THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE BLACK PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

By

Eugene Netupsky, B.A.

Washington, DC
May 3, 2013
THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE BLACK PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

Eugene Netupsky, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Ricardo Ortiz, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This thesis will examine the intellectual activism of three current Black Public Intellectuals: Cornel West, Lani Guinier, and Melissa Harris-Perry. I will argue, using the theories of Homi Bhabha, Roderick Ferguson, and Edward Said, that the Black Public Intellectual is not confined to the study of race, but rather, examines affiliate fields of race, class, gender, and sexuality to productively disrupt an American society that has historically participated in white, heteropatriarchal, capitalistic exclusion. At the core of chapter one is the tension between the intellectual protest of Black Public Intellectuals and the discriminatory ideologies that circulate in American society. Chapters two, three, and four examine the strategies these Black Public Intellectuals have adopted to begin the process of educating and enlightening the public towards democratic equality. Chapter five concludes with the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, demonstrating how each group of persons was marked as non-normative for the purposes of capitalistic exploitation, and how the Black Public Intellectual has risen to protest in favor of democracy for all.
# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Black Public Intellectual and American Human Suffering

- I. Disrupting White, Heteropatriarchal Pedagogies through Black Public Intellectual Activism
  
- II. American Media Representations of the Marginalized
  
- III. Representations of the Black Public Intellectual

Chapter 2: Cornel West: Capitalism and its Effects on American Society

- I. Black Existential Angst

Chapter 3: Lani Guinier and The Miner’s Canary

Chapter 4: Melissa Harris Perry: Political Recognition for Black American Women

Chapter 5: Queer of Color Critique: Race, Class, Gender, Sexuality

Bibliography
Chapter 1

The Black Public Intellectual and American Human Suffering

How do Black Public Intellectuals in the United States approach, examine, and put into action the values and truths that speak to the historical legacy that American slavery has left behind? In America, asymmetries of power have emerged as a result of the historical reality of slavery and racial segregation, namely the division of the wealthy from the poor and the educated from the non-educated. The Black Public Intellectual has had to think critically and reflect on the historical and social realities in America, and subsequently, produce a mass of critical knowledge regarding how these realities have shaped and formed our contemporary society. The American Black Public Intellectual is not confined to the study and analysis of race, but pursues any discourse in American society that has produced power structures that alienate and estrange any group outside the dominant, privileged class. These issues include poverty, the maintenance of the division between upper class and underclass, discrimination on the basis of gender, race, or sexual orientation, and any force that undermines and threatens the possibility of egalitarianism.

The role and responsibility of the Black Intellectual becomes aligned with the intellectual that Edward Said imagines in his *Representations of the Intellectual*: “There is no question in my mind,” Said writes, “that the intellectual belongs on the same side with the weak and unrepresented. Robin Hood, some are likely to say” (22). The Black Public Intellectual will send “seismic shocks” and “jolts people” in the name of philosophical and spiritual choices that are different and more ethically and intellectually grounded than the general public’s attitudes (56). More than just having an intellectual
energy that is oriented in the direction of the poor and underrepresented, the Black Public Intellectual’s training will reflect a broad historical knowledge of events as well as discursive techniques and analyses that will help in critiquing the institutional signifiers and systems of power in today’s society. Like the Saidian Public Intellectual, the Black Public Intellectual must have a commitment to philology: “A true philological reading is active; it involves getting inside the process of language already going on in words and making it disclose what may be hidden or incomplete or masked or distorted in any text we have before us” (59). For Said, the philologist employs an analytical rigor in studying texts—where text represents any instance of speech making—and the systems of power and hierarchy that are embedded in them. The role of the Black Public Intellectual, who at once functions as a philologist, is to uncover the hidden, misleading, and difficult messages in American society that produce discrimination, and make them clear, accessible, and intelligible to the general public. In reinterpreting and re-framing the issues at hand, the Black Public Intellectual must evoke the history of race-relations, class-relations, gender-relations, and sexual identity-relations in American society, and situate the current representations of oppressed groups in their proper context. The Black Public Intellectual subscribes to Said’s claim that the intellectual tends to “see things not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way. Look at situations as contingent, not as inevitable, look at them as the result of a series of historical choices made by men and women, as facts of society made by human beings” (60).

Edward Said’s *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* lays bare the responsibility of the Black Intellectual: “Principally, it means situating critique at the heart of humanism, critique as a form of democratic freedom and as a continuous practice of
questioning and accumulating knowledge that is open to, rather than in denial of, the constituent historical realities of the post-Cold War, its early colonial formation, and the frighteningly global reach of the last remaining superpower of today” (47). To adopt Said’s version of humanism, Black Intellectual Humanism speaks to and reflects an intellectual critique of the political structures, political agents, laws, and policies that produce human suffering in America. The Black Public Intellectual performs the type of intellectual work Saidian Humanism analyzes in American society: The construction of race in early colonial formation and its subsequent production of racial difference in society; The asymmetries of power produced by historical realities; Free-market fundamentalism that created, produced, and subjugated an underclass in American society. Recognizing these asymmetries and inequalities in American society that are rooted in Black experience and history, Black Public Intellectuals feel a calling to protest, publically, through published works or the media on the divisions that exist in society. William Banks writes, “The lives and works of black intellectuals have always been strongly linked to the position of African Americans in the United States. … Unlike whites, they could not choose to ignore the question of what it meant to be black in America” (242). For Black Public Intellectuals, recognizing these social realities is the first step towards developing a critical mass of knowledge. This reservoir of knowledge is the first step towards awareness—a potent, political awareness—, which creates political consciousness. Political consciousness, for this study, is the close, careful attention to racial, class, and gender inequities; a comprehension of their devastating effects on the human being; and the emergence of an oppositional consciousness to challenge and undermine discriminatory social practices.
Never has the role of the Black Public Intellectual been more vital to analyzing political and social inequality in America. Today, Black Americans, women, and poor whites are still discriminated against both in access to educational institutions and workplace establishments; women who perform the same work as men are still paid less merely because of gender inequality; Gay Americans are still fighting for the right to openly express their sexual identity in their place of work and in the military; Superior educations are still reserved for the children of wealthy families, while lower-middle class children are scorned by the public education system in America; Quality of healthcare Americans receive depends on the ability to afford the best treatment options.

In America, the responsibility of the Black Public Intellectual is to critique white-patriarchal hegemony, which produces and disseminates ideologies that promote a fictitious “natural” hierarchy: non-white, non-male, and non-heterosexual persons are marked as inferior and subordinate. The Black Public Intellectual is duty-bound to explain and re-interpret these pervasive, discriminatory ideologies that exist in today’s society, situate them in their American historical context, and attempt to provide answers that help society move towards justice. The Black Public Intellectual is expected to provide critical commentary on current events, like the nationally televised Rodney King assault, the Amadou Diallo beating, and the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin. These incidents serve as concrete reminders that people of color are still mistreated by agents of the law (who, ironically, have safety and protection as their ostensible goals). Black Public Intellectuals are not limited to the production of analysis on race-relations in American society, but are expected to provide incisive commentary and speak out in favor of similarly oppressed groups: gay Americans, poor Americans, religiously
persecuted Americans, and women in America. Black Public Intellectuals advocate for equal rights for the gays in the military, support the plight of poor whites, speak out against religious intolerance after post September 11th discrimination of Muslim groups, and protest against any injustice in American society. In his book *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, Cornel West unites the plight of all those who have been racially, religiously, and economically persecuted by making frequent references to “xenophobic prejudices and imperialistic practices” (18) that have been experienced by Jewish, Black, and poor persons in America. For West, oppressed citizens around the world must unite and create a vision of solidarity against any tyrannical party or regime that is unfairly and cruelly crushing a group of people. Lani Guinier envisions examining race by addressing “people of color and, beyond them, injustices to other oppressed groups such as poor whites” (95). Michael Eric Dyson notes that in the year that Malcolm X died, he said “even when whites credit a Negro with some intelligence, they still feel the black thinker is only qualified to speak about race” (498). Dyson writes that Malcolm X later remarked, “Just notice how rarely you will hear whites asking an Negroes what they think about the problem of world health.” Although Dyson asserts that this claim is still true today, his works are proof that Black Intellectuals have at least started to comment publically on many matters outside of race and across many different cultural and political terrains, all in favor of political and cultural equality. In their works, these Black Intellectuals have chosen not to confine themselves to analyzing the history of subjugation for Black Americans, but for any group that has been socially, economically, or politically excluded.
Trained in the American University, the Black Public Intellectual as engaged, critical, scholar seizes the opportunity to uncover, explore, and analyze his or her history, giving a broader historical perspective to critique intergenerational adversity generated by race-relations and laws in America. Michael Eric Dyson notes this important historical moment: “The post-civil rights generation of black intellectuals has begun to get some of the benefits that even towering intellectual giants were routinely denied. For the most part, the present cadre of celebrated black intellectuals is the first generation to gain entry as students into elite white colleges and universities, later to return and find their voices and vocations within those same halls of ivy as professors” (499). Historically, people of color in America have had the doors of educational institutions closed to them, and although educational institutions now encourage a diverse student body, the Black Public Intellectual engages in research that illustrates the added difficulties that children of color face in educational institutions: children of parents who have only gone to high school, like many under-represented children in America, are far-less likely to go to college themselves. Black-American and Hispanic American parents being denied to educational institutions not only resulted in their disadvantage, but has produced intergenerational disadvantage: the odds these children will attend college is statistically terrible. The historical and social forces that afflicted past generations cast a long shadow on the current generation; both socio-historical and psycho-historical forces make it far more difficult for young, minority adults to attend college, and thus, making it harder for them to overcome socio-economic barriers.

Amidst a society that seeks out tangible, concrete proof in the form of quantitative data, Black Public Intellectuals have had to research, produce, and publish for mass
circulation data that reflects the growing injustices in America and the world. Realizing that the American citizenry may respond better to arguments that contain numerical data, Black Public Intellectuals have utilized social science research to win over the American masses into understanding the plight of the underclass in American society. At the outset of her book *The Miner’s Canary*, Lani Guinier devotes a significant amount of text to giving her readers a rapid, concentrated dose of the frightening statistics for Black, Hispanic, and poor Americans. Guinier cites data that illustrates the effects of compounded inequality over decades on black families when compared to their white counterparts: “blacks earning $50,000 or more have a median net worth that is barely one-half the median net worth of their white counterparts” (44). Should joblessness, healthcare bills, family emergencies, or unexpected costs fall on both a white family and a black family, the data suggests that the white family has economic capital passed down from previous generations to help pay bills, while the black family would need to resort to other measures. This, potentially, includes draining any savings that were accumulated, continuing the cycle of leaving no financial safety net for future generations. Equally startling, Guinier points out that for those making less than $15,000 per year, “the median African American family has no assets, while the equivalent white family holds $10,000 worth of equity.” At upper income levels, “white families have a median net worth of $308,000, almost three times the figure for upper-income African American families ($114,600)” (45). As she continues her economic analysis of black families when compared to white families, she cites research which shows homes in black neighborhoods appreciate much slower than homes in white neighborhoods, which leads her finally to conclude that each generation in black families passes on a form of “asset
poverty” (47). Even black families who have moved up the social ladder cannot fully mitigate the effects of the asset poverty left behind in the previous generation. Guinier quotes the writer DeNeen L. Brown on what being in the middle class means: “To me that term (middle class) doesn’t mean anything other than someone who is one step out of poverty and two paychecks from being broke. I have income but not true wealth” (47).

Like Lani Guinier, Melissa Harris-Perry draws on sociological research to incorporate it into her intellectual activism. Commenting on the socio-medical climate for black women, Harris-Perry writes, “Black women have higher rates of hypertension and diabetes. They are more likely to die of breast cancer and more likely to have a hysterectomy. While HIV-AIDS infections have declined throughout the United States, the highest rate of new cases is among young black women, in whom it is also the leading cause of death” (46). The statistical inequalities presented here capture some of the hardships for black women across America: having to bear the burden of being the backbone (oftentimes as single mothers) to their families and psychological stress that accompanies this; unequal access to healthcare and medical screenings; poorer quality of care during healthcare treatment. When compared to white women, Harris-Perry observes that one in four black women lives in poverty, a rate that is double that of white women. She continues, “Babies born to black women are two and a half times more likely to die before their first birthday than white babies. Compared to white women, black women are significantly more likely to be the sole wage earner in their household, to never marry, to suffer divorce, or to be widowed young” (45-46). Each one of these statistics reveals alarming data as to the economic, psychological, and bodily hardships black women must face. The statistics Harris-Perry cites bring to view the reality for black
women: They must raise a family with less financial means, without a husband’s assistance, with less access to education, and with more healthcare costs. This bleak picture highlights some of the disadvantages that black women must endure in the American context.

Michael Eric Dyson has argued that some have pointed out that modern racism is modeled on the white immigrant experience in the United States. Dyson argues, however, that to do so would be to dilute or ignore the function of structural racism with its history of enslavement, and with the specific economic consequences that lead to sustained and prolonged inequalities. This liberal tendency is to speak of ethnicity, conjoined to language, religion, and other cultural differences, but this inclination promotes a cultural pluralism that once more ignores the fact of structural racism. Assimilation, then, becomes a key feature within such a view of white liberalism, where blacks and Hispanics are always looking to catch up to a fictional white standard.

For Dyson, one possible way of redressing this notion is the evident need to compensate for the unequal distribution of resources that have historically left Blacks at a disadvantage. In a debate with Carl Cohen, professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan, Dyson lays out the need for affirmative action programs while simultaneously exposing the lack of merits for Professor Cohen’s arguments against affirmative action. Dyson writes that admissions officers look to “legacy,” “geographical distribution,” and “wealth” as criteria for admission to higher education, and yet, many don’t seem to view these as unfair advantages (76). He points out that whites seem to have no problem with these advantages because they benefit from them. Furthermore, even after black students get an education, they only make ninety percent of what their white counterparts are
earning. Lastly, Dyson argues for a point that is often overlooked in affirmative action arguments: diversity is not only good for leveling the playing field, but is also an inherent educational good which contributes to the learning environment of the university community. For Dyson, ultimately, “American society has to accommodate the ways in which race has played a significantly detrimental factor in the distribution of a good like education” (83). This detrimental factor, which has prevented equality for blacks in American society, occurs both consciously and unconsciously, and prevents blacks from opportunities in research, the workplace, education, and housing. Dyson is sure to point out that this discrimination occurs not only on the basis of race, but also on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, social class, and ethnicity. For Dyson, there is an inherent good that may result from all these different types of diversities, and should be taken account into affirmative action programs.

These alarming statistics are meant to shock the reader into action, move the reader out of political and social inertness, to re-write the narratives that the American social psyche and public policy system have ingrained into the American memory. This tangible, verifiable data is meant to help stir the American citizenry towards an oppositional consciousness, which seeks out reformation in public housing, equal opportunity and funding in education for children starting at an early age, healthcare policy that does not seek to bankrupt its citizens, and the discontinuation of redlining sections of neighborhoods for discriminatory purposes. Guinier, Dyson, and Harris-Perry hope to create a political consciousness for their readerships by use of their statistical evidence to have the American public begin to understand the inequality that is created through generations of systematic and deliberate segregation and discrimination.
My initial speculation, that Black Public Intellectuals who gravitate to the study of race-relations in America, would examine affiliate fields that have historically, and currently, produced discrimination in America on the basis of class, race, gender, proved to be accurate. The three Black Public Intellectuals who I will be focusing on—Cornel West, Lani Guinier, and Melissa Harris-Perry—perform the work of intellectual activism against political and social inequities existing in America. In *Race Matters*, Cornel West takes the temperature of race in the 1990’s and asks: Where are we regarding race in America today? He addresses a range of issues including: the crisis in Black leadership, affirmative action, and black sexuality as a taboo subject. In *Democracy Matters*, West’s central thesis revolves around the nihilism that is overtaking American society. For West, what will be the outlook for an American culture devoid of spirituality, for a citizenry buying into the excesses of capitalism, and for politicians who lack principle? In *Sister Citizen*, Melissa Harris-Perry examines the cultural stereotypes that threaten the physical and emotional well-being of black, female Americans. After tracing back to the historical origins of these discriminatory perceptions, she argues that, today, these stereotypes contribute to a political misrecognition for black women in society. Lani Guinier uses the metaphor of the canary in the mine and its role in discovering noxious gases to argue that if the canary is exposed to poisonous gases, it is only a matter of time before the miners are also poisoned. She argues that social change will not only benefit blacks and Hispanics, but other oppressed groups in American society.
I. Disrupting White, Heteropatriarchal Pedagogies through Black Public Intellectual Activism

In his chapter “DissemiNation,” Homi Bhabha reads and explores the nation from the immigrant perspective. Bhabha’s reading of the immigrant perspective can be applied to the current American cultural terrain: like the immigrant, people of color, women, gays, and poor persons experience similar discrimination and cultural dislocation because of the white, heteropatriarchal hegemony that exists in American society. Like the displaced immigrant, marginalized persons in America struggle to position themselves within the grids of power in American society. How, Bhabha asks, can the immigrant become part of the narrative of the new nation, and reconstruct the new nation to become part of its narrative. Bhabha proposes the term “pedagogical” to describe the unwritten cultural laws and social narratives, which contain ideologies of white, heteropatriarchal supremacy. This American pedagogical functions as a stabilizing force: It attempts to promote the identity of nation as fixed and settled. As immigrants enter the nation space, the national identity is disrupted, which Bhabha terms the performative. Like immigrants entering into the new nation space, Black Public Intellectuals presence in the media, published works, and public voice disengages the white, heteropatriarchal ideologies that circulate in American society. The performative of the Black Public Intellectual—the public intellectual activism—erases and re-constructs pre-existing social-historical narratives in America. Bhabha explains the effect of this dynamic exchange between pedagogical and performative on the political: the resulting ambivalence “produces a continual slippage of categories like sexuality, class affiliation, territorial paranoia, or ‘cultural difference’ in the act of writing the nation” (201). Pervasive, dominant
narratives, marking gay persons, poor persons, and racially and culturally different persons as “other,” begin to lose their hegemonic meaning. Black Public intellectuals, in critiquing the media, public policies, and social institutions, are a dynamic and powerful force in the re-writing of an American nation that is more just, more humane, and more egalitarian.

This, however, is not an unimpeded process: entrenched institutional ideologies and practices are so ingrained in the American social psyche and system of public policy that the preexisting American social narrative persists. In this conflict between the white, heteropatriarchal ideology and Black performative, a double narrative emerges where “the people are also the ‘subjects’ of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity” (208). The residual white, heteropatriarchal ideology remains not only in institutions, but also embedded within American subjects; the Black Public Intellectual must help re-orient the American people towards more contemporary, more progressive, ideas of the nation space and its people. The Black Public Intellectual is crucial in creating a tension between the national (discriminatory!) pedagogies and the people. Exposure to a new, thoughtful engagement with issues like affirmative action, gender pay inequities, racial injustices, and capitalistic greed, plays a significant role in the re-articulation of nation and re-definition of the nation towards new cultural meaning.

Black Intellectual activism encourages oppressed American citizens to seek out their own identity, discover an authentic sense of national cultural belonging, and voices its dissent against pedagogies that were dominant in the old national narrative. The constant dialectic exchange between the racist, homophobic, class elitist, discourses in
American society become slowly undone by intellectuals who speak for oppressed groups. Not only does the national narrative become revised and altered, but also marginalized persons develop an oppositional consciousness, and begin to protest for political and social reform. The nation begins to slowly, but meaningfully, become unsettled: White, heteropatriarchal hegemony can no longer be the single, powerful, dominant discourse. Bhabha writes the unsettling caused by the performative’s engagement with the pedagogical “makes untenable any supremacist, or national claims to cultural mastery, for the position of narrative control is neither monocular nor monologic” (213). The very presence of Black Intellectual protest disturbs any historic hegemonic control that discourses have tried to produce. What emerges and materializes is an American citizenry attuned to a racial politics, feminist politics, and class politics; intellectual activism leads to visible, public protest, and Americans take to the streets against American inequalities. The significance of Black Intellectual performative resides in its ability to critique white, heteropatriarchal hegemony; To develop an oppositional consciousness in the minds of marginalized members of society; And finally, to produce a racial, feminist, class, and identity politics in the minds of those who have never been forced to experience or understand the plight of those experiencing poverty, adversity, and inequity in society.

In the process of gathering and mobilizing towards protest, technology has played a crucial role, and we must turn to Arjun Appadurai to explore the intersection of the Black Intellectual activism with technology. Appadurai writes, “There is growing evidence that the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and in general, agency” (7). Black Public Intellectuals turn
to books, media, newspapers, magazines, and social networking sites to publically engage
the American public with current social and political issues. Melissa Harris-Perry
currently has her own show on MSNBC, “Melissa Harris-Perry.” Cornel West frequently
visits “Real Time with Bill Maher,” and tours across America with Tavis Smiley to get
his message out on issues of democracy, race, and poverty. Michael Eric Dyson, in
addition to being both professor and author, is a political analyst for MSNBC, a
commentator on NPR and CNN, and regularly visits other TV news outlets. Witnessing
these Black Public Intellectuals protest against political and social inequities on TV, the
Internet, and in newspapers contributed to the formulation of a more politically and
socially enlightened cadre in the United States.

Technology plays a critical role in creating a space for citizens to become
educated if they do not necessarily have the means to have formal educational training,
and allows them to become inspired. Black Public Intellectuals have all taken to
technological communication to address masses of people and help galvanize them to
social action and protest. For Appadurai, the documentation and recording of events
through technologies can create new “instabilities” and new “disorders” (4). Appadurai
adds that with “the rapid flow of mass-mediated images, scripts, and sensations, we have
a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities” (4). The Internet,
newspapers, and the twenty-four-hour cycle of news programs function as a real-time
classroom for Black Public Intellectuals to educate the American citizenry. The dialectic
exchange between the Black Intellectual activism and technological media, according to
Appadurai, produces “modern subjectivities,” whose aim is to “render instabilities” and
“disorders” within a group of citizens who are sexist, racist, and homophobic.
II. American Media Representations of the Marginalized

Regarding the American media’s portrayal of the marginalized in America, Said writes that Intellectuals must be “capable of resisting those only by disputing the images, official narratives, justifications of power circulated by an increasingly powerful media—and not only media but whole trends of thought that maintain the status quo, keep things within an acceptable and sanctioned perspective on actuality—by providing what Mills calls unmasking or alternative versions in which to the best of one’s ability the intellectual tries to tell the truth” (22). Today’s media create and select specific narratives that will confirm and reinforce textual and visual representations of the other in American society based on historical nationalist pedagogies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The intellectual’s responsibility is to pay meticulous attention to the language employed by the media, and then to disseminate knowledge that undermines the propaganda used by the media, and re-represent the images and ideas of the groups being scorned by media outlets. These groups become racialized in very specific ways to maintain the white, hegemonic, patriarchal systems of power in the United States. Society becomes impressed with these representations largely through the American media, which, through ownership of various corporations, has an invested interest in keeping power to those who already possess it. The media disseminates a multiplicity of representations that create a layered, multi-faceted effect on the minds of the American public to picture and understand American “others” in coded ways.

Concerning media production in the United States, Noam Chomsky and Cornel West have each made trenchant observations on the relationship between powerful
institutions and the media as well as the subtle, coded images and words that produce certain effects on the American audience in ways that benefit the elite. Chomsky in his book *Manufacturing Consent* writes, “It is our view that, among their other functions, the media serve, and propagize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them. The representatives of these interests have important agendas and principles that they want to advance, and they are well positioned to shape and constrain media policy” (xi). Powerful institutions in America create or buyout media outlets in America that will have an abiding faith and allegiance towards a certain ideological stance. These institutions ensure that media outlets have “experts” and “specialists” that manipulate and create stories that abide by the institutional ideology; Seek out events that are newsworthy if and only if they confirm and reinforce the institution’s dominant ideologies; And lastly, create certain effects on the population that compels them to hold beliefs about society that keep the wealth, property, and status positions among a small elite group of the population. All this amounts to the production of people who do not have access to and are remote from the systems of wealth in America because of naturalized views of them, which revolve around inferiority, immorality, and criminality. Especially today, with the advent of many more textual representations—the Internet, political television commentary, news journalism in print and technological format, and books—there is a greater demand for what the public intellectual must do. Like in Said’s version of Orientalism, where readers and consumers of certain kinds of texts were influenced in how the West saw the East in a naturally inferior way, so too now modern texts have created and perpetuated certain images, both textual and visual, of the outsider in American society. While Chomsky works to help us understand the relationship
between power structure and the media, Cornel West criticizes the type of news stories that are shown on the media in *Democracy Matters*: “So many shows follow a crude formula for providing titillating coverage that masks itself as news. Those who are purveyors of this bastardized form of reporting are sentimental nihilists, willing to sidestep or even bludgeon the truth or unpleasant and unpopular facts and stories, in order to provide an emotionally satisfying show” (Democracy Matters, 36). For West, demagoguery has run amuck, leaving news media pundits to incite the passions and prejudices of the people that trigger America’s racial history, to keep minority groups outside of the circles of power. The “sentimental nihilism” that West invokes is the media’s way of sensationalizing news stories that are not about truth, but about rousing the general public towards feelings of “middle-class and upper-class white people” that have an invested interest in keeping the power within their small circle. His use of “nihilism” refers to the media’s refusal to report accurately and truthfully, but rather to manufacture and create inaccurate truths about groups of people that are non-white. This, for West, amounts to a nihilism: a lack of ethics, morals, and principles guiding what is published and said by journalists nowadays, but only a commitment to entertainment which, in many instances, is void of any real truth.

**III. Representations of the Black Public Intellectual**

Michael Eric Dyson observes a couple of interesting nuances regarding the Black Public Intellectual in American society. Dyson writes:

Most of the time our identities are exploited for white commercial ends, or ripped off to further the careers of white imitators. Blackness is today a hot commodity, but of course, it always has been: the selling of black bodies on the slave market,
minstrel shows, Elvis’s cloning of black gospel and blues singers all point to the fetish of black skin and skill in American popular culture (497).

Dyson observes that it is part of the tendency today for blackness to be in and out of fashion in American cultural life, and Black Public Intellectuals are riding the wave of popularity in the American media. Dyson traces this cycle back to the historical narrative of understanding the black body to be used as capital, for the production of capitalistic profits. Black skin and the black body have been used either in slavery, or as a form of entertainment for white public consumption. Dyson writes, “You’re alright if your black body shows up on professional basketball courts, where nearly 80 percent of the players are black. Or in the entertainment industry, where, despite the preponderance of decent parts doled out to whites, more blacks have slightly thicker pickin’s and more leftovers to compete for in the past.” Dyson believes the Black Public Intellectual has a duty to examine exactly what “blackness” means in society, and to help explain this disproportionate representation of blacks in the entertainment industry rather than in the fields of education, law, business, medicine, and politics. In understanding and studying blackness, the Black Public Intellectuals speak often exclusively more often than not to a white public; their job is to explain, translate, and interpret black culture to the white masses. The danger in this scenario, for Dyson, is trying to please a white public, rather than speaking, genuinely, critically, and thoughtfully about black experience in America and selling out black interests. Dyson writes, ”That we come to think white folk are the only folk that that count and, in trying to please them, we end up selling out black interests” (501). Concurring with Dyson’s analysis, in *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*, Cornel West adds that “given the constraints upon black upward social mobility and the pressures for status and affluence among middle-class peers, many
Black Intellectuals principally seek material gain and cultural prestige. Since these intellectuals are members of an anxiety-ridden and status-hungry Black middle-class, their proclivities are understandable and, to some extent, justifiable, since most intellectuals are in search of recognition, status, power, and often wealth” (135).

Additionally, Dyson does note that once the Black Intellectual writes for an academic audience, he or she faces the charge of writing towards a white, academic audience, neglecting a general audience who most needs the thoughts, insights, and reflections of leaders in the Black community. The Black Intellectual must navigate and straddle two distinct worlds: the white public, looking to understand black culture, as well as a black public who they are directly engaging with. Although some claim that Black Intellectuals are primarily speaking to a white audience, and therefore, writing and speaking to please white audiences, Dyson refutes this immediately. He writes, “Let’s get real. Black folk read the papers, watch television, and consume books like everybody else. … Black Public Intellectuals are reaching broader white and black audiences through their work. …Besides, most of the Black Public Intellectuals I know make regular appearances among black folk to hash out important ideas about race, democracy, and this nation’s destiny” (501).

In addition to observing the duty of Black Intellectuals to speak out authentically about Black culture, Black Intellectuals have faced the charge of not being rigorous enough, not scholarly enough, with regard to the intellectual thought produced. The charge against Black Public Intellectuals for producing intellectually inferior work seems to be rooted in the racist notion of black intellectual inferiority, but also, fails to understand the responsibility of the black public intellectual. Dyson writes, “There’s a
useful distinction to be made between rigor, which can be expressed in elegant prose or complex theory, and wanton inaccessibility, which masquerades as cutting-edge intellectual craft when it’s little more than jargon bloated, obfuscated, intellectual nonsense” (502). Although Dyson writes that charges made against the Black Public Intellectual are partially due to an academic audience which does not fully understand the role of the Black Intellectual to speak to a general public, Cornel West critiques the University as institution: “It is much more difficult for Black students, especially graduate students, to be taken seriously as potential scholars and intellectuals, owing to the managerial ethos of our universities and colleges and universities and to the vulgar (racist!) perceptions fueled by affirmative action programs which pollute many Black student-White Professor relations” (133).

Black Public Intellectuals, additionally, are forced to navigate two worlds: the world of the academy and the world of the general public. Dyson points out that as a Black Intellectual, he is first committed to work as a “black person” and secondly, as a “black scholar” (502). Dyson, like many other Black Intellectuals, realizes that his first concern is to speak in a clear and intelligible manner to a general audience that has not had the academic training he has received. For Dyson, the first priority for the Black Intellectual is to shed light for the community on a range of issues that affect the day to day living of the general public and to continue to elaborate on why race is still a central problem in America. West, like Dyson, imagines the central task of “postmodern Black Intellectuals is to stimulate, hasten, and enable alternative perceptions and practices by dislodging prevailing discourses and powers. This can be done only by intense intellectual work and engaged insurgent practice” (144).
One February 4, 2013, *The New York Times* published a series of articles in the “Room for Debate” section, asking, “Do Black Public Intellectuals need to talk about race?” Melissa Harris Perry writes, “If we have unique responsibilities, I am not sure they derive mainly from our race. I believe public intellectuals of all races have a responsibility to stay as true to our academic training as we can manage within the pressures of media environments.” Although she does suggest at the end of her essay that Black Public Intellectuals need not solely stick to discussing issues of race, but rather, should focus on making contributions within the academic area that one has expertise in, she does make comments earlier to suggest that part of the role of the Black Public Intellectual is to make contributions within the intellectual tradition of previous Black Intellectuals. She writes, “the works of scholars like Cornel West, Manning Marable, bell hooks, and Patricia Williams are definitive contributions that shaped the intellectual and political landscape in which we came of age. We will no more displace them than they displaced W.E.B. Du Bois, Julia Cooper, or Ida B. Wells.” Although on the one hand Harris-Perry seems to suggest that Black Public Intellectuals should make contributions based on their area of academic expertise, she does seem to say that Black Intellectuals will be working to expand upon and elaborate previous work from other Black Intellectuals. Ultimately, Harris-Perry believes that Black Public Intellectuals are not to be confined to speak on the subject of race, but rather, to speak to his or her area of expertise.
Chapter 2

Cornel West: Capitalism and its Effects on American Society

In *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, Cornel West identifies three phenomena threatening democracy in our times: free market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism. For West, American society has been overrun and overtaken by the destructive effects of capitalism, which has produced the following: the pursuit of individualistic preoccupations, the glamorization of materialism, and the demise of human spirituality. As a society, we have quickly evolved to value profit and corporate interests ahead of public interest and human welfare. His central thesis is that capitalistic American culture has bred a nihilism that has resulted in a citizenry devoid of spirituality and a politics that does not recognize the power of being principled. Nihilism in America has precipitated the “psychic depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair,” which has overwhelmed Americans (26). The Americans who feel this most are those who have been excluded from democracy—poor and oppressed peoples—having had their freedom and agency revoked by capitalism that encourages the “drive to succeed at the cost of others rather than the drive to decency and integrity” (28). A market morality, devoted to the quest of accumulating as much wealth as possible, has effectively replaced any and all humanistically oriented philosophies that promote the sacredness of the human being. West recognizes the dual “political nihilisms” that exist in society: street gangsterism in the inner-city and elite gangsterism in the American halls of power. Although both political nihilisms occur in two different social contexts, both have similar origins: the quest for power, the drive towards greed, and the desire to manipulate the masses results in political and social
capital for few, and violent and harmful consequences for many. West sums up the worldview for these few political nihilists who create despair and hopelessness for the mass majority of society: “He will use clever arguments to rationalize his will to power and deploy skillful strategies, denying the pain and suffering he may cause, in order to shape the world and control history in light of the pursuit of power” (29).

After asserting the dangerous and violent effects of nihilism in America, West turns his attention to youth culture to see how nihilistic beliefs have invaded into the psyches of young America. West writes, “the market driven media lead many young people to think that life is basically about material toys and social status” (175). Adolescents in America are now convinced that pleasure, materialism, and sexual satisfaction are the pillars to a meaningful, fulfilling life. West blames the media for the “bombardment of images on TV and in movies and music … that the culture of gratification … is the only way of being human” (175). For West, the danger of this situation comes when adolescents turn to drinking, drugs, and guns to fill emotional voids created by a lack of family, communities in despair, and a country that has a long history of oppressing a racial and social underclass. These young adults are trained—indoctrinated—to believe that success revolves around attaining clothes and electronics and chasing pipe dreams of becoming professional athletes rather than developing qualities of mind to aid them in their professional careers.

American companies have played a critical role in the messages disseminated to young black and Hispanic children all over America. West writes that hip-hop has become “a nihilistic, macho, violent, and bling-bling phenomenon when in-fact its originating impulse was a fierce disgust with the hypocrisies of adult culture—disgust
with the selfishness, capitalist callousness, and xenophobia of the culture of adults, both within the hood and in the society at large” (179). At first, teenagers and young adults took to hip-hop as a linguistic outlet for the sorrow, despair, and disrepair they experienced at home and in their communities. Faced with the reality that they were outsiders in American society due to their skin color, and having to confront parents that became psychologically and socially broken by American society, hip hop was intended to chronicle “truth-telling about black suffering and resistance in America” (180).

Additionally, a corollary of capitalism is that labor is underpaid, and overworked, reducing further the time and resources parents can spend with their children. Hip-Hop culture expressed a yearning for love given the conditions described. Corporate America, however, realizing that hip-hop was quickly and substantially being appropriated by white, suburban teenagers “who long for rebellious energy and exotic amusement in their own hollow bourgeois world” began to dictate what hip-hop artists rap about in exchange for large amounts of money. Understanding the content that would sell the most, hip-hop began to celebrate the “materialism, hedonism, and narcissism of the culture (the bling-bling!) and promotes a degrading of women, gays, lesbians, and gangster enemies” to produce a horizontal oppression” (184). While white, suburban America listened to and was amused by this music, black teens searching for guidance and values turned to hip-hop music and internalized the messages being flaunted and hyped. Socially black youth fell (and continue to fall) prey to the glorification of consumerism, the celebration of attaining as many sexual partners possible, and a life of gangsterism.

At this point, the importance of black intellectuals should be eminently clear. Over the past couple of decades, as hip-hop has become the de-facto social and political
guide for young urban persons, Black Intellectuals must present a counter-narrative not only to help explain the commodification of hip-hop voices over the past couple of decades, but to provide moral and spiritual leadership in the face of an extreme poverty of values and vision in urban communities. West writes about the ways in which he has collaborated and communicated with the wider culture to help re-write and re-work the dominant narratives that hip-hop music has created. West proclaims that he feels he has a “substantive conviction to communicate with the larger culture” and writes that he has “taught in prisons for over twenty years” has had “numerous appearances on C-SPAN and other TV networks” to “challenge fellow citizens on burning issues of the day.” He writes that he engages in parenting symposiums, helps children tackle issues of presenting slavery to young children on Nick News, and does a “Pass-the-Mic” tour across several cities with Tavis Smiley and Michael Eric Dyson to engage thousands of citizens in conversation about pressing democratic issues of the day. This visible, performative activism executes exactly the type of public work needed to un-do and re-write the white, hegemonic, heteropatriarchal, heteronormative narratives that have circulated in American society over the centuries towards a more just society. For West and myself, it is especially important to engage youth culture and to help young people re-think the dominant narratives that saturate urban society. Rather than fill young minds with nonsense about materialism, sexual gratification, and violence, Black Intellectuals must urge youth to critically reflect on education, priorities, work ethic, and giving back to the community. West locates his response in the model found in The Republic. West contrasts the market-driven obsessions of the sophists against the proponents of the Socratic dialogue, where their love of wisdom militates against their love of money. West
extols Socratic questioning and parrhesia (frank speech) as the tools to find and develop justice, love, and humility.

II. Black Existential Angst

Like the general thesis concerning nihilism and American culture outlined in *Democracy Matters*, West focuses here on a particular form of that nihilism pertaining to race that he identifies as black existential angst. Segregation, poor housing conditions, unequal educations, long, underpaid working hours, and financial woes have emerged under capitalism to produce black existential angst. After a history of Jim Crow laws and enforced legal segregation, black existential angst remains as a residual element left over from American history. For West, black existential angst has played a part in limiting African Americans’ integration and entry into the dominant social structures. This angst can be best described as a misdirected and misplaced anger towards white and black persons alike, terrorizing the black psyche. In the aftermath of this history of race-relations in America, a black-citizenry sought to understand individuality, meaning, existence, and freedom in the world. The role and responsibility of Black Intellectuals, then, became to posit a new humanism, a black humanism, which placed a black citizenry as equal to a white citizenry, and to help lay out a blueprint for meaningful, responsible, happy living after centuries of crisis and cruelty. West tells the story of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, “a terribly disillusioned priest in the city of Seville during the time of the Spanish Inquisition. So cynical has the grand inquisitor become that although he knows the abuses of the Inquisition are a horrible perversion of the teachings of Christ, perpetrated by a terribly corrupted church, he nevertheless takes part in those abuses”
West terms this paternalistic nihilism, where power-hungry agents of any significant institution in society deceive, manipulate, and rid any choice, freedom, or agency from the general public. West, like Dostoevsky, dismisses working within a “corrupted system” with the belief that one could “do more good” this way. Rather, West promotes truth telling, agency, democracy, and freedom as antidotes to this kind of paternalistic nihilism. In his introduction to The Grand Inquisitor, Charles Guignon writes “it would be a serious mistake, however, to regard The Grand Inquisitor story as stating Dostoevsky’s own views in any way … which he hoped to refute in the following book, “The Russian Monk” (x). West, participating in the existential thought of Dostoevsky, believes that man is not just responsible to himself, but responsible to all of mankind. For West, arising out of black existential angst must be a deliberate, conscious, movement towards achieving agency, freedom, and choice for all citizens of American society. West’s response to black existential angst becomes aligned with a Sartrean conception of choice, responsibility, and human freedom, which Jean-Paul Sartre lays out in his Existentialism as a Humanism: “I am responsible for myself and for everyone else. I am creating a certain image of man of my own choosing. In choosing myself, I choose man” (311). This compassion, humility, and purpose are, for West, the beginnings of un-doing and re-writing the history oppressed American groups had, and still have to, endure.
Chapter 3

Lani Guinier and The Miner’s Canary

In the post Jim Crow era, some argue for a color-blind society. Guinier, however, contends that a color-blind society “masks entrenched racial inequality” (44). Her book, *The Miner’s Canary*, returns to the basic question: what is race? Guinier points out that most commentators agree that race is an unstable term, not having any fixed meaning, yet it continues to depend on a fantasy of a fixed meaning. For Guinier, there has been an evolution of race from biological ancestry to “a proxy for one’s political and socio-economic status” (95). Based on this, Guinier come up with the term *political race* to describe any group of persons, regardless of their skin color, who have been subjugated under any structures of power and inequality in American society. Although political race offers a “more inclusive nomenclature … the experience of black people” is at the core of her argument.

The governing metaphor of the text is the canary in the mine and its role as a warning about noxious gases. If the canary is exposed to poisonous gases, then it is only a matter of time before the miners are also poisoned. By extension, in the social and racial realm, race functions as a social canary so that any and every sign of our social oppression related to racially marked others is a signal for our society as a whole that the fundamental social institutions are imperiled. The key argument that leads Guinier to believe that race functions as a social canary is that race is linked to power, that is, the inequitable distribution of goods along racial lines. Whenever the redistribution of goods is so asymmetrical in American society, the oppression of African Americans signals oppression for other marginalized groups as well. This asymmetrical distribution of
goods, for Guinier, leads to “asymmetrical concepts of the self,” leading groups of Latinos, Blacks, and poor whites in America to perceive themselves as “weak” (86). To illustrate the effects of the powerful groups in the American social hierarchy, she provides the Smithfield hog factory as an example of the invisibility Mexican workers experience as well as the social and political weakness they are psychologically ingrained to feel. Mexican workers at the Smithfield hog factory were referred to as ‘Hey You,’ and for Guinier, “Hey you not only named them as anonymous, but it also raced them as black and poor or its equivalent” (87). Louis Althusser, Marxist political theorist, calls this interpellation, that is, “the act of defining someone’s identity for him or her, including naming someone as being so insignificant that what they call themselves no longer matters.” American society has historically tried to interpellate individuals and groups of individuals as racialized subjects, creating identities for Blacks, Latinos, poor whites, gays, and women before they are even born into society. Importantly, not only is the naming of this identity crucial, but also, our willingness to adhere to this identity creates a built-in hierarchical structure in American society. When citizens respond to the “hey you” of a police officer, famously used in Frantz Fanon’s *White Skins, Black Masks*, this act of calling out to an individual instantly races them both as “black” and “criminal” despite whatever their biology is. Those who compliantly and obediently respond to this hailing immediately “have learned their real name and social position; the power of others has constructed their sense of who they are” (87). Language’s ability to interpellate individuals in society, to produce social realities, illustrate the power language contains in the speech act. Once words are uttered, they have power to take a particular real effect in the world, namely, keeping Blacks and Hispanics outside the grids of power.
To better understand the effects of interpellation, we turn to Judith Butler: “We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory” (1). Speech has an agency, a power that functions to serve particular social effects; it has the ability to be self-empowering and has an active quality to it. This agency and power can necessarily translate itself into having an interpellative effect: “Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible” (5). Through language, individuals and groups of people are allotted identities and subjectivities in society. In the process of interpellation, the body becomes the signified, which produces real social hierarchies. When delivered by those in positions of power against those who are already subordinated, “speech” has “the effect of resubordinating those to whom such utterances are addressed” (26). A speech “injury,” here the act of subordinating or resubordinating an individual or group of persons, is the very act of interpellation. Despite the fact that language’s interpellative effects can marginalize or alienate members of society, language can also be used by victimized persons to re-acquire power. For Butler, social performative acts function with the same instrumental value as speech, and because of the agency and interpellative authority language contains, language holds the potential to instill power in groups that have been subjugated in society. Butler writes, “Does the figure of the sovereign performative compensate for a lost sense of power, and how might that loss become the condition for a revised sense of the performative?” (74). Language’s agency, and its power in relation to real social contexts is not only found in acts of “hate-speech” or interpellative speech, but Butler is also suggesting that language
can be used to help people re-claim and re-discover power that has been removed from them or temporarily taken away. “Utterance itself,” Butler writes, “is regarded in inflated and highly efficacious ways, no longer as a representation of power or its verbal epiphenomenon, but as the modus vivendi of power itself” (74). Although language and power are each distinctive, they both co-exist and mutually interact with one another.

Guinier’s intellectual activism—bringing to light certain injustices that the factory workers at the Smithfield Hog Factor faced—begins the process of making those who face similar interpellation aware of the speech-act. Once there is awareness, these workers can now understand how they are marked as invisible, and take steps to un-do this invisibility by demanding fair pay, safe working conditions, and professionalism on the job. This democratic process of workers being able to advocate for themselves all begins with the analysis of language, and ultimately, workers using language to demand for their visibility on the job.

This culminates in the importance of “canary watching” in American society. Guinier writes using real-life examples about how the subjugation of poor, racialized, persons impedes our democratic process. Guinier writes that for “every person jailed in the prosecution of the drug war, some person is being denied educational, health, or other public resources” and this denial is not limited to people in the lower-class, but people in the middle-class as well. Using the state of California, Guinier compares the construction and maintenance of two institutions to illuminate her point regarding how persons jailed interfere with educational resources. In the state of California, between 1984 and 1994, California built sixteen new prisons, while during the same time, “the state built only one new campus of the California State University system” (274). In terms of personnel,
imprisoning more individuals has required the hiring of more and more prison guards: The California Department of Corrections increased its personnel by twenty-five thousand eight hundred and sixty four, while “higher education personnel dropped by eight thousand and eighty-two.” Lastly, Guinier compares the political power of teachers versus prison guards through an analysis of spending on schools versus prisons. She writes, “In 1995, a first-year college professor in California made $41,000 a year. A prison guard made $51,000 per year” (275). After prisons were built and personnel were hired, the incarceration industry needed “raw materials” to feed its complex. Guinier writes, “Prisoners have become captive consumers … prized for the services they require, the money they attract and the jobs they create.” Money, resources, and politics that would have gone to improving education were redirected toward prison building. This redistribution of money and resources has bred laws and policies like the Three Strikes law, which disproportionately affects black and Latino citizens. For Guinier, political power structures are astute at re-framing the issues, and rather than seeing drugs as a national health issue, it is framed as a “criminal justice crisis.”

Using California again as a site for analysis, Lani Guinier examines SAT and LSAT scores to demonstrate that these scores are not necessarily good predictors of success in education, but rather, are indicators of people who are rich in resources, with high parental incomes. Guinier writes, “Among those Black and Chicano students at UC Berkeley who did not do as well as others on the SAT, 36 percent of them came from households with incomes of less than $15,000 a year. On the other hand, 60 percent of the white students whose SAT scores got them into Berkeley came from households with incomes of more than $60,000 a year” (269). Additionally, Guinier cites studies which
have shown that students who were admitted through affirmative action performed well in their educational careers and go on to become productive contributors of society. This becomes an important point in her argument for achieving an equitable, democratic society because traditionally, education has been recognized as the great equalizer in America. The research clearly demonstrates strong evidence that the best educations in American society are purchased, and that a family’s wealth and resources play a crucial factor in determining the educational future of their children. As the statistics outlined in chapter one demonstrate, Black families in America typically earn less than their white counterparts, have home values that are significantly less, and have a lot less in inheritable wealth than white families. All of these factors, created by an unequal distribution dating back to the beginnings of American society, led to a disadvantage for children of Black and Hispanic families in the American educational system.

Lastly, Guinier argues for interconnectedness among individuals who are discriminated against in American society, and uses blackness as a political and social signifier. She writes, “blackness becomes disconnected—within this context—from biology, ancestry, and the prejudices of individuals. It becomes transformed into a political and social signifier, not just of those who may be descriptively black, but of all who are vulnerable under current hierarchies of power.” Like Guinier’s observation, this project has tried to argue that the responsibility of the Black Public Intellectual (who doesn’t need to necessarily have black skin), is duty-bound to educate the public, make the public aware, and present to the public in clear and accessible language any social and political inequities to help transform this American oligarchy into a true American democracy. Only by recognizing the social canaries and addressing the needs of the
politically and socially marginalized can we move towards a vision of American society
that is equitable for all.

Chapter 4

Melissa Harris Perry: Political Recognition for Black American Women

In her book *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, Melissa Harris-Perry examines the racialized and gendered perceptions of black men and women in America. Harris-Perry uses the media’s portrayal of the events following Hurricane Katrina to demonstrate that “Americans have long connected urban African American communities with crime” (13). Harris-Perry, citing other academic fields, points out to her readership the “decades of research in sociology, political science, and psychology,” which “demonstrates the facile link between blackness and criminality that exists for many Americans” (13). As a result of this, the suffering that many Black citizens experienced during Hurricane Katrina went unnoticed, ignored, and—with consummate irony—black citizens were represented in the media as engaging in illegal and immoral activities. During Hurricane Katrina, news reports described young black males as “stealing from electronic stores, raping women trapped in evacuation centers, and trying to assassinate relief workers,” when, in fact, they were searching for supplies to help treat and care for “the elderly, the sick, and women with children.” This gross and inaccurate misrepresentation of Black citizens is deeply embedded in the American psyche, and has such powerful repercussions that the American government failed to respond to the Katrina’s disaster in any kind of adequate or suitable manner. New Orleans’s black community waited for “relief and rescue” that for days—not hours—did
not come. The city was completely flooded, left without electricity, and many residents were left for days stranded inside their homes and on rooftops. The lack of urgency can be traced to the political and social associations with blackness in America: American racial and class hierarchies positions poor, racially-coded, persons with a status that is read as second or third class citizen.

For Harris-Perry, what can be particularly illuminating is the idea that “black women’s experiences act as a democratic litmus test for the nation” (16). Similar to this project, Harris-Perry finds the work of Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres commendable, identifying the work of *The Miner’s Canary* as crucial in the quest for establishing democratic equality in America. The particular frame that Harris-Perry explores is with that of the black female, uncovering myths, stereotypes, and experiences of black female Americans. Like Guinier’s and Torres’ work, Harris Perry believes that the plights of black women can be enlightening in exposing institutional inequalities in America. Her book seeks to answer the question: “What does it mean to be a black woman and an American citizen?” (20). She argues that the black American woman has lived in a “crooked room,” unfairly facing stereotypes like the strong, independent black woman who requires no help, the overly-sexual, lewd black female, and the black mammy who takes care of her own family and the white family she functions as a housekeeper for. In addition to these stereotypes, Harris-Perry argues that because of their status as black and female, and their history as “dependents in a punitive modern welfare state” (39), they live in America under heightened surveillance by the state. This hypervisibility, their status as marginalized both as female and black, and the stereotypes black females must
contend with, amounts to the black female living in what Harris-Perry calls a crooked room.

The racial stereotypes and gender stereotypes that dominate American society are so prevalent and widespread that Harris-Perry uses the metaphor of the crooked room to describe what it feels like for black women to live in American society. She cites cognitive psychology research where in one study, subjects were placed “in a crooked room, in a crooked chair, and then asked to align themselves vertically” (29). The researchers found that some participants in the study could be tilted “by as much as thirty-five degrees and report that they were perfectly straight, simply because they were aligned with images that were equally tilted” (29). Like the subjects in the study, Harris-Perry contends that black women living in American society, who meet predetermined race and gender labels, are standing in a crooked room, and must face the challenge of figuring out which way is up. Harris-Perry uses as an example hip-hop videos, where young black women are seen dancing, half-naked, usually for the pleasure of dominant male figures that loom in the forefront. Harris-Perry writes, “bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion” (29). America’s cultural consciousness places constraints on black women, dictating how they are to think, act, and behave in American society, and here, these representations of black women that circulate in American society are so powerful and psychically penetrating that black females conform to this historically degrading image of themselves. Unfortunately, these stereotypes are so powerful that they are generationally transmitted, as young black girls watch these images on television and the movies, and then believe that they are to reproduce the same type of behavior.
Harris-Perry continues her metaphor of the crooked room to make one of her central claims: for public and political recognition, a system must offer its citizens equal opportunities, free of institutional biases. Black women have suffered from a political misrecognition, denying them any free and equal participation in political and social affairs. Harris-Perry draws the connection between one popular stereotype of black women, sexual lewdness, with welfare policy in American society. Harris-Perry cites Martin Gilens’s work to show that “white American opposition to welfare results from whites’ fixed beliefs that the system supports unworthy black people who lack a suitable work ethic” (67). Central to this idea for the American public is that “black women do not appropriately control their fertility, that they have sex with multiple partners, producing children who must be cared for through tax-supported social welfare programs” (67). Harris Perry attributes this to the corporate-controlled hip-hop industry, which “created a new set of tilted images portraying black women as lusty, available, and willing partners” (66).

Furthermore, this focus on the black mammy figure as sexually lascivious draws attention away from persistent social inequalities that leave a disproportionate amount of black women living under poverty: Unequal housing opportunities, employment opportunities, educational institutions, and as the disaster surrounding Hurricane Katrina demonstrated, an American public that still—consciously or subconsciously—holds discriminatory views against black citizens. Placing the burden on black females for their uncontrolled sexuality relieves the American public from seeing the inequalities that exist across racial lines and places the fault on young black women for the collapse of their own communities.
Harris-Perry examines the popular racist stereotype of the angry black woman. On June 18, 2008, Fox News contributor Cal Thomas placed Michelle Obama within a “larger tradition of angry black women political figures” (86). At a single moment, he calls Maxine Walters, a liberal democrat from California, Cynthia McKinney, former congresswoman from Georgia, and now, Michelle Obama, all angry, black women. Interestingly, there is a dearth of information regarding the stereotype of the angry, black woman in academic literature: “the relative scholarly invisibility of the angry black woman myth does not mean that it is inconsequential,” but rather, “these stereotypes are more than representations; they are representations that shape realities” (89). One possible explanation, then, is many researchers accept the stereotype, which accounts for the lack of scholarly literature in academia. Rather than begin the process of tracing back the roots of this damaging stereotype, which haunts the black female community, research has been halted due to an institutional bias of black women within the academy. This episode underscores the prevalence of both media reporters that perpetuate these stereotypes against the black, female community, and also, illustrate how even within academic communities, these stereotypes can go unquestioned.

What is particularly harmful about this stereotype is that it does not understand a black women’s anger as appropriate or equal in any circumstance; rather, it dismisses it “as a pathological, irrational desire to control black men, families, and communities” (95). Black female voices are silenced and ignored within their families, their communities, and the political and social structures in American society. Black females, used to being ignored in the public and private spheres, eventually give up their voice to remain subordinate for fear that they will be dismissed as irrational. The stereotype of the
angry black woman has been so toxic to black females that it has limited, if not effectively diminished altogether, their opinion in their communities, in their workplace settings, and in American political life.

Continuing in her exploration of the inner-life of black females and how it contributes to a political misrecognition and political invisibility in American society, Harris-Perry explores the effects of racial shame on black women. Shame, she writes, is created and felt within a social boundary and not within isolation, and for individuals who are placed in a “crooked room,” most individuals “assume that the room must be correct, so they adapt themselves to it” (105). White American hegemony, which discriminates against both categories, black and female, forces black women to internalize feelings of worthlessness, shame, and guilt. Harris-Perry draws on research from other fields, such as psychology, in which shame is associated with the malignant self: “the idea that your entire person is infected by something inherently bad and potentially contagious” (104). Similarly, psychologists have “found a strong negative correlation between shame and self-esteem” (110). What follows is a self-fulfilling prophecy for black Americans, where a history of slavery, miscegenation laws, Jim Crow laws, the media’s portrayal of welfare and the black community, the American public’s association of blackness and criminality, and housing, employment, and educational inequalities has left them to feel socially shamed. Harris Perry writes, “The lesson echoes Du Bois. If you are constantly told that you are a problem, you eventually feel that you are a problem; and the more you feel like a problem, the more you notice negative feedback” (110). What emerges here is a psychological force—in addition to law and policy that impedes the freedom and agency of black women—which acts as a barrier to
the success of black women across the country. In writing about the “crooked room,” the myths and stigmas that pervade American society, and the politics of shame, Harris-Perry is actively trying to increase her readership’s attention to and awareness of their socio-political and psychological surroundings. By writing a book that performs a genealogy of African American racialized stigmas and representations, she effectively begins the process of freeing black American women from the psychological bondages and social constraints that have been imposed by American politics since the founding of this country. Her writing is meant to have an emotional impact, both releasing black women from stereotypes, stigmas, and shame that have circulated across American society, as well as beginning the process of reversing and erasing any of these misrepresentations that exist in popular culture or within families and communities.

Chapter 5

Queer of Color Critique: Race, Class, Gender, Sexuality

At the outset of this project, I thought the Black Public Intellectual was duty-bound to speak out against not just racial injustice, but any kind of injustice producing human suffering in American society. Melissa Harris-Perry delves deeply into the political and emotional struggles black women in America face. She contends that black women are doubly persecuted on the basis of race and gender, and offers her readership insight not only into the challenges that black women face, but ultimately tries to provide a solution to them: black women must abandon the belief that they must always have “impervious strength” in the face of any social and familial disaster (299). She forces her readership to observe that the stereotype of the “strong, black female” has dire
consequences for black women as individuals: black women believe they must sacrifice themselves for the greater good of their families and communities, at the risk of their physical and mental well-being. Harris-Perry ends with a message by Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman to run for President, and the first elected to the United States Congress: “I want history to remember me not just as the first black woman to be elected to Congress, not as the first black woman to have made a bid for the presidency of the United States, but as a black woman who lived in the 20th century and dared to be herself” (300). Harris-Perry explains to black women the origins of the stereotype of the “strong, black woman,” traces it to a role created by an oppressive, discriminatory American society, and tells her readership that a “strong, black female” can only be strong for so long until she herself requires emotional nurturing as well as material resources for sustenance. Cornel West rails against any threat to democratic freedom, including discrimination against practicing Muslims and Jewish persons in America, the rise of materialism in American culture, poor business practices benefitting the rich and humiliating the poor, and inequality for gay Americans. For West, all these categories of discrimination are intertwined and mutually benefit the white, plutocratic elites who are in power. West harshly criticizes those at the helm of corporate power and those in positions of social power for a lack of ethics, authenticity, and political courage to seek out democracy for America. For West, those in power are effectively allowing the continued persecution of social groups in America. Lani Guinier takes up the struggle of poor Americans—both white and black—and argues that when one group is discriminated against, all groups face the threat of losing their freedom and agency in American society. For Guinier, there needs to be a re-structuring of policies, priorities, and power in
American society, focusing on education, housing, healthcare, and the workplace, to eliminate any built-in residual discrimination that has not allowed the possibility of equal achievement for all groups in America.

As I began to see that these three Black Public Intellectuals engaged with issues of sexuality, race, social class, and gender, critiquing any injustices occurring both historically and in current events, I theorized that these categories of discrimination could be read as affiliate fields, each one mutually reinforcing the other in an attempt to maintain a white, heteropatriarchal, capitalistic society. I turned to Roderick Ferguson to help explain the intersectionality of these categories used to discriminate persons in American society.

In Roderick Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Blackness*, Ferguson explains the intersection of race, sexual identity, class, and gender in white, heteropatriarchal capitalistic society. For Ferguson, what emerges from capitalism are heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity, which produce discrimination among those who are non-white, lower class, non-heterosexual members of society. What distinguishes Ferguson’s thesis is his critique of Marx’s exclusion of race, gender, and sexuality only to argue for their re-introduction under his queer of color critique. He describes an “epistemological intervention” (3) where he criticizes Marx for sustaining heteropatriarchy through the absence of a race, gender, and sexuality critique. To this end, for Ferguson, Marx can be accused of “perpetuating bourgeois definitions of civilization” (6). Rather than sustain a Marxian historical materialism critique that focuses solely on social class, Ferguson writes about “intersections formerly thought to be discrete” (6) and argues for the correspondence or intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class. He arrives at these
intersections of “formerly discrete categories” by presenting an image as an example of these intersections: the black prostitute. The black prostitute is forced to sell her body because of her inability to economically sustain herself; her race and sexuality are both seen as deviant, departing from heteronormative behavior; her gender calls into question why is it that women enter into this form of economic exchange. For Ferguson, heteronormativity is not only concerned with gender and sexuality, but is racialized as well. Ferguson writes, “If heteronormativity is racialized, as I have been arguing, then it is not only gender and sexual integrity that are at stake for heteronormative formations, like the state, but racial integrity and purity as well” (17). Gender and sexual norms disrupted become “indices” of racial difference for Ferguson, illustrating the ways in which these categories mutually interact with each other in a heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalistic society. Black Americans, gay Americans, female Americans, and impoverished Americans have historically been thought of as non-normative, and Ferguson points out especially within sociological perspectives. In capitalistic America, these groups have functioned as signs or templates for non-normative behavior, allowing the formation of ideologies that mark these members of American society as the “other,” and for the production of surplus labor. Ferguson writes, “As surplus labor becomes the impetus for anxieties about the sanctity of ‘community,’ ‘family,’ and ‘nation,’ it reveals the ways in which these categories are normalized in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and class” (17). Heteropatriarchy, as a hegemonic formulation in America, allows for exclusion of these groups of people from the dominant spheres of power, and instead uses them as cheap labor to maximize capitalistic profits.
The queer of color critique that Ferguson presents becomes exactly the type of performative work—capable of producing ruptures in society—which Black Public Intellectuals execute. Black Public Intellectuals, understanding legalized American slavery and Jim Crow laws, understand the implications for being treated as capital in American society. The Black Public Intellectual, having closely studied his or her own cultural and political history in America, understands the mutual interdependence of class, sexuality, gender, and race in the construction of capitalistic society that seeks to use people as a means to maximize profit. Lani Guinier echoes the queer of color analysis that is necessary to perform in American society, which understands class, gender, and sexuality as racial indices as well. Guinier offers a definition of race, which extends beyond skin color, which she terms “political race.” She understands political race as not just understanding and examining injustices to people of color, but beyond black members of society to other oppressed groups, such as gays, poor whites, and women. Blackness becomes “transformed into a political and social signifier, not just of those who might be descriptively black, but to those who are vulnerable under current hierarchies of power” (300).

The responsibility of the Black Public Intellectual is not confined to race, but to critically speak out against any suffering in American society produced by capitalistic exclusion. This project understands that the Black Public Intellectual has spent his or her life reading, writing, thinking, and experiencing blackness, and is now uniquely suited to critique the capitalistic exclusion that exists in American society today.
Bibliography


