Theirs is an approach to social criticism "where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity": a politic that does not require anyone to

horns of the white man's dilemma?" Ellison, *An American Dilemma: A Review*, in *SHADOW AND ACT* at 315.

18. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, *THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK: WRITINGS BY RADICAL WOMEN OF COLOR* (1981); Barbara Smith, *HOME GIRLS: A BLACK FEMINIST ANTHOLOGY* (1983); June Jordan, *MOVING TOWARDS HOME: POLITICAL ESSAYS* (1989); Audre Lorde, *SISTER OUTSIDER* (1984).

repress elements of their selves in order to "get with the program."¹⁹ Finding themselves "the colored in a white feminist movement, the feminists among the people of our culture" and often "the lesbians among the straight," these women "attempt to bridge the contradictions in [their] experience" by "naming ourselves and telling our stories in our own words."²⁰

These critics are also acutely aware of the need for coalitional work, and the possibility of mining differences for the creative possibilities that they offer.²¹ Audre Lorde, for example, insists that it is not difference itself that separates people, but a refusal to "recognize differences and examine distortions which result from misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation."²² When differences are seen as "a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic," control over the representations of ourselves and others—naming rather than misnaming difference and its consequences—is a first step towards control over the possibilities for political cooperation. In the poem "Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap," Lorde captures the tragedy of representations that facilitate the misnaming and misunderstanding of differences: "It is a waste of time hating a mirror/or its reflection/ instead of stopping the hand/ that makes glass with distortions/slight enough to pass/ unnoticed . . . Because at the same time/ down the street/a glassmaker is grinning/ turning out new mirrors that lie/ selling us/ new clowns/ at cut rate."²³

Finally, these writers recognize the importance of broadening our understanding of civil rights and "minority issues." June Jordan insists that "in America, you can segregate the people, but the problems will travel."²⁴ Writing of the Jesse Jackson presidential campaign, she argues for a broad view of civil rights, a view that considers it to be a *majority* problem:

Was hunger a Black problem or an American disgrace? Was equal access to good housing and education a Black demand or a necessity inside a "democratic state"? Was "Jobs or Income" an unreasonable, left-wing slogan, or a matter of human survival?²⁵

Jordan calls for a new social criticism to accommodate a new *majority* situation of powerlessness: "Somebody needs to write aggressive new

19. Moraga and Anzaldua, *Id.* at 23.

20. *Id.*

21. See especially Bernice Johnson Reagon, *Coalition Politics: Turning the Century* in Smith, *supra* note 18.

22. Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* in Lorde, *supra* note 18 at 115.

23. Audre Lorde, *FROM A LAND WHERE OTHER PEOPLE LIVE* (1973) at 15.

24. Jordan, *Problems of Language in a Democratic State* in Jordan, *supra* note 18 at 126.

25. Jordan, *American in Confrontation with Democracy or The Meaning of the Jesse Jackson Campaign* in Jordan, *supra* note 18 at 206.

editorials," she says, "somebody needs to write aggressive new statements of social design and demand."²⁶ Taken together these women are attempting to address the needs that stem from the circumstances of African American life in the contemporary period—the need to develop clear, accurate representations of the differences between and among people and the need to develop strategies and languages to facilitate organization and mobilizations across the boundaries that the *misnaming* and the *misrepresentation* of difference help to erect.

Many of Stephen Carter's instincts are laudable: his effort to bridge difference mirrors the work of writers like Jordan, Lorde, and Reagon. The problem is that to suggest that the black community is accurately represented in terms of black anti-semitism and some "civil rights orthodoxy" is to construct a straw man that he can pick apart in order to establish his own credentials as a courageous dissenter. This is especially problematic as it promotes an image of the black population as most likely *unreceptive* to the kind of coalitional work that political mobilization and organization requires. Carter's valuable insights are obscured by his inclination to write in such a manner as to validate the most narrow and uninformed stereotypes of "the black community."

As can be seen in the work of black women like June Jordan and Audre Lorde, there are African American social critics who have no choice but to combat and remake stereotyped representations of blackness and "the black community." They are critics who know from often bitter experience that what it means to be black has perhaps never been as complex as it is today—critics who understand that the social, cultural and political factors that condition African American lives require an Ellisonian attention to that complexity.

It isn't surprising that the voices of these women are so often ignored in the depiction of African American political discourse. Those who construct the representations of politics and political discourse in this country have never been at a loss for ways and reasons to overlook and trivialize the political contributions of women, especially the contributions of women of color. We have, I would suggest, paid dearly for this indulgence. Confronting politics in its clean, abstract, cartoon-like outlines has left behind a mess for others to clean up, others whom we would prefer to treat as the maids and housekeepers of our political culture. We can little afford to continue this foolish conceit.

26. Jordan, *supra* note 24 at 30.