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THE COMPLEXITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN RACIAL IDENTIFICATION

VETTA L. SANDERS THOMPSON

University of Missouri–St. Louis

Current theoretical interest in racial identification is sustained by the view that it is a culture specific personality variable. The importance of racial identification is based on its ability to explain a process that brings people together or separates them. Racial identification has implications for the social, cultural, and personal striving of members of the African American community. It is important that social scientists begin to examine the ability of various assessment strategies to answer questions related to African American racial identification. This article presents empirical findings that address the usefulness of a multidimensional approach to racial identification. Current data suggest that only approximately 15% of African Americans report consistent levels of racial identification when various content aspects are assessed. This fact suggests the potential of the multidimensional model to provide new insights into African American personality and behavior.

Racial group identification refers to a psychological attachment to one of several social categories available to individuals when the category selected is based on race or skin color and/or a common history, particularly as it relates to oppression and discrimination due to skin color. Members are believed to share an implicit understanding of what it means to be a member of the designated racial group (White & Burke, 1987). Not all possible members of the group identify, nor do all members identify equally. Members may differ in their willingness to identify with specific group issues or aspects. This definition exposes the complexity of racial identification.
This article briefly outlines efforts to address the complex issues involved in the understanding of racial identity and the psychology of individuals who differentially identify. Data are provided that illustrate the variability in the level of racial identification on the four parameters delineated. Gender differences in the pattern of high, medium, and low scoring were examined for the psychological, sociopolitical, cultural, and physical parameters as presented by Myers and Sanders Thompson (1994).

Racial identification has been a salient issue in psychological research on African Americans. The importance of racial identification is based on its assumed ability to provide information on the unique psychological orientation of African Americans. Racial identification is perceived as relevant to an individual’s way of perceiving and responding to the environment. In general, the assessment of racial identification can be understood as an attempt to represent the extent to which a person holds “positive, negative, or mixed attitudes toward their own racial or cultural group and their place in it” (Carter & Helms, 1988, p. 23).

Allen and Stukes (1982) noted that racial identification is important due to its association with positive psychological outcomes, such as an increased tolerance of frustration, a stronger sense of purpose, enhanced school performance, and greater security in self. E. M. Smith (1989) noted that racial identity relates to a sense of peoplehood, which provides a sense of belonging: A “fragmented sense of racial identity mitigates against a strong sense of peoplehood. . . . Individuals who have a fragmented sense of racial identity are often torn by competing models of the sense of peoplehood” (p. 278). This may create competition within the group in addition to the competition commonly noted with those deemed members of the outgroup. These propositions make an understanding of racial identification an important undertaking.

For a variable to be useful in understanding individual or group behavior and functioning, it must be properly conceptualized and have reliable assessment techniques. The conceptualization of racial identification has gone through several transformations. Early efforts to conceptualize the variable approached racial identi-
fication as a unitary concept. Williams (1976), however, suggested that the more common method of viewing racial identification as an all-or-none phenomenon might be inadequate. He suggested that an individual might have varying group orientations coexisting in his or her repertoire of experiences. If this proposition were true, then a multifaceted conceptualization of racial identification was necessary.

Other researchers and scholars have noted that racial identity is a multidimensional construct (Hilliard, 1985; Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; E. M. Smith, 1989). The Nigrescence models of African American racial identification were developed, which challenged the all-or-none approach. These theories proposed that racial identification was developed in stages. African Americans were believed to be socialized into the predominant culture, which resulted in diminished racial identification. A process of exploration and discovery was necessary for the individual to acquire a strong African American identity (Cross, 1971). This process was conceptualized as a developmental progression. Although the original developmental progression models addressed the all-or-none proposition, they failed to deal with the conceptualization of racial identification as a unitary phenomenon.


Hilliard (1985) proposed that African American identification was not a unitary phenomenon but could be broken down into four parameters of racial identity. Cross (1985) and Parham (1989) subsequently commented on the multidimensional nature of racial identification. Demo and Hughes (1990) reported that empirical data were consistent with a multidimensional conceptualization of
racial group identification. Hecht, Collier, and Ribeau (1993) reported support for a multidimensional construct of racial identity for African Americans but a unidimensional construct of racial identity among White Americans.

The synthesis of this work has resulted in progress in the conceptualization of African American identity over the past decade. In addition to traditional Nigresence models, both Africentric and group social identity models have been introduced. The development of the African American Identity Attitude Scale permits a different conceptualization of African American behavior that has often been viewed as supporting a notion of Black self-hatred. Sanders Thompson (1994; Sanders Thompson, 1992, 1995) proposed four parameters of racial identification similar to those of Hilliard (1985). The parameters are physical, cultural, sociopolitical, and psychological. Sanders Thompson (1994) was able to demonstrate empirically the existence of four of the proposed parameters of racial identification. The psychological parameter, which referred to a sense of belonging and commitment to the group, was verified through factor analysis. The sociopolitical parameter, which referred to an awareness of and the commitment to the resolution of social, economic, and political issues that affect African Americans, was verified, as was the physical dimension, which refers to the acceptance of physical characteristics often associated with African American heritage. Cultural racial identification was the final parameter verified. It refers to the individual’s awareness of African American contributions to society as well as comfort with the language, art, literature, and social traditions of the African American community.

The assumption made in this study is that racial identification among African Americans is composed of varying aspects. The greater the consistency in levels of identification on the parameters proposed, the less obvious the dimensions and the degree of peoplehood become. The more inconsistent the parameters, the less peoplehood and group unity one can expect. The parameters suggested for African Americans are psychological, physical, cultural, and sociopolitical.
METHOD

PARTICIPANT DATA

Interviewed were 426 African Americans, including 255 females and 167 males (4 participants did not indicate sex). All participants were 18 years of age or older and born in the United States. Participants resided within the St. Louis metropolitan area. The mean age for participants was 33.0 years, with a mean age of 32.7 years for males and 33.5 years for females. The median income for the sample was $24,000.

INSTRUMENT

The Multidimensional Racial Identification Scale–Revised assesses the orientation of participants on four parameters of racial identification. The questionnaire is a revised version of an instrument previously developed by Sanders Thompson (1992, 1995). The questionnaire consists of 29 items formatted on a Likert-type scale.

Questionnaire items were hypothesized to generate scores on the following racial identification parameters: physical, sociopolitical, cultural, and psychological. The questionnaire was scored according to face valid criteria, with each item having a preassigned point value. Responses received scores based on their representation of a positive African American identification. High scores indicated such an orientation, and low scores were representative of a mainstream American or Eurocentric identification.

Physical identity referred to a sense of acceptance and comfort with the physical attributes of African Americans. Psychological identity referred to the individual’s sense of concern for and commitment to and pride in the racial group. Sociopolitical identity referred to the individual’s attitude toward the social and political issues facing the African American community. Cultural racial identity referred to an individual’s awareness and knowledge of as well as commitment to the cultural traditions of African Americans.
The coefficient alphas for the scales were as follows: psychological racial identification, .86; physical racial identification, .75; cultural racial identification, .85; and sociopolitical racial identification, .62. An estimate of test-retest reliability was obtained at 2 weeks using 27 participants. Test-retest reliability was as follows: Psychological Racial Identity scale, .90; Physical Racial Identity scale, .90; Cultural Racial Identity scale, .92; and Sociopolitical Racial Identity scale, .89.

PROCEDURE

The data were collected between June 1992 and May 1994. The surveys were administered individually by one of eight research assistants. Solicitation was door to door within assigned census tracts. The 1980 census tract data (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1980) were used to select neighborhoods to be surveyed. The rate of refusal to participate was 35%.

Participants completed the questionnaire on racial identification in their home in a single session. A research assistant was present to answer questions or address concerns of the participants. The study was described as a project concerned with attitudes on race relations. The questionnaire required approximately 20 to 35 minutes to complete. There was no remuneration for participation.

RESULTS

Summary and frequency statistics were computed for racial identification scores on each parameter. The mean scores and frequencies obtained for each parameter indicated that participants generally evidenced moderate levels of racial identification (see Tables 1 and 2). Participants were most likely to obtain high racial identification scores on the cultural parameter and least likely to obtain a low score on the sociopolitical parameter.

Racial identification scores were recoded to reflect high, moderate, or low scores. Scores 1 standard deviation below the mean were
considered low, and those 1 standard deviation above the mean were coded as high. All other scores were coded as moderate. An examination of frequency data using this coding scheme indicated that approximately 15% of participants demonstrated consistent levels of racial identification across parameters, i.e. individuals consistently evidenced high, moderate, or low levels of identification on each parameter (see Table 4). This is contrasted with the 25.6% of participants with highly discrepant scores. Of this number, 4% of participants held the most extreme discrepant views as evidenced by parameter scores in only the high or low ranges.

The percentage of participants obtaining high, medium, and low scores varied by parameter (see Tables 2 and 4). Participants with consistent scores across parameters typically demonstrated a high level of racial identification. A consistently low level of racial identification was the least frequent occurrence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>21.35</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>39.49</td>
<td>5.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>10.22</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociopolitical</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>14.42</td>
<td>4.05</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>Parameters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociopolitical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2 Level of Racial Identification by Parameter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An analysis of variance was conducted to determine if there were significant differences in parameter scores related to sex and income. No main effects of sex (see Table 3) or income were noted for any parameter.

### TABLE 3
Level of Racial Identification by Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male (n = 167)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Female (n = 255)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociopolitical</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 4
Consistency in Level of Racial Identification Across Parameters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High/moderate</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High/moderate/low</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High/low</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate/low</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Indicates consistency in level of racial identification: Four parameters consistent \( n = 64, \) 15.1%.
b. Parameter inconsistency:
   - Three parameters consistent \( n = 148, 34.7\%\)
   - Two parameters consistent \( n = 95, 22.3\%\)
   - Two pair parameters consistent \( n = 119, 27.9\%\)

An analysis of variance was conducted to determine if there were significant differences in parameter scores related to sex and income. No main effects of sex (see Table 3) or income were noted for any parameter.
DISCUSSION

The data suggest generally high levels of racial identification among participants; however, scores varied across parameters. The highest level of racial identification was obtained on the cultural parameter. It is noteworthy that only approximately 15% of participants demonstrated a consistent level of racial identification across parameters. In addition, the percentage of participants attaining high racial identification scores was dependent on the parameter examined. There was no main effect of sex for any parameter.

The data suggest that in practical everyday life, African Americans live with a variety of stances and attitudes with respect to their racial group affiliation. This finding is consistent with the suggestion of varying group orientations (Williams, 1976) and with a multidimensional model of racial identification. Researchers must seek to understand the varying attitudes toward racial identification African Americans possess.

African Americans wear natural hairstyles and African attire yet continue to vacillate over the desirability of dark skin. African and African American art is promoted, but we remain unable to make a full commitment to African American businesses. Are these signs of self-hatred? No. Are they signs of group hatred? No. They reflect the psychological reality of a people bound by a concept rooted in a framework that renders them vulnerable to denigration and fails to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the group.

E. M. Smith (1989) reminded us of Maslow’s (1962) discussion of the need of all people to belong and establish a sense of peoplehood. For many African Americans, race serves this function. We may be connected via skin color, through our ancestors and a common history. Yet, coming together and organizing around these commonalities is difficult in a society that persistently rewards individuals who in one way or another distance themselves from the group. This situation leads to divided loyalty and contributes to a fragmented sense of peoplehood. The data on variability related to racial identity dimensions reflect this fragmentation.

It is this fragmented peoplehood that has variously been mis-identified as self-hatred, reference group hatred and rejection,
misorientation, and so forth. As society becomes less segregated, moves toward integration and racism and discrimination remain potent forces, the implications of this fragmented sense of peoplehood will have serious consequences for the African American/Black community. African Americans/Blacks will find no easy issues to unify around, and the consequences of the competing models of what it is or means to be African American or Black will increase the political and economic crisis within the African American community.

African American identification is a part of a process by which a self is constructed and understood and a basic psychological need is satisfied via the establishment of a sense of belonging and symbol around which a group of similarly affected people may organize for effective collective action. For this identification to remain viable for members, the variability in identification must be understood and dialogue must occur that establishes a stronger and clearer sense of the meaning and connection for group.

REFERENCES


Vetta L. Sanders Thompson obtained her master of arts and doctorate of philosophy in psychology from Duke University, where she also completed the clinical training program. She is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. She has been a member of the faculty since 1989. She is a licensed clinical psychologist and health service provider in the state of Missouri. Her research interests include racial identification, mental health issues of African Americans, health attitudes in African American communities, and the psychological impact of discrimination. She has developed measures of African American racial identity, racial socialization, and racial identity salience. Her current work focuses on the impact that understandings of race have on African American racial identity and preferred terms for self-designation and the psychological impact of repeated experiences of discrimination.
This article attempts to make a wake-up call to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to respond to the plight of minority business owners while also fulfilling their role of educating students. Although the state of minority businesses was much better than what the public is made to believe, however, these businesses continue to face challenges. Aside from the traditional problem of limited capital resources many challenges have ensued from the economic, social, and political changes in our society today. As long as the current political and economic climates persist, leading to a negative impact on the economies of minority population, institutions of higher learning, particularly HBCUs, have a unique opportunity to be the catalyst of change in the development and promotion of minority businesses.

The leadership role historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have played and continue to play in the overall growth and development of minorities in general and African Americans in particular has never been in question. What is not clear is whether
these institutions can also serve as necessary incubators and as agents of change for laying a firm foundation in the development of minority businesses. This article focuses on the challenges and problems plaguing minority businesses in today’s economy, and some possible solutions to the identified problems are explored.

Recent trade developments across the globe and growth opportunities for minority-owned businesses suggest the potential role HBCUs can play in bringing about a positive change to the development of minority businesses (Boston, 1995). A minority business is a business enterprise that is owned and operated by one or more socially or economically disadvantaged persons, where such disadvantage arises from cultural, racial, or severe economic circumstances.

The persistent resentment from the majority population of the society toward affirmative action and other ancillary government programs in recent years and the wave of workforce downsizing in both government and private industries have increasingly forced minorities to espouse the concept of entrepreneurship: hence, a rapid growth in the creation of minority businesses. In fact, current U.S. Census Bureau’s estimates show that minority businesses show one of the fastest growth rates in the overall U.S. economy. As long as the current political and economic climates leading to a negative impact on the economies of minority population persist, institutions of higher learning, particularly HBCUs, have a unique opportunity to be the catalyst of change in the development and promotion of minority businesses.

**PROBLEMS FACING MINORITY BUSINESSES**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 1992 survey of minority-owned enterprises, there was a significant increase in the number of business start-ups as well as in sales revenues. Although the state of minority businesses was much better than what was reported by the U.S. Census Bureau, these businesses continue to face challenges (Butler, 1995/1996; Allen, 1990). Aside from the traditional problem of limited capital resources, many challenges have ensued
from the economic, social, and political changes in our society today.

**LIMITED ACCESS TO CAPITAL**

A limited access to capital is still a major challenge despite loan programs such as Small Administration’s 7(a) Guaranteed Business Loan Program. It has been reported that minority businesses received a significantly small portion of the loans awarded each year to small businesses; and this significantly small portion decreases every year. According to Beech (1997), “Some black business owners say persistent loan discrimination is making fair access to capital difficult.” In addition, the volume of paperwork required to obtain the 7(a) loan has discouraged many minority business owners from applying for this loan, although some attempts have been made to reduce the application paperwork required through the “LowDoc” Program. The shortage of capital seems to be one of the critical problems that minority businesses face.

**RESENTMENT TOWARD AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PROGRAMS**

The persistent resentment from the society toward affirmative action programs has exacerbated the difficulty of minority businesses in getting government contracts. For example, the California’s Proposition 209, the California Civil Rights Initiative, prohibits consideration of race, gender, or ethnicity in all areas of the state’s system of public contracting, employment, and education. In addition, the effect of *Adarand Construction v. Pena* case restricted the use of race as a consideration in awarding federal contracts. The anti–affirmative action sentiments also led to the proposal to revise the Small Business Administration’s 8(a) program, a program designed to promote fair competition among small firms or organizations. These anti–affirmative action policies have set the clock back for minority businesses, which have always been competitively disadvantaged. The erosion of minority set-aside program has created the need for minority entrepreneurs to formulate
new strategies for doing business today. The wave of business mergers among majority businesses (the top Fortune 500 companies) has made it difficult for minority businesses to compete for profitable business.

CHALLENGES OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology is yet another challenge that minority businesses face in today’s economy. The use of technology in minority businesses is minimal. Minority business owners or their employees either lack the technological knowledge and skills or they cannot afford the cost of technology. Access to market and business information is now available and fairly inexpensive. The type of information necessary in the operation of a business can be readily accessed via the Internet or through the use of computer technology. Accounting functions can be performed by using the available inexpensive computer software. However, minority businesses often do not capitalize on these resources; hence, high operating costs put them out of competition. Another challenge in this area is the fact that technology changes at such a rapid pace that it is impossible for minority businesses to keep up with the changes. Minority businesses just do not have adequate financial and, oftentimes, human resources to keep up with technology. In the face of a budget crunch, staff training becomes a low priority.

LACK OF PLANNING AND FORESIGHT

Inadequate preparation on the part of the business owners has caused many businesses to fail. Most business owners start their businesses having only the skill required to operate the business but fail to prepare for the other crucial factors necessary to run the business. They often do not have a business plan or financial projection; are not cognizant of the legal, environmental, or social requirements as well as government regulations that relate to the business; and most important, have no provision for appropriate bookkeeping and accounting functions. Beech (1997) reported that Frank R. Gittens, a business financial consultant at Arizona’s Bank One,
observed that “African-American business owners call daily, but they really don’t have a clue as to how much money they want to borrow. They don’t have a business plan or financial projections.” Furthermore, minority businesses fall victim to IRS and other tax agencies’ scrutiny due to lack of adequate documentation, so that in most cases, businesses are forced to liquidate. If business owners are aware of related legal, environmental, or social requirements at the start of the business, they usually can make adequate provisions to comply with these requirements. Sadly, most failed businesses learned the harsh lessons of the costly devastation of ignorance too late.

The main focus of this article is to explore the possible roles of the HBCUs in bringing about solutions rather than to catalog the problems facing minority enterprises; however, we agree with Smith and Moore (1985) that the rate of growth and development of minority enterprises is severely constrained as a result of the concentration of these businesses’ market environments that are relatively unstable. Consequently, the businesses face a potential for low growth and its attendant low profitability. Any attempt to reverse the misfortunes for the businesses would require a well-structured approach at the local and regional levels to assist minority entrepreneurs to penetrate high-growth and/or high-profit-oriented industries.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS OF MINORITY BUSINESSES

There are some possible solutions to combating the challenges facing minority businesses today. First and foremost, minority business owners have to develop strategies for obtaining clients or customers and maintaining them. In the wake of the anti-affirmative action programs, Rooselvet Roby of California-based Reese Network commented, “We have to get off our feet and stop begging for equal opportunity. We just need to lick our wounds, move on and stop asking for special treatment” (Reynolds, 1996). This is the harsh reality of the society in which we live today. As the economic,
social, and political climates change at will, the business communities will have to adapt to the changes. Minority business owners cannot expect business to continue as usual. Some of the strategies that minority business owners should consider and possibly embrace are discussed below.

**FORMAL BUSINESS KNOWLEDGE**

The business owner must be well prepared to face all challenges prior to starting the business. He or she must learn the fundamentals of the business. What this means is that the business owner must be knowledgeable of the social, legal, environmental, and political aspects of the business. There must be a business plan and financial projections that will serve as a guide to operating the business. Identify the potential clients/customers so that the business can focus available resources effectively (Booth et al., 1995; Padgett, 1995; Smith, 1996).

**PARTNERING**

Minority business owners should explore the idea of partnering. Partnering is a means whereby a minority business enters into a partnership relationship with a majority business. This type of relationship allows the minority business to learn about the operation and needs of the majority business. The goal of the minority business is to look for an opportunity to supply the majority business with its products or services. This relationship gives the majority business the opportunity to support a minority business as well. The minority business benefits tremendously as it avoids fierce competition from other minority and majority businesses.

**COOPERATIVE EFFORT BETWEEN HBCUs AND MINORITY BUSINESS OWNERS**

Minority businesses should enter into cooperative activities with institutions of higher learning for supply of training and research activities, assistance from business development centers on cam-
puses, supply of human resources through internships, and technological resource and training. Most institutions of higher learning have developed the resources to promote entrepreneurship in their communities (Anonymous, 1997b). Minority businesses can collaborate with these institutions in solving most of the challenges mentioned above.

MATCHMAKING

The concept of matchmaking is yet another method that can be used to benefit minority businesses. The idea of matchmaking is to increase opportunities for minority businesses to participate in the free enterprise system through the formation, development, and preservation of competitive minority-owned firms (Richardson, 1995). One of the benefits of the Commerce Department’s Minority Business Development Agency is its matchmaking activities. Paul R. Weber IV of the Commerce Department’s Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA) stated that the agency maintains a database of minority firms and their capabilities, which is used to broker a lot of relationships between those companies and major Fortune 1,000 firms that have a need for their product or services (Beech, 1997). In addition, MBDA entered into an agreement with the Commerce Department’s International Trade Administration (ITA) to assist U.S. minority-owned companies to overcome exporting hurdles and compete in an international marketplace.

NETWORKING

Last, networking or peer-to-peer networking provides a mechanism for minority businesses to access opportunities beyond the Black community (Beech, 1997). Networking enhances business capability of minority businesses through support and motivation; examples and role models; expert opinion and counseling; and access to opportunities, information, and resources (Gnyawali et al., 1994). Minority businesses should become members of different relevant associations, clubs, and trade fairs.
ROLE OF HBCUs IN GROOMING MINORITY BUSINESSES

In a treatise, Ayadi (1994) proposed a working relationship between the HBCUs and minority enterprises. Such a relationship would benefit both parties given that HBCUs would be more receptive to and understand the problems facing the fledgling minority businesses. Similar calls have been made by other researchers, especially Heyliger (1992); Murphy (1992); Anonymous, 1997a; Barthelemy, 1984; and Buss (1997). The thesis of this article is to examine five different ways through which HBCUs can be used as catalysts for grooming small business with the utmost objective of fulfilling their service obligations to their community. These five initiatives are examined in the following subsections.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

The literature is not quite categorical about the relationship between educational achievement and success in entrepreneurial venture. However, Bates (1989) remarked that “highly educated owners employing larger financial capital inputs are more likely to create viable, lasting firms than poorly educated cohorts whose financial capital inputs are less bountiful.” He argued that among other demographic traits, a potential entrepreneur’s level of education is a major determinant of the loan amounts that commercial lenders extend to small business formations.

According to Gorman, Hanlon, and King (1997), personal characteristics do influence a person’s inclination toward entrepreneurship. The personal characteristics that can be influenced through a formal program of education include values and attitudes, personal goals, creativity, propensity to take risks, and locus of control. According to Bandura (1986), education has the potential of serving a preparatory function in relation to new venture initiation. The entrepreneurial learning process can be enhanced in an environment with role models with the aim of strengthening personal networks. The role of educational institutions is to establish an enter-
prise culture in the educational process that would focus on both pre-start-up and post-start-up management skills. As Knight (1987) articulated, an appropriate framework and methodology for teaching entrepreneurship should incorporate opportunity identification, strategy development, resource acquisition, and implementation.

To foster entrepreneurial growth and development, HBCUs should get out of the traditional method and focus of instruction that assumes that business schools’ graduates are prepared to take positions in a large corporation. According to Heyliger (1992), the traditional approach superimposes the functional areas of business on a liberal arts background with the hope that graduates with a broad management education will be able to adapt within a large organizational setup even as the setup adapts to its changing environment. He proposed a dualistic curriculum that has a potential of being cost-effective by linking minority entrepreneurs and students. According to Heyliger, a well-structured program will include hands-on experience in all kinds of businesses but especially budding small businesses. In a recent interview conducted by Black Enterprise, the interviewees (selected HBCU business deans) emphasized the importance of quality business education that emphasizes entrepreneurship. This proposal has the potential of giving students the skills and options to work for a large corporation, work for a small to medium-size firm, or become an entrepreneur on graduation.

ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT CENTERS (EDCs)

HBCUs should strive to establish small business development units whose focus would be completely different from that of the existing government agencies. These new small business centers would assist minority entrepreneurs to conceptualize business plans, evaluate business proposals, assist in the preparation of bank loan applications, or explore other sources of financing and help to establish bookkeeping systems.

In addition to the services identified, the EDCs should be operated as incubation centers with businesses serving as laboratories.
HBCUs’ faculty should be fully involved in the operation of these centers as consultants or members of advisory councils for the small businesses. The faculty should be a part of the development and implementation of business plans for minority enterprises. On a periodic basis, minority entrepreneurs should be updated through professional development courses on leadership skills. In this spirit, Matthew (1996) argues for a periodic get-together among minority entrepreneurs for the purpose of brainstorming on issues of common concern. Through this initiative, faculty at HBCUs could build a reservoir of business cases that is appropriate for use in their classrooms.

Many business owners mistakenly consider business plans as instruments for borrowing money from financial institutions. The EDCs should help these businesses to follow their road maps as documented in the business plans. Personnel from the EDCs should meet with the management of emerging firms on a periodic basis with the task of reviewing their business plans in light of environmental changes. The key intention is to encourage these entrepreneurs not to abandon their business plans (Lewis, 1993-1994).

An EDC should be a source of nontraditional loans to budding firms that require operating capital. This can be done through a business capital fund that seeks contributions and grants from governments, businesses, and individuals. As a precondition for obtaining a loan from the business capital fund, an entrepreneur should be required to undergo some specified number of hours of management training.

The involvement of students in the operation of the EDCs should also be considered. They are at a great advantage to observe how real businesses are managed. More important, students’ skills could be needed in such areas as market studies, quality control, and bookkeeping, including payroll, data processing, and benefit tracking systems. In addition to this, students can secure internship opportunities in these emerging businesses. Murphy (1992) noted that businesses often reap the benefits of special projects and tasks undertaken by interns that are not feasible with the current workforce. Moreover, interns can be used to supplement and complement the existing workforce. An internship program also
expands the choices available to students in terms of exploring career fields in different industries. It represents a way students bridge the gap between classroom theories and hands-on experience. The benefits to HBCUs are immeasurable too. An internship program represents an avenue for getting a feedback on the quality of academic programs in terms of curriculum content and the character of their graduates.

MATCHMAKING, NETWORKING, AND STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

It has been documented in various related publications that the concept of matchmaking is an emerging technique used today to foster the development and growth of small businesses. The major challenge that business enterprises face is the difficulty in getting bank (financial institution) financing. The other alternative, equity financing, has also proven to be a challenge as well. Brown (1994b) stated that an increasing number of fledgling companies are looking for viable sources of equity, but investors are hard to find. The matchmaking efforts have been focused on financing, that is, making the exercise of finding capital for business ventures a little less painful. The idea of matchmaking focuses on linking businesses up with investors where the goals, objectives, and strategies of the business entities match those of the investors. Although the matchmaking concept has a great potential for success in finding capital, it has even more potential for success in promoting business expansion and growth. Who are these matchmakers? Brown (1994a) identified a handful of business groups and universities as matchmakers that have engaged in the matchmaking process by maintaining computer networks used to match entrepreneurs with private and institutional investors. Brown (1994a) reported Massachusetts Institute of Technology as an institution of higher learning that is a matchmaker.

In light of the potential services that can be provided through matchmaking, it is undoubtedly clear that the HBCUs can play a major role in fostering minority business ventures by taking up the role of a matchmaker. HBCUs can obtain important information such as business plan and objectives, financial projections, prod-
ucts sold and/or services rendered, significant strategies, and any other pertinent information from businesses (majority and minority) and investors to create a database for networking. If the HBCUs can develop and maintain such a database of information, they can become a central source of business assistance to minority businesses. Using the database, HBCUs will be able to link potential investors with businesses that are in need of capital where the profiles of both parties are compatible. Businesses are introduced to potential investors based on specified criteria maintained in the database, and vice versa. As the matchmaking efforts are successful, minority businesses are relieved of the traditional problem of capital shortage. Several business organizations and governmental agencies are promoting matchmaking efforts. Scott and Brown (1995) have strongly argued in favor of minority businesses’ access to the international market. HBCUs should play a role in promoting minority businesses by matching them with compatible international business organizations. The U.S. Commerce Department’s MBDA and ITA collaboration is an attempt to assist minority-owned businesses to overcome the problems associated with product exportation to the international marketplace so that they can compete internationally. Such efforts led to a group of business leaders participating in a recent Minority Business Trade and Matchmaker Trade Delegation to Port-au-Prince and Cap Haitien, Haiti (Richardson, 1995).

Through matchmaking, HBCUs can provide networking opportunity, thereby solving another problem that plagues minority businesses. Typically, majority business owners network through membership in social clubs and attendance at social events of the various social organizations, such as country club and golf course activities. At these various events, majority business owners have the opportunity to share business ideas and solicit business relationships. This type of networking has not been, for the most part, a viable option for minority business owners. Hence, the matchmaking concept will serve to provide a means of networking for minority business.

Furthermore, HBCUs can use the information in the database to match a minority enterprise with a majority enterprise where both
entities complement each other. This effort can result in the majority entity becoming a customer of the minority business, thereby creating a customer-vendor relationship. These matchmaking efforts are occurring on a local level as well. This is a great time for the institutions of higher learning to play a great part.

The initial capital outlay of the matchmaking effort can be funded through private and public donations, and services fees can be charged to maintain the program. The effort will benefit all parties involved. The minority business will have the convenience of obtaining, at a relatively low cost, pertinent information from a central clearinghouse that is otherwise impossible. Furthermore, minority business entities can avoid the bureaucratic problems and difficulties of obtaining funds through the Small Business Administration 7(a) loan program and the financial institutions. The majority businesses benefit from the effort in the sense that they have the opportunity to participate in the progress of minority business endeavors while their business needs are met by their minority counterpart. On a more important note, majority business entities derive social benefits because the matchmaking effort presents them with the opportunity to improve and maintain positive public image (public relation) and broaden their customer/client bases. The HBCUs benefit as they are perceived as a major force in the promotion of business ventures, particularly those of the minority business entities.

TECHNOLOGY

An important area where HBCUs can contribute to the growth and development of minority businesses is technology. To the extent that in this day and age, known as the information age, the computer and, indeed, information technology (IT) have become the lifeblood and the driving force of most successful businesses, the same is expected to hold true for minority businesses. The unique role HBCUs can play in the development and sustenance of minority businesses through technology assumes dramatic proportions given that the success of any modern business is inextricably joined to how well technology is applied.
A strategy through which technology-related assistance could be provided to existing and emerging minority businesses is education. The profound, permanent, and pervasive nature of IT and its penetrating impact on modern business demands that business people be information literate. It is therefore imperative that at the most basic level, every minority business owner/entrepreneur should be aware, knowledgeable of, and able to interact effectively with the computer. Education on how to interact with the computer to apply productivity tools in the five major need areas of business—that is, word processing, spreadsheets, database processing, graphics, and electronic communication (e-mail and the Internet)—can be the very first step in the right direction for HBCUs and minority businesses collaboration. Short-term seminars, refresher courses, and hands-on tutorials may be potential candidates for implementing the education initiative, considering the fact these strategies have proven valuable in other situations (Marchand & Horton, 1986; Synnot, 1987).

Beyond being information literate, it is important for minority business leaders to recognize and internalize the philosophy that information now ranks as one of the fundamental cornerstones of a modern business. Like man, money, and market, information should be given the serious attention it deserves. HBCUs’ responsibility to minority businesses should, among others, include the provision of necessary education to enable minority entrepreneurs to rethink their businesses in the new information economy. Having understood the real issues surrounding strategic use of information and its associated technologies, minority-business owners should therefore be able to embrace the imperatives of the information economy requiring that (a) information should be treated as a strategic asset and (b) information management should be tied to strategic business planning.

The emerging National Information Infrastructure (NII) or information highway is giving increased access to a vast selection of goods and services. As these electronic markets unfold and as many more businesses become members of the online community at an unprecedented rate, minority businesses cannot afford not to join the bandwagon. HBCUs can play a major role by initiating and
nurturing the necessary and desired culture shift expected of minority businesses. The presence of minority businesses on the World Wide Web and the Internet can be made possible by the Web-authoring expertise waiting to be tapped on HBCU campuses.

It is common knowledge that the emergence of the NII offers dramatic new business opportunities as well as new ways to run existing minority businesses. For example, electronic transactions are now commonplace in the business and government environments in the industrialized world. In the United States alone, greater than 60% of all companies are exchanging data electronically while engaging in accounting, controlling, production management, funds transfer, record-keeping, purchasing, and selling activities. Consumers also use various information technologies to browse through electronic catalogs and thereafter to transact business. Again, HBCUs can provide what it takes in terms of education and technical support for minority businesses to become active participants in electronic commerce. There are other avenues where HBCUs technical assistance and support can be invaluable. HBCUs can serve as consultants providing a myriad of services, ranging from technology purchase guidance to troubleshooting.

GLOBALIZATION

*B*usiness Week recently conducted a study of midsize U.S. firms to identify the characteristics these businesses adhere to in their successful internationalization programs. Some of these characteristics are maintaining lean headquarters, getting into partnerships, employing foreigners to manage offshore operations with the hope of bringing these managers into senior positions at home, and being customer focused by designing products that meet the expectations of customers. HBCUs have a niche in this area when it comes to helping minority businesses. Through their capability to conduct effective market research, HBCUs can match foreign business operators with compatible minority entrepreneurs at home. Furthermore, the research efforts of HBCUs can be used to identify market characteristics and business culture in several foreign countries to the advantage of emerging minority operations in the United
States. This approach has been successfully used at Kennesaw State University (Torkornoo, 1997).

CONCLUSION

The 1992 U.S. Census Bureau’s *Survey of Minority-Owned Enterprises* reported a significant increase in the number of business start-ups as well as in sales revenues. Although the state of minority businesses was much better than was reported, these businesses continue to face challenges. Aside from the traditional problem of limited capital resources, many challenges have ensued from the economic, social, and political changes in our society today. As long as the current political and economic climates persist, leading to a negative impact on the economies of minority population, institutions of higher learning, particularly HBCUs, have a unique opportunity to be the catalyst of change in the development and promotion of minority businesses. The attempt in this article has been to make a wake-up call to HBCUs to respond to the plight of minority business owners while also fulfilling their role of educating students.

Five strategic approaches are proposed in this article. They include the revamping of the traditional business curriculum to accommodate students who would graduate to become entrepreneurs, the use of networking and matchmaking, the establishment of effective entrepreneurial development centers, the use of technology, and helping minority businesses implement their internationalization programs. It is hoped that a careful implementation of these initiatives would yield good fruits for both HBCUs and these budding minority enterprises.

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AFRICANS AND RACISM
IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

FEMI OJO-ADE
Saint Mary’s College of Maryland

Given the general excitement over the New Millennium, Femi Ojo-Ade has deemed it fit to re-visit the question of race and color with regards to Africans from the continent and the Diaspora. His intention is to determine whether humanity has made enough progress to belie the late W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1903 statement on the preeminence of racism as a universal problem. The critic uses both written texts and film to assess the experiences of Africans as they encounter Euro-America and search for identity in a global village that has remained primarily Eurocentric. The article’s conclusions challenge all those of African ancestry: In the face of persistent racism, a polarization of Africans along continental and national lines can only hurt the cause of all descendants of Africa, including the African Americans who are being urged to prioritize their citizenship of the United States.

All men are born free and equal both in dignity and in rights.

[An African American’s dream is] to be in Africa, to walk outside to see lions and leopards running around; that would have been good!
—Statement in documentary film An American Love Story (Fox, Fleming, & Fox, 1999)
There’s a struggle between the dreamers of inclusion and the dream busters of exclusion.

—Jesse Jackson, at a church in Tallahassee, Florida, in Miami Herald, Sept. 27, 1999, p. 1B

When they [European immigrants] got off the boat, the second word they learned was “nigger”. Every immigrant knew he would not come as the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group—and that was us.

—Toni Morrison (1989, p. 120)

A branca é mais bonita que a negra, e quem prospera troca automaticamente de carro. (The White woman is more beautiful than the Black, and whoever is prosperous automatically changes cars.)

—The Brazilian historian Joel Rufino dos Santos, quoted in Pinto (1998, p. 43)

THE PAST: DEAD OR ALIVE?

Many observers of African or world history have a fixed idea of the African past and its evolution to the present: slavery, colonialism, independence, postindependence. However, those of us who know better, due to our experience in the eye of the hurricane or in the belly of the civilized monster, would make some adjustment to show that slavery and colonialism are not really dead, that independence has been nominal and superficial, and that postindependence is a euphemism for neocolonialism. The latter, concretized by the inhuman acts of military and civilian dictators, has witnessed the depletion, if not destruction, of Africa’s human and natural resources to such an extent that the best minds as well as the worst are scurrying off in search of life more abundant abroad, specifically in Euramerica.

The author of this article is among the ever-growing number of these dreamers who find soon enough, to their dismay and disap-
pointment, that the dream is very close to a nightmare and that no matter where Africans find themselves, they are faced with the problem of race and color. Yet, we Africans, wanderers of the world, resilient in our search for a better place away from home, convinced that we can shed our sufferings and shame like some past events that our masters call historical constructs, insist on reenacting the slavery of centuries past, with the distinct difference that unlike our forebears who were forcibly carried across the Atlantic into an existence worse than that of horses and dogs, the eve-of-the-new-millennium slaves are offering ourselves willingly, prepared to do anything, just to feel free. We do not care to think that this so-called freedom may be another bondage or, indeed, a continuation of that first bondage that has left an indelible and painful mark on the psyche of our people. So, here we are in civilization,1 slaving away, contributing to the construction of citadels on top of which others perch like peacocks, while we remain at the bottom to prop up the edifice and make sure that it does not collapse.2

The reason for our status vis-à-vis others, including the implacable masters, is the madness called *racism*. One would not dare proffer a definitive definition here, for that is not the point. Intellectual discourse is not our objective. The incontrovertible fact is that for the African, the color of his skin and his race immediately make him less than the others. It is what Toni Morrison (1989), the African American Nobel laureate, calls “the pain of being black.” We agree with Ruth Benedict (1983) that “racism stultifies the development of those who suffer from it, perverts those who apply it, divides nations within themselves, aggravates international conflict and threatens world peace” (p. 179). But in our estimation, what it does most and worst is to make everyone else feel superior to Blacks. It is the opprobrium visited upon Black people because of our race, color, and Africanity. Manifested by prejudice or discrimination, it is a question of belief or behavior, of attitude or action. No matter how many theories may be propounded by “experts” who try to highlight the impact of class and economics, of culture and civilization, and of individual ignorance, racism has continued to rear its ugly head, and Blacks, including and particularly those hoodwinked into believing in their emancipation (salva-
tion?) by material or professional success, are often urged to return to the ancestral jungle to live among the apes and chimps. This in spite of Rosa Parks and her refusal to sit at the back of the bus; Martin Luther King, the March on Washington, and the myriad achievements of the civil rights movement; W.E.B. DuBois, Kwame Nkrumah, and the glory of Pan-Africanism; Frederick Douglas and abolition and emancipation and nationhood in African countries. This in spite of General Colin Powell, son of Jamaican immigrants who rose to the very top of American military hierarchy; and Michael Jordan, the basketball megastar, symbol of deracialization, whose larger than life image on the side of Chicago skyscrapers made Louis Farrakhan, Black Muslim leader, appreciate “that process of transformation [of Black]” (Gates, 1996) and his interlocutor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1996), exclaim in awe, “He’s a walking phallic symbol. Here’s this black man, very dark complexion, obviously being used as a sex symbol. That wouldn’t have happened when I was growing up” (p. 159).

Optimists of Black movement up the ladder could also point to Brazil, often cited as symbol of deracialized society, of the much vaunted policy of racial democracy, in essence, the epitome of “rainbow coalition.” Brazil is the nation where the vast majority of Blacks have refused to see themselves as Black. Yet, one must again urge caution, because the myth of deracialization and democracy is now being debunked by those who know better (Nascimento, 1978). “The wonderful Brazilian landscape, a melange of blacks and browns and tans and taupes, of coppers and cinnamonos and at least a dozen shades of beige” (Robinson, 1999, p. 10), is basically a convoluted construct of escapism, driven by the fear to face facts and the hypocrisy of a racist society: Black is at the bottom, imprisoned in the favela (slum or ghetto). It is only logical that given the slightest opportunity, everyone would deny his pedigree, even if it means living a lie.

It is significant that the conference at which these comments are being made is organized in Salvador-Bahia, the center of African presence in Brazil and the capital of a state epitomizing the political absence of Blacks and their socioeconomic enslavement. “The question of political representation in Bahia is symbolic of the situ-

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ation in the nation as a whole. In this ‘antiracist’ state, an African majority of close to ninety percent is governed by an all-white democratic minority” (Nasciemento, 1992, p. 112). As opposed to past recidivist efforts to cover up the criminality of an establishment bent upon eradicating all African elements in Brazil by preaching deracialization, some Brazilians are now speaking out, affirming and confirming what certain observers as well as victims of the oppressive system have been condemning: Racism is a problem in Brazil.

Unfortunately, however, such intellectual gatherings as those of Salvador, organized by descendants and adherents of a Eurocentric society and visibly and almost exclusively populated by them, hardly constitute the way out for victims of racism. This critic has already commented on the peculiarities of the 1997 congresso (see Gates, 1996). The 1999 experience is supposed to be less scientifically oriented, that is, more popular, more open, and more committed to the cause of antiracism. Yet, as one witnesses the comings and goings of conferees, as one listens to comments from inside and outside the cavernous, definitely highbrow “Centro de Convenções da Bahia,” one wonders whether much has changed. In a country where the minimum wage is about R$ 140 (reais), each participant at the conference has been asked to pay R$100. It is therefore not surprising that the very people whose lives are being discussed are largely on the outside looking in, objects of elitist notions and still instruments for promoting careers and causes far removed from the hell to which they have been banished. In essence, the Salvador congress, in a very subtle manner, reaffirms the reality of racism, derived as it does from a position of power. One would like to ask: Who is present? Whose voice is heard? Who is in control? Who oils and directs the sociopolitical machine? Who decides the nation’s destiny?

DEFINING THE AFRICAN

The answer to each of the above questions would no doubt indicate that powerlessness is inextricably linked to the fact of Black-
ness or, more precisely, of African-ness. In other words, the closer one is to Africa, the more likely one would be victim of racism. One cannot forget that in Africa, Africans do not define themselves according to their color. The debate on color and culture has been going on for years, and no one has proffered a universally accepted solution or definition. At the 1956 First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, Louis-Thomas Achille, from Martinique, asked whether Africans called themselves Black, “an expression that, indeed, has been imposed from outside, by the colonizing nations” (Présence Africaine, 1956, p. 219). In response, Alioune Diop, from Senegal, made the clarification that it is necessary to distinguish between Blacks, Arabs, and Whites. This does not lessen the import or impact of Achille’s food for thought, for notwithstanding the relevance of specificity of one’s Africanity, one is often mystified by certain diasporic postures on the question of Africa.

Perhaps one should not be astonished: During slavery, one major factor for determining the slaves’ place in the human (civilized) hierarchy was linkage to Africa. The most recent arrivals, the Congo, the African, were at the bottom of the ladder. One recalls the story of Mag, a mulatto woman, in Harriet E. Wilson’s (1859/1983) novel, Our Nig. Mag fell in love with a White man:

She knew the voice of her charmer, so ravishing, sounded far above her. It seemed like an angel’s, alluring her upward and onward. She thought she could ascend to him and become an equal. She surrendered to him a priceless gem, which he proudly garnered as a trophy, with those of other victims, and left her to her fate. (p. 6)

Thus abandoned and ostracized by society, the pregnant Mag goes into exile in another community. The baby soon dies. Mag is a non-entity in everyone’s eyes, safe in those of “a kind-hearted African,” Jim, her fuel supplier who sums up courage to ask her to marry him. For the inferior man, it is a unique opportunity at superioration. She is close to White: “He thought of the pleasing contrast between her fair face and his own dark skin. . . . ‘She’d be as much of a prize to me as she’d fall short of coming up to the mark with white folks.’” So, he declares to her, “‘I’s black outside, I know, but I’s got a white
heart inside. Which you rather have, a black heart in a white skin, or a white heart in a black one?” (pp. 11-12). When she agrees to marry the African, Mag is clear in her mind that it is not a question of love but of necessity and that she has taken one more step toward absolute ignominy: “Poor Mag. She has sundered another bond which held her to her fellows. She has descended another step down the ladder of infamy” (p. 13).

We must note here the nascent amalgamation or confusion between color and culture and, more important, the evolution of the African exiled in America into Negro-nigger-Black-colored-Afro-/African American as he strives to realize the legendary American dream. With the abolition of slavery and emancipation, the process of de-Africanization continued apace. Ex-slaves and their descendants were encouraged to go back to civilize continental Africans. Even those who returned to settle back on the continent considered themselves superior for having been to the “new world”; such was the attitude of the coastal Liberians and Sierra Leoneans. Later, with the advent of Pan-Africanism, the element of superiority was notably reduced; nonetheless, there remained a condescending attitude toward the colonized Africans who were to be helped to shed their shackles.

Again, a survey of the 1956 Paris congress shows the tension between the African American and the African. James Baldwin (1985), then living in Paris, was an interested observer. He saw himself as “a black westerner.” He was struck by “that gulf which yawns between the American Negro and all other men of color.” He lamented,

This is a very sad and dangerous state of affairs, for the American Negro is possibly the only man of color who can speak of the West with real authority, whose experience, painful as it is, also proves the vitality of the so transgressed western ideals. (p. 44)

In Baldwin’s opinion, the Negro is fortunate to be “born in a society, which, in a way quite inconceivable for Africans, and no longer real for Europeans, was open, and, in a sense which has nothing to do with justice and injustice, was free” (p. 45). It is a society offer-
ing many more possibilities than one could ever imagine elsewhere—indeed, a superior society. For Baldwin, Africa, which he calls “a country,” is “a mystery” (p. 46) with strange people and an “extremely strange language,” not to forget a “hypothetical African heritage,” a culture that “may simply be, after all, a history of oppression” (p. 49). Baldwin is categorical in his position that American Negroes are Americans before being anything else. In their privileged position, they can only help other Negroes because they, Americans, and the connecting link between Africa and the West know the protocol and process of climbing the mythical ladder of civilization.

Baldwin’s position is supported by the objection raised by the American delegation to the following statement by one of the acclaimed fathers of Negritude, Aimé Césaire:

This common denominator [among the conferees] is the colonial situation. And our American brothers themselves are, by the game of racial discrimination, placed in an artificial manner and within a great modern nation, in a situation that can be understood only in reference to a colonialism, certainly abolished, but whose consequences have continued to echo in the present (Présence Africaine, 1956, p. 190).

J. A. Davis makes it clear that as Americans, they are builders, “pragmatic people,” working hard to achieve “equal status as citizens” and “making tremendous progress in this regard” (p. 215). Césaire is forced to apologize for daring to posit a racial and cultural unity based on African ancestry.

In Brazil, there is a unique example of racist de-Africanization, with categorization being decidedly anchored on a policy of Afrophobia. Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery (in 1888), and when it did, something peculiar happened: The minister of finance, Ruy Barbosa, decreed in 1891 that all documents and archives related to slavery be burnt. Thus began the process of trying to destroy any African presence in the country. No doubt that much success has been achieved. Even today, with the conscientization among Afro-Brazilian groups, such as the Movimento Negro Unificado, it is not unusual to find people staring at
anyone wearing an African dress on the streets of Salvador, center of Candomblé, the Afrocentric religion, and symbol of African culture and continuity. It is not unusual to hear Blacks refusing to be called Black. A Black American foreign correspondent, Eugene Robinson (1999), recently recounted his experience of this racial dilemma. Individuals whom he considered Black denied being so, preferring to call themselves White. At first, he was elated by this newfound freedom to name oneself:

I was in a world where race seemed to be indefinite, unfixed, imprecise—a world where, at least to some extent, race was what you made it. Instead of what it made you. . . . Many individuals fit into that nether region where there was no absolute racial identity, just broad categories. (pp. 10-12)

Gradually, however, he began to realize the danger in a situation where solid walls are absent. This dawns on him when he visits the favelas, slums, most visibly and vividly populated by Blacks, and when, at carnaval, he witnesses subtle but well-defined segregation, including the dehumanization of Black entertainers:

Black was more than just a color. It was a condition. It was an identity about which some of them might have been ambivalent, that some of them might even have rejected, but that suddenly, for me, had a clarity and a pertinence that changed everything. (p. 24)

Thus, the American visitor comes to understand that Brazil, far from representing the glorious American future of a mixed society, actually symbolizes the deliberate attempt to eradicate Blackness through a process of dehumanization so that Blacks may categorically deny their color and culture and, to which one must add, their African-ness. Interestingly enough, although he indirectly made this last point, Robinson did not dwell at length on it, for a reason that we shall soon suggest. He rightly affirmed, “In Brazil, most people with some measure of African blood demand not to be thought of as black. . . . In Brazil, most black people do not seem to feel themselves at all in conflict with white society” (p. 24). He
noticed that the factors for naming anyone Black are usually pronounced as African features: kinky hair, flat nose, among others. Anyone fortunate to have escaped from the slums, to become empowered through education, certainly ceases to be called Black. Why, then, does the Black American (Robinson does not use the term African American) not recognize the fact of de-Africanization in the Brazilian example? From Robinson’s account of life in South Carolina, what is of utmost importance is the question of Blackness, that is, the racism encountered by his people in the hands of Whites and the struggle to affirm their Americanity. In Brazil, he is an American, albeit Black, but not an American conscious of his Africanity. Therefore, it is with relief that he concluded that Brazil does not have anything to teach America and that in America, Blacks constitute a presence: “Despite all our [italics added] problems, I could put together a dozen magazine covers of black role models that included more than basketball players and soap opera stars” (p. 24).

What is common between the American and the Brazilian realities is the refusal to recognize African heritage as a viable, positive factor in the lives of diasporic Africans; indeed, the very word African is foreign, strange, if not absolute anathema. Nonetheless, to this critic’s mind, being African—not as a matter of citizenship or nationality, not as a question of racial or cultural imprisonment or restriction, but as a fact of an affiliation offering possibilities for affirming one’s humanity—cannot but be a force and a factor in the presence and survival of those now belonging to the new world. For, after all, the European who becomes American has never forgotten his heritage. He takes it for granted, because his presence and empowerment are a matter of course, and his way of life is the standard, the mainstream. As for the Chinese, the Japanese, the Indian, and other transplanted nationalities, it is noteworthy that they also take for granted the viability of their cultures, which they live without shame or any second thought.

It is left to us Africans to find out why the hesitation, the self-hate, the self-denial. Whether we like it or not, the words of Abdias do Nascimento (1992) ring true:
Blackness is not a question of skin color. The color of our skin, in all its varied and sundry shades, function only as a badge of our African origin, the root of our identity. *Mulato, cafuso, negro, escurinho, moreno*: all the famous euphemisms converge toward this identity, which the ruling elites in Brazil have always tried to disclaim. Therefore, when we are denied a job or shown the service entrance, it is not only our skin color that provokes the discrimination, but above all the African identity announced by the color of our skin. (pp. 71-72)

**THE MALADY AND THE MADNESS: RACISM IS ALIVE AND WELL**

What makes the Brazilian example particularly troubling is that descendants of Africans are so many in number but so marginalized and dehumanized that the prognosis for the future is very discouraging. The following information is supplied online by Láldert Produções Multimídia: 75% of Blacks run the risk of being arrested, 70% work in the nontechnical sector, 80% live in *favelas*, and 87% of Brazilian children who are out of school are Black. Only 15% of Blacks complete college. Among dropouts, there are 65% more among Blacks; 37.7% of Black women are illiterate, as opposed to 17.7% of White women. Of Black men, 40.25% are illiterate, as compared to 18.5% of White men. An average Black family earns R$689, whereas a White family earns R$1,440.

In such a situation, one can easily imagine how the idea of miscegenation would be widespread. The myth is that Brazilian society is a model of conviviality, cordiality, and total harmony. The reality is that Blacks, having internalized a complex of inferiority, would use the White woman as a stepping stone, a means of upward mobility, and for their offspring, life in racial paradise. Recently, an Afro-Brazilian magazine, *RAÇA* (it reminds one of *Ebony*), published an article, “Por que eles preferem as loiras?” (“Why do they [economically successful Black men] prefer blond women?”) (Pinto, 1998). The thesis is quite simple and straightforward: Black men prefer White women—any White woman—to Black because White is superior and makes the man better. The magazine quotes several
anthropologists and psychologists to buttress the point. Sergio Ferreira da Silva, Black psychologist, affirmed,

Os homens negros preferem as loiras por medo de perpetuar a raça. Quando você olha o negro, vê o sujo, o piche, o macaco. É o que ele vive quando criança na escola e traz para a vida adulta. Aí, quando ele pensa em casar, sai em busca da mulher branca como objeto de negação da própria cor. (Black men prefer blondes out of fear of perpetuating the race. When you see Black, you see filth, tar, monkey. That is what he lives through at childhood and brings to adulthood. So, when he thinks of getting married, he goes out in search of the White woman as symbol of denial of his own color.) (Pinto, 1998, p. 42)

Ana Lúcia Valente, anthropologist, saw reciprocity in the relationship between a Black man and White woman and a reaffirmation of the ambiguity of racial relations in Brazil: “A loira ao lado do negro, de alguma maneira, mostra que não é racista” (The blonde by the side of the Black man, somehow, shows that she is not a racist) (Pinto, 1998, p. 42). If the affair goes bad, the woman can claim to know Black men and their behavior. Valente also quoted comments by those observing such biracial couples: “Ele deve ser rico! Senão, não conseguiria sair com uma loira dessas” (He must be rich! If not, he would not succeed in going out with such a blonde). “Ela deve estar numa pior” (She must be in dire straits). “Esse cara deve ser muito bom de cama” (That guy must be very good in bed) (Pinto, 1998, p. 42).

Joel Rufino dos Santos, a blunt, chauvinistic, and racist historian, explained why Black men lust after White women:

A parte mais obvia da explicação é que a branca e mais bonita que a negra, e quem prospera troca automaticamente de carro. Quem me conheceu dirigindo um Fusca e hoje me vê de Monza tem certeza de que já não sou um pé-rapado: o carro, como a mulher, é um signo. (The most obvious explanation is that the White woman is more beautiful than the Black, and any successful person automatically changes cars. Whoever knew that I used to drive a Fusca sees me
today driving a Monza is convinced that I am no longer an underdog: the car, like woman, is a symbol.) (Pinto, 1998, p. 43)

In the meantime, some of the magazine’s respondents stood firm on the side of the mixed couples. According to a businessman, “Não é uma questão de preferência, é uma questão de coincidência” (It is not a question of preference, it is one of coincidence) (Pinto, 1998, p. 42). Sueli Carneiro, of the Institute of the Black Woman, saw mixed couples as representative of the ongoing universal changes in racial and social relations.

Não são objetos de consumo, símbolo de status nem garantia de mobilidade social: são companheiros e companheiras, seres humanos, que não simbolizam êxito, mas a possibilidade do encontro, da solidariedade, do amor entre grupos étnicos e raciais diferentes. (They are neither consumer objects, symbols of status, nor guarantee of social mobility: They are companions, human beings, that do not symbolize success but the possibility of coming together, of solidarity, of love between two different ethnic and racial groups). (Pinto, 1998, p. 43)

Such a notion, one need comment, would be the ultimate ideal in a society without any racial problems, in a community where everyone’s humanity was taken for granted, and in a world where skin color, social status, indeed any factor for divisions or separation, did not exist. That would be paradise, not the human society at the end of the 20th century.

The most striking aspect of the RAÇA article is the lack of perception in using a classic of Black revolutionary writing to support the sensationalist standpoint. The text in question is Eldridge Cleaver’s (1968) Soul on Ice in its Portuguese edition of Alma no Exílio. Quoting out of context, the author, journalist Tania Regina Pinto (1998), included statements about the Black man’s obsession with the White woman. For example, it is stated that he cannot help himself in craving madly for this superior flesh. He has, indeed, concluded that there can never be love between Black men and women, thus supposedly giving support and explanation for the Black Brazilian’s lactifying lust. “There is no love left between a
black man and a black woman” (Cleaver, 1968, p. 159): “Every time I embrace a black woman I’m embracing slavery, and when I put my arms around a white woman, well, I’m hugging freedom” (p. 160). Pinto (1998) went on to inform the reader,

Unfortunately for the reader and for the editors of the magazine, the whole article lacks focus and depth. Cleaver’s (1968) text is, indeed, the confession of a sickness resulting from the experience of racism, a disease that must be cured; more important, it is a honest, blunt analysis of the malady, with the resolve to find a solution within the context of Black. It is a soul-searching journey through psychological hell toward the light provided by consciousness of one’s culture, race, and humanity. Cleaver never made an absolute statement regarding the Black woman or the White. Besides, the experience of the young Cleaver is not presented as a monologue; he shared his trauma with other prisoners, and RAÇA fails to distinguish between the various personages in the affirmations quoted in the article.

Most significant, Cleaver found his way back home, to the Black woman, his Black Queen. The last chapter of Soul on Ice is a message, “To All Black Women, From All Black Men:”

Queen-Mother-Daughter of Africa
Sister of My Soul
Black Pride of My Passion
my Eternal Love. (p. 205)

Cleaver outlined the Black man’s hurt and humiliation, his fear and shame, and “the naked abyss of negated masculinity,” in short, the 400 years of dehumanization that left him not only impotent but also incapable of accepting responsibility toward himself and his
woman. He declared, “Flower of Africa, it is only through the liber-
ating power of your re-love that my manhood can be redeemed. . . .
Only, only, only you and only you can condemn or set me free”
(p. 207). Africa, it cannot be overemphasized, plays a major role in
this process of liberation and rehabilitation. It is the past, but also
the present and the path to the future.

The past is an omniscient mirror: we gaze and see reflected there
ourselves and each other—what we used to be, what we are today,
how we got this way, and what we are becoming. To decline to look
into the Mirror of Then, my heart, is to refuse to view the face of
Now. (p. 207)

Cleaver made another very thought-provoking point: that con-
trary to what everyone might like to believe, the abolition of slavery
and the enacting of laws proclaiming equality and other human
rights have not led Blacks to earthly paradise. “It’s all jungle here, a
wild and savage wilderness that’s overrun with ruins” (p. 210).
Together, Black man and Black woman are therefore called upon to
build a new nation over the ruins. The Black Brazilian bourgeoisie
would know nothing of such resolve; they are engaged in self-
denial and self-destruction. On the streets of Salvador, the com-
monest sight is that of a Black man oozing some ill-defined pride in
his Rastafarian dreadlocks, walking hand in hand with his elated
blonde and preaching Black power while swaying to the music of
Bob Marley blaring out of the giant amplifiers in a nearby bar. If
and when the couple makes babies, the offspring would blend into
the supposedly de-racialized society. But would they? RAÇA, in
another recent issue (Bertolino, 1998), raises the question of the
experience and behavior of siblings of different color shades,
“Irmãos de sangue, porém com tom de pele diferente” (“Blood Sib-
lings, but with Different Skin Color”). Implication: There does
exist difficulty in paradise.

In the United States, in spite of declarations of tremendous prog-
ress made in regard to racial relations, everyone remains obsessed
with race and with good reason: Racism is endemic to the system; it
is embedded in the culture; it is entrenched in the air we breathe. In
fact, race remains the issue, and precisely, it is the dichotomy
between Black and White. As Morrison (1989) asserted, “Black people have always been used as a buffer in this country between powers to prevent class war, to prevent other kinds of real conflagrations” (p. 120) Everyday, in every major-city newspaper—The New York Times, The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times—some outrageous, racist act is reported, with Black as victim of White. At the end of the century that has witnessed a move beyond modern to postmodern, civilized savages are on the prowl, more daring than ever before, more barbaric in their actions.

In Bryant, Texas, a Black man is tied to the back of a truck by two White supremacists, who then go on a joy ride on the town’s dirt road, dragging along their innocent victim. His body is shredded to pieces. In New York, an African immigrant is arrested and sodomized almost to death by a White police officer in the presence of other unprotesting officers. Two pipe bombs are detonated at Black Florida A. & M. University (FAMU) in Tallahassee, after many Black churches have been victims of similar hate crimes. Racial profiling is a daily fixture on public roads, and DWB (Driving While Black) has become a theme of discussion in bars and bistros, with Black men finding themselves, as usual, categorized as irresponsible criminals culpable for being Black. A police officer said with conviction, “To be honest, my sense of suspicion is greater towards black males than any other race of people” (The Washington Post, Sept. 26, 1999, p. A1). The Ku Klux Klan, hiding behind constitutional provisions, marches with impunity on main streets. And one remembers O. J. Simpson and Rodney King and the racial divide defining their cases. And one recalls that this is not the early 20th century, not the times when Blacks were lynched for having the audacity to look at a White woman; not the 1950s or 1960s, when Blacks were fighting to ride in front of a bus or obtain service in a bar. This is the postmodern era, when Blacks are supposed to be free: free to walk tall, to sit where they want, to use any toilet, to attend any school of their choice, and to date any person they want. And, indeed, they are doing all that; however, somewhere, someone, by an act of hate, supported by a system that allows such madness to thrive, reminds us that we are living in a fool’s paradise.
AFRICANS AND RACISM:  
A QUESTION OF INCLUSION OR EXCLUSION?

One is fascinated by how easily we Africans—and here we are including all those on the continent and in the diaspora—overlook the reality of our lives to gravitate toward Eldorado, a dreamland that allows us peace of mind but not much else. The individualism encouraged by capitalism contributes to this spurious search for peace and prosperity. The West has taught us that attachment to community is the bane of primitive society and that the hallmark of modern society is the ability and desire to compete, to assert oneself, to be oneself, to set one’s goals, and to be the best that one can be in a setting that rewards the outstanding individual willing and able to beat the competition. So the goal of the progressive Black is to get out of the ghetto by all means necessary. As for the leaders, their objective is to lead the followers into the melting pot of American mainstream to attain the almighty American dream.

Talking of leadership, one finds a certain confusion among those of the diaspora. On the continent, leaders are afflicted by decadence. First, the diasporic leadership: One observation made by Baldwin (1985) resonates with relevance and cogency: Black leaders, the new bourgeoisie, have a special relationship to the West, a relationship that they must deal with, with honesty and sincerity of purpose; otherwise, they will have difficulty leading their people in the right direction. Frantz Fanon (1952, 1961) called these leaders “men of culture,” that is, those who have “penetrated into the heart of the great wilderness which was Europe and stolen the sacred fire” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 54).

In the case of the African American, there is a tendency to eschew Black nationalism and opt for American nationalism. Note that it is an element peculiar to the Black struggle to consider everything in phases of progression, delineating and distinguishing movements, generations, and personalities as historical constructs so that the past is forgotten as the present welcomes something better that is closer to and more acceptable by the mainstream. Several questions arise: Is it true that racism has been eradicated? What should Blacks do in a society that considers them inferior and liable
to return to the level of their cousins living on trees in Africa? Is it wrong to proclaim one’s Blackness, to promote it, to protect it, and to live one’s culture based on values extant in the motherland? For Blacks to survive in the West, correct answers must be found to these questions. In the United States, not only is there lack of leadership interested in such questions, but those standing out among the crowd are too often engaged in bickering among themselves, struggling to be the most visible and vocal, the most viable candidate for whatever is available because, rather than think of the people’s destiny, they are busy thinking of their image (individualism) and the so-called larger society (American nationalism).

One of the most prominent leaders of the Black community is the Reverend Jesse Jackson. At a gathering used to express support and encouragement for the students and faculty of the Florida university where those bombs exploded, the good reverend stated,

There is a struggle between the dreamers of inclusion and the dream busters of exclusion. . . . This is not racists, this is fascists. This is shooting children in Los Angeles. . . . This is not black and white, it’s wrong and right. Whether it’s Jews in Los Angeles or FAMU in Florida, people of conscience know none of us are safe until all of us are safe. . . . Black and white together, that’s power. When we register to vote, that’s power, and when we pray, that’s power. (The Miami Herald, Sept. 27, 1999, pp. 1B-2B)

Of course, one easily notices the preacher’s rhetoric and the rousing style of the civil rights era: relevant, one might say, but also confusing and confused. Perhaps one mistake committed then and continued now is to link the Black struggle to others, thus diluting it, making it commonplace, hoodwinking the people, and giving them a false notion of their condition. Fascists, anti-Semitic bigots, child killers, and ethnic cleansers are all criminal monsters, yes; but although their crimes may be categorized in the general construct that would include racism against Blacks, it must not be forgotten that being Black is indeed considered to be a crime, at birth. Jackson and others are often more engaged in assimilationist politics than in combating racism. Precisely, Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition, in its attempt to be all embracing to cut across the color and other
lines, so as to be all-American, compels one to note that after all, Black is not a color of the rainbow.

Another Black leader whose actions leave one in doubt of a clear understanding of the Black condition and his commitment to the community is the Black Muslim Louis Farrakhan. His whole organization is, to a certain extent, representative of a misunderstanding of culture and heritage; for, if Christianity has been the bane of Africans, Islam has been no less of an instrument of imperialism. To reject one and embrace the other, therefore, might be regarded as a matter of jumping from the frying pan into the fire. But, then, how can one sincerely blame the Black Muslim or the Baptist in the United States when continental Africans are engaged in religious zealotry and bigotry as servants of messiahs and masters from abroad while they continue to condemn their own original beliefs as paganism? Farrakhan would appear to think first and foremost in terms of maligning and embarrassing the oppressive system in his country and cooperating with whoever stands against the system, without paying much attention to issues of major concern to his culture and community. This would explain, for instance, his visit to the late Nigerian dictator, Abacha.

A quick look at the situation in Brazil confirms the kind of confusion and lack of focus noticeable in the American setting. Only there the situation is worsened by the deliberate lack of opportunity made available to the Afro-Brazilian. At least the United States does throw up umpteen possibilities if there is a concerted effort to avail oneself of them. By successfully promoting a faceless brand of nationalism, Brazilian establishment has reduced the level of militancy among Blacks. And within the rank of the militant minority, engagement is dissipated in sectional struggles when not mired in the mysterious myopia of religious mysticism. Ironically, unlike in the United States, the vast majority of Afro-Brazilians (one could actually say most Brazilians) admit adherence to African religion, which holds the potential for self-determination, affirmation, and progress within the society. The problem is that the faith favors resignation, an acceptance of the status quo, and an inertia that imprisons the acolytes in the shrine, even as the leaders corner socio-economic power.
Black ambiguity is exacerbated by the machinations of an establishment that discourages communal action. Elements of solidarity are definitely more noticeable among African Americans than their counterparts in Brazil. Nonetheless, both countries have their share of mongrelization. If Brazil’s racial democracy has effectively reduced to a minimum adherence to one’s Blackness, American individualism is continually arousing thoughts of biracial and bicultural egalitarianism. Thus, miscegenation, more and more visible, appears to be a fad, a way of showing the great possibilities of a society accepting Black and White on the same level. Stories of biracial couples abound in books and articles and, most recently, a documentary, *An American Love Story* (Fox et al., 1999), which was broadcast on public television. The film raises questions about the whole process of Americanization. Rather than level the playing field, as it were, the outcome seems to be de-conscientization. At best, the offspring of interracial marriage would be human beings, neither Black nor White; at worst, they could be simply mad. Of the many themes addressed in the documentary—which, by the way, reminds this viewer of an earlier docudrama *Roots*—the one on the African-ness of a biracial child is of most interest to us here.

Cicily Wilson, daughter of a Black blues musician and a White corporate manager, is a student at Colgate University in upstate New York. She travels for a summer semester in Nigeria in company of other students: 7 White, 7 Black, and 2 mixed blood (she and her only friend in the group, Nicole). The sojourn reveals the tension and latent hate between mulatto and Black Americans. It also reveals the tension between African Americans and Africans, not to forget the mutual ignorance of both American and African Blacks.

Cicily’s trip is a fulfillment of sorts of her father Bill’s dream of going to Africa and waking up “to walk outside to see lions and leopards running around.” His daughter does not see lions and leopards but visits a zoo and sees chimpanzees as well as human beings. Her opinion evolves from ignorance through confusion to some acceptance of her African-ness. She falls in love with a young Nigerian, Tony, who, significantly, cannot hide his yearning for the
American dream. Indeed, his fawning and cringing toward the American woman is reminiscent of many an African prepared to do anything to become part of the human cargo of the postmodern slave ship.

The relationship between Cicily and her African American colleagues is sad, because it takes the trip to Africa to bring both sides to live together. On the other hand, it is symbolic that by going back to the ancestral continent, both sides come face to face with their color and, particularly, their culture. Perhaps, back home in the United States, Cicily, now a working woman, would convince her parents that it is important to live and understand her “Black side,” a side that, subconsciously, she and her family have downplayed or denied.

According to Census Bureau statistics, since 1990, the annual number of marriages between Blacks and Whites has nearly doubled: In 1997, it was 13% of all weddings (311,000). “They offer an intriguing lens through which to look at the ever-perplexing role of race in America” (The Washington Post, Sept. 9, 1999, p. C9). The thrust of the American love story would seem to be the potential to create a cocoon of humanity or humanism, precisely American, with no thoughts of another place or presence, so that lovers may live their life in this earthly paradise. Unfortunately, the truth is otherwise. The very fact that the two children of this all-American family bear different surnames—the first takes the mother’s name, Wilson, whereas the younger takes the father’s, Sims—constitutes a loud comment on the spuriousness of such a sense of family. And when Bill Sims visits his extended family, one cannot help thinking of the African concept of community, with family as nucleus of a well-grounded unity, complementarity, and continuity. Such elemental configurations are hardly accorded importance in American society.

Cicily’s visit to Nigeria also underscores the way Africans contribute to the racist perception and misrepresentation perpetrated by the West. The Americana mannerisms of the young men and women around her make the perplexed student remark, “I didn’t think I was going to see people striving to be like Americans!” If one condemns American media for their Afrophobic propaganda,
as they emphasize only and always the negative (violence, misery, death, official corruption, lack of material development, with the jungle as symbol), one must also condemn Africans for aiding and abetting the propaganda: There are innumerable Tonys approving of any negative statement on Africa and serving as mouthpiece for American state departments by warning the foreigner to steer clear of “the dark continent.” Moreover, if one feels nauseated by Western officialdom for failing to recognize Africa as part of the world—the world that for them seems to begin and end between United States and Europe, with outposts in Asia and Latin America—one must simultaneously feel outraged by the actions of African dictators, money-mongering monsters with designs at self-perpetuation in power and the patriotic objective of reducing their countries to rubble. Meanwhile, it is conveniently forgotten that past colonizers and present imperialists are also culpable in this art of debauchery and destruction; they prop up the abominable dictators who readily serve as pimps in the prostitution of Africans. The West cannot claim innocence from the tragedies exemplified by Angola, Burundi, the Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Nigeria.

For the African American or Afro-Brazilian or Afro-Cuban or any descendant of Africans returning to the continent, there is the need to know Africa’s history, not from the perspective of the invaders who exploited the land and peoples and are now collaborating with internal colonizers but from the point of view of Africans, aware of their past and how it has led to the present and committed to using those experiences to genuinely liberate the beleaguered culture and civilization. Such visitors from abroad would come to understand that Africa is not just the land of safari, not the jungles depicted on television and postcards, not the land of filth and corruption and coups d’état. They would find out that Africa has a culture and a civilization from which others borrowed and stole without making any acknowledgment. They would learn that that culture represents a continuity in their new homelands and that they would do best to recognize and draw from that living culture for their own benefits.
CONCLUSION: A MILLENNIAL PAN-AFRICANISM

If this sounds like another call for a return to roots, that would be an unfortunate misunderstanding, because no one in their right mind would tell citizens of other countries, with the commitment of nationalism and patriotism, to reject their nations for other habitats that in reality are geographical conglomerations concocted by vain-glorious exploiters. The coming together being proposed here is based on not only the shared experiences of colonialism but many manifestations of a common ethos. In addition, this article has proved that African ancestry has been used by racist detractors to keep down Africans. It is therefore only logical to rehabilitate the downtrodden by returning value to their culture and rehumanizing them.

As Morrison (1989) has asserted in disgust, “One black person is all black people” (p. 120)—that is, when the particular individual has perpetrated something considered negative, evil. On the contrary, when a Black person does good, shows signs of brilliance, or affirms his or her genius, then he or she is an exception to the rule. Our proposal here is that we reject the ruse of individualism while reviewing and revamping our cherished ethos of community: To begin with, we must perceive the bad egg as an exception to be rehabilitated and the exceptional talent as representing the potential for widespread excellence. In other words, we must reject the habit of having others write our history. To date, we have allowed them to make our history not even on our behalf but over our dead bodies, using us as objects to promote their various agendas. In the new millennium, the image of Africa has to change: Africa, the most exploited, the most expendable, the least aided, and the most afflicted by the AIDS virus has to give way to another Africa, conscious of its values and its humanism; prepared to make sacrifices to make its people survive; clean again, as it used to be in generations past, when dignity, probity, and honor were essential aspects of commitment; and committed, not to oneself, but to all. An Africa of achievers, with research institutions where foreigners went to study; an Africa that contributed immensely to human development. That is the Africa of which every son and daughter can be
proud. It is the Africa to which the mentally enslaved and the socially deprived will not hesitate to return to drink from its well of wisdom and its source of strength and to continue the struggle against racism.

In the face of this persistent racism, the worst that could happen is polarization of Africans along continental and national lines. And the temptation is very strong, what with the United States’ emergence as the “only world superpower” and the African Americans’ tendency to prioritize their adhesion to this superior society to the detriment of their Africanity. That worst scenario can only hurt, not help, the cause of all descendants of Africa, including the African American. It would constitute the apotheosis of determined efforts at de-Africanization (call it “civilizing the savage”) begun centuries ago. In this process of dispersal, dilution, and dissipation, diasporic Africans have come to believe that “the best and brightest” were saved from the motherland.\(^8\)

There appears to be a growing support for the theory that Africans themselves must bear the blame for slavery and that Euramericans were only exercising their God-given right to free trade. As outrageous as it may sound, such an idea was expressed back in 1966 by a Brazilian, Clarival do Prado Valladares, who after the First World Festival of Negro Art in Dakar, Senegal, declared, “Whites did not hunt blacks in Africa, but bought them peacefully from black tyrants” (Nascimento, 1992, p. 114). Thus, whereas reparations are being paid in multimillion dollars to Jews for the Holocaust, Africans are being compelled to engage in another set of arguments about their culpability in the heinous crimes committed against them.\(^9\)

Indeed, it is only with us Africans that people dare suggest that the past be doctored or buried and forgotten, either because of shame or because, we are told, the very thought of it is too painful to bear. Yet, other pogroms, at best comparable in bestiality to our enslavement, are constantly kept on the front burner, so that the perpetrators of the evils may continually ponder the past and pay for it—so that any potential monsters may think a million times before rearing their ugly heads.
How can we as Africans become self-sufficient and self-fulfilled to survive in the new millennium, given all the odds against us? How can we thrive in a so-called global village where Black has not ceased to be globally marginalized and dehumanized? Where others are aware and proud of their past, which they have used to carve out their niche in the present, without denying or being ashamed of their heritage? Why are we always apologetic and afraid? Why do we need anyone’s permission to propagate programs that will promote our culture and affirm our humanity? To this writer’s mind, the most appropriate action must be based on the complementarity among the various African communities spread across the world. Each nationality would evolve new configurations of self, taking cognizance of Africa as an essential presence. After all, the qualifier—Afro or African—already admits such a presence. The increasing number of continental immigrants also attests to the rising possibilities for new formations. Contrary to the widespread stereotype of the African as vagrant, drug courier, credit-card defrauder, and con artist, most Africans in the diaspora are hard-working professionals and artisans engaged in constructive rather than destructive enterprises. It would be worthwhile, for instance, to provide data on these responsible citizens. Apart from debunking certain myths, the exercise would, it is hoped, make for well-deserved respect and open the door toward solidarity among all of Africa’s children.

The Yoruba, one of the major nations to which diasporic Africans can trace their roots, affirmed, “Apâpò ôwò l’afì sò àyà” (We use the whole hand, with all the fingers together, to beat our chest). And “Ènikán k’ì jé àwà dé” (An individual cannot be called the community). The notion of community, serving as underpinning for communality, has been successfully used in great kingdoms on the continent and in the diaspora. It was, indeed, an essential aspect of maroon societies (Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, Venezuela), and the Republic of Palmares in Brazil remains a symbol of pride for all African descendants who know their history. Such solidarity has remained our source of strength, even in this age of selfishness and individualism. If we return to our ethos based on the cycle of life, we would be able to forge a new ideology. We would thus syn-
thesize the best elements of the cultural nationalism of Quilombo, Negritude, and Indigenism; the pride and zeal of Harlem’s New Negro; the commitment to freedom of the original Pan-Africanism; the militancy of Black Power; the artistic and sociocultural return to roots of Black Aesthetics—all anchored on Mother Africa’s unwavering humanism.

To anyone who might wish to condemn this as proof of retrogression, let us respond, with conviction, that a call to go back to understand, appreciate, and live one’s culture—a constant in human existence—cannot but be the height of progressiveness, particularly because our experience of dehumanization was actually precipitated upon a systematic alienation from that culture. In essence, to become human again, to combat and conquer the ills of oppression, exploitation, and racism, we have to find our way back home. Let us note that when, years ago, such a call was made, the proponents were imbued with a mixture of superiority complex vis-à-vis Africa and a sense of inferiority in their relationship with America. And those who heeded the call, the reputed leaders of Africa’s struggle for independence, stood a chance to lead their countries out of bondage; but confused in their colonized minds, they soon became collaborators with our oppressors and murderers of their own people. Today’s call comes from those who realize the deep confusion and lack of commitment raging in the community. With this perspicacity, all Africans can come together and walk through the tunnel into the light of a new day.

NOTES

1. The word *civilization* is used ironically throughout this article to connote a society that purports to epitomize the zenith of humanism while, in reality, actualizing savagery and dehumanizing fellow human beings.

2. Years ago, in 1939, the Haitian writer Jacques Roumain (1972) captured this image of African slaves in his poetry, “Bois d’ebène.”

3. Congresso Mundial Sobre Racismo, September 28 to October 1, 1999. An earlier gathering (August 17-20, 1997) took place in the same city: V Congresso Afro-Brasileiro, which addressed several sociocultural issues, including racism. From that congress ema-

4. See also Ojo-Ade (1996a, pp. 228-260).

5. For comments on this evolution in nomenclature and psyche, see Ojo-Ade (1996b, pp. 181-186), “Afterword: What’s in a Name?”

6. Robinson’s (1999) *we* is defined as all Americans, Black and White. Of course, one can easily contest his statement with other facts. The truth about Black Brazilian role models is hardly different for their American counterparts. Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, and Quincy Jones, all entertainers, are at the top of any list of role models.

7. It is noteworthy that several of the issues being lately addressed in Brazil have caught the attention of people in the United States. Indeed, the tendency is to think that America has already dealt with and resolved such problems. On the contrary, one finds that what America does is deal cursorily with many problems without finding solutions or with superficial ones. Legislation, a historical marker, records official action but not the beliefs and actions of human beings. Furthermore, it is amazing how easily the establishment as well as the marginalized also forget. Group amnesia attends many seminal works by Blacks, including Cleaver’s (1968). Often enough, personalities themselves suffer from the disease: Cleaver metamorphosed from revolutionary to reactionary, a Republican propagandist and a conservative Christian whose words and works came to belie the position held in *Soul on Ice*. Chester Himes’s (1972) novel *The Third Generation* analyzes the problem of color shades among siblings. Spike Lee’s movie *School Daze* does a similar analysis of students at an all-Black college. The film certainly ruffled many a complacent, contented feather.

8. One vividly remembers the nighttime television talk show hosted by Arsenio Hall. His guest was another popular African American personality, Bryant Gumbel, host of the morning-time *Today* show. It was 1990, the year Nelson Mandela was freed from his 27-year incarceration by South Africa’s apartheid government, and Gumbel was planning to take his show on the road to South Africa. He and Hall were having fun talking of the past and present and were visibly enthralled by the notion that the best and brightest had crossed the Atlantic during slavery.

9. A present source of controversy is the public television documentary by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., of Harvard University and one of the officially recognized voices of the African American community. *Wonders of the African World* is the subject of ongoing e-mail exchanges and a collection of essays to be published by Africa World Press. This author intends to be a contributor.

10. Zumbi was the king of this Afro-Brazilian nation, *quilombo*. The republic of Palmares resisted armed colonizers for more than a century (1594-1696).

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THE FEMINIST STRUGGLE
IN THE SENEGALESE NOVEL
Mariama Ba and Sembene Ousmane

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This article analyzes Sembene Ousmane’s and Mariama Ba’s novels in an attempt to determine whether or not the struggle of Feminism in achieving its inherent objectives is gender based. Indeed, there are those radical feminist critics, especially Euro-Americans, who accuse African male novelists, among other things, of marginalising the African woman. From the narrowed lenses of these critics, the African woman’s worst enemy is the African man. On the contrary, this study points out that African female and male novelists pursue the same agenda, the liberation of the African woman from those traditional beliefs that place the African woman at a disadvantaged position.

O! Women, give us the courage,
the strength never to drape ourselves in falsehood.
O! Men, take your wives as the measure of your daring.

—Sembene Ousmane (1983, p. 41),
The Last of the Empire

The Senegalese intellectuals of today are asking not for French citizenship and its entire concomitant mores. Rather, they are asking for a redefinition of Senegal nationhood that puts Senegalese/African culture at the center while making concessions for those French/Western values that do not overtly or covertly subvert the center. This position holds true even in the struggle for a definition of feminism.

What is feminism? Who can be a feminist? Who can be a Black feminist? Or better still, who can participate in the feminist quest?
A review of the literature of the West on feminism for the past several years reveals no clear-cut answers. Works—such as the 25 articles contained in Feminist Criticism: Essays on Theory, Poetry and Prose edited by Cheryl L. Brown and Karen Olsen (1978), Feminist Criticism: Women as Contemporary Critics by Maggie Humm (1986), and even A Feminist Dictionary by Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler (1985)—simply provide conflicting definitions that are partly conciliatory and partly confrontational in terms of tone and agenda. The problem is even accentuated when it comes to who can be characterized as a Black feminist. Barbara Christian (1985) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) are prime examples. Whether it is a Black feminist or simply a feminist, scholars are divided. Some contend that only women can qualify, whereas others provide an unequal role for men.

But the most radical Western feminist critics of African literature seriously pursue a contentious approach to the issue of African feminism. For example, Bazin (1985), Frank (1987), and Stranton (1994) believed that the African man is directly responsible for the problems of the African woman. Frank even went as far to suggest that the African “man is the enemy, exploiter and oppressor” (p. 15) of the African woman. Therefore, Frank concluded, “it clearly demonstrates that women and men in contemporary African society are at war with one another” (p. 24). To remedy the situation, she advised African women to “cleverly exploit their exploiters and then retreat for their emotional needs to a separate world of women” (p. 24). Clearly, for Bazin, Frank, and Stranton, African men cannot work together to solve the problems of the continent. Although this may be acceptable in some sphere, it poses uneasy questions for an African-centered person. Consequently, the Bazin, Frank, or Stranton definition of feminism does not leave room for African men to participate in the African feminist agenda.

However, contrary to the contention of the Western critics aforementioned, Black women do not see Black men as the enemy. In fact, African and African American feminist critics do realize that the issues confronting Africa, including the problems the woman faces, require the efforts of both genders (Nnaemaka, 1995; Ogunyemi, 1985; Walker, 1983; Zongo, 1996). This is a complimentary
approach, which is indeed an African-centered perspective that is intellectually conducive to an African problem. Evidently, it is an Afrocentric solution.

Afrocentricity encourages “gender complementarily” (Keto, 1989), especially on matters of principles, such as the question of feminism. In the case when the question of principle affects the community, the community as a whole becomes the subject of concern, not the individual or a group of individuals within that community (Asante, 1987, 1989, 1990). Therefore, what I propose to argue in this article is that the feminist struggle is not a struggle for women alone, nor is it a struggle between women and men, but it is a struggle that requires the partnership of both genders. As I shall demonstrate later, Sembene Ousmane of Senegal has, in spite of being a man, proved through his literary works that he can achieve the same feminist goals as his countrywoman Mariama Ba. For instance, Ba’s novels problematize the treatment of women in Africa (e.g., Chang, 1984; Sarvan, 1988; Trieber, 1996) and demonstrate that women in Africa can assert their womanhood as an entity that is subordinate to no one (e.g., Flewellen, 1985; Nnaemaka, 1990; Plant 1996). By the same token, some scholars have noticed in Ousmane’s novels that he exposes the problems African women face and the means by which to overcome them (e.g., Berrian, 1986; Makward, 1986; Popkin, 1996).

Unfortunately, there are those who argue otherwise. For instance, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1987) pointed out that “feminists have posited that the woman writer has these two major responsibilities: first to tell about being a woman; secondly, to describe reality from a woman’s view, a woman’s perspective” (p. 5). The problem here is the limitation of who is or is not a feminist. In the literary world, according to this parameter, only women writers, upon fulfilling the criteria set forth, can be feminists. Obviously, this rules out any consideration of Ousmane’s candidacy, whereas Ba stands a good chance. It is tantamount to saying that only a woman can understand and can represent the pains and sufferings of women, the oppression of women, and for that matter, the problems of women. Indeed, a woman has a better grasp of women’s issues than a man. However, common sense begs us to dif-
fer from this narrow perspective. Ogundipe-Leslie herself did not seriously accept this premise. In the same article, she insisted that the commitment of the female writer should be that of changing the “stereotypic notions of the nature of women,” which includes “formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy” (p. 5). Clearly, apart from formlessness, perhaps, because this does not have anything to do with characterization, any male writer can create a character that is free of these blemishes. Besides, who is more credulous in “destroying male stereotypes of women” (p. 11) than the male writer who created these stereotypes in the first place? For instance, male writers created what Ogundipe-Leslie calls “the figures of ‘sweet mother’, the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self sacrifice, the ‘sophisticated’ city girl [prostitute] and the rural woman” (p. 6). Certainly, these male writers are bound to be much more amenable in undoing the damage they are reported to have caused.

But on a more fundamental base, we need to heed Shirley Anne Williams’s (1986) call when she suggested that “feminist theory . . . offers us not only the possibility of changing one’s ‘reading’ of the world, but of changing the world itself” (p. 303). In paraphrasing Elaine Showalter’s “Introduction” to The New Feminist Criticism, Williams re-echoed her call in pointing out that “feminist criticism . . . challenges the theoretical fundamental assumptions of literary history and criticism by demanding a radical rethinking and revisioning of the conceptual grounds of literary study that have been based almost entirely on male literary experiences” (p. 303). Williams’s article makes a lot of demands, including asking feminist critics to look at male writers in relation to how these male writers view themselves as a pretext to understanding how male writers are able to portray such female stereotypical characters in their works as Ogundipe-Leslie (1987) reported. Williams suggested a venture that is somewhat joint between male and female writers in the quest for feminist theory in African literature.

To understand Ba’s and Ousmane’s approaches, I turn my attention to the editors of Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature (Davies & Graves, 1986). In this text, Carole Boyce Davies,
in making use of Ogundipe-Leslie’s “African Women, Culture and Another Development,” pointed out six conditions that thwart the strides of African women in their pursuit of the glory of feminism. Davies indicated that African women have additional burden bearing down on them:

1) oppression from outside (foreign intrusions, colonial domination, etc.);
2) heritage of tradition (feudal, slave-based, communal),
3) her own backwardness, a product of colonization and neocolonialism and its concomitant poverty, ignorance etc.;
4) her men, weaned on centuries of male domination who will not willingly relinquish their power and privilege;
5) her race, because the international economic order is divided along race and class lines;
6) herself. (p. 7)

These six conditions, which Davies stated that Ogundipe-Leslie referred to as the “mountain on the back,” do weigh very heavily on the backs of African women, and the literature of the continent reflects these burdens. Of these six mountains, directly citing Ogundipe-Leslie, Davies posited,

The sixth mountain on the woman’s back—herself—is the most important. Women are shackled by their own negative self image by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Her own reaction to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling. She reacts with fear dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed. (p. 8)

For Ba’s and Ousmane’s novels under consideration, Conditions (mountains) 2, 3, and 6 are much more useful. Whereas Ogundipe-Leslie has so accurately expounded on Condition 6 and Condition 2 (heritage of tradition), religion (Islam in particular) needs to be included. After all, it is heritage, tradition, and religion that perpetuate the practice of polygamy. And as Katherine Frank (1987) succinctly reminded us, “Polygamy, of course, is the most glaring inequitable and sexist feature of traditional African society” (p. 18). As for Condition 3, “her own backwardness,” this is due to the refusal of education to the African woman. With education,
Africans in general are able to put a dent on poverty and ignorance. For African women, however, until now, education was considered an unnecessary burden.

Thus, we shall use the following criteria to determine the impact of the feminist struggle in the Senegalese novel as is reflected in Ba’s (1981) *So Long a Letter* and Ousmane’s (1983) *The Last of the Empire*: First, I shall attempt to see how each novel comports itself to the concepts of heritage, tradition, religion, and the destructive force of polygamy. Second, I shall examine, where applicable, each novel in terms of how the characters’ backgrounds (especially educational background or the lack of it) affect their economic power and intellectual ability to make informed critical judgment on matters affecting their well-being. And here, let me hasten to point out, education is to be understood as any form of training, be it written or oral, formal or informal, that provides the means whereby the individual is economically, politically, and socially sufficient to be dependent. Finally, I shall scrutinize each novel on the basis of how the female characters react to the problems they encounter in terms of whether such reactions defeat or cripple them in any way whatsoever. Perhaps there may be other considerations as I race toward accomplishing my goal, but these criteria will engage the greater part of my efforts.

Returning now to the core of this article, I posit here that both Ba and Ousmane tackle the question of feminist struggle in their novels. In addition, I can find traces of the criteria I have mapped out. But their similarities end there. What stand out are the marked differences in their approach to bringing the issue of feminism to the public front.

To start, it is not only significant to think but to ponder over the following questions: Is Mariama Ba a feminist? Does she meet the three criteria that I have hitherto set forth? Of course, these questions are to be answered so long as the commitment is to *So Long a Letter*.

*So Long a Letter* (Ba, 1981) introduces us to the predicament of three heroines: Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, and Jacqueline. In each case, the husband is an active, totally willing participant and instigator of the dilemma. In Ramatoulaye’s case, after giving 30 years
of her life to her husband, Modou, he dumps her for a woman young enough to be his daughter. During Modou and Ramatoulaye’s nuptial, Ramatoulaye endures all kinds of pain, including, she recalls,

the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and, worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his male and female cousins, his friends. Her behavior is conditioned; no sister-in-law will touch the head of any wife who has been stingy, unfaithful or inhospitable. (p. 4)

Where common sense prevails, any woman who is forced to succumb to such expectations should be richly rewarded with gratitude. She deserves to be put on a pedestal. But selfishness knows no gratitude, as Ramatoulaye herself laments:

And to think that I loved this man passionately, to think that I gave him thirty years of my life, to think that twelve times over I carried his child. The addition of a rival to my life was not enough for him. In loving someone else, he burned his past, both morally and materially. He dared to commit such an act of disavowal. (p. 12)

Thirty years and 12 children are investments that should have guaranteed everlasting love to the matrimony of Ramatoulaye and Modou. But the ominous potency of polygamy, which tradition and religion encourage, blinds Modou to the extent that he not only psychologically abuses Ramatoulaye by the mere act of polygamy itself but insults her in the manner in which he takes another wife. Modou ignores traditional decorum and religious tenets that require the husband to secure the approval and the participation, in some measure, of the first wife in the process of taking a second wife; Ramatoulaye does not even know about her cowife until the day of the wedding, after the ceremony itself. In fact, Modou does not even have the decency to tell Ramatoulaye himself. He sends his brother, Tamsir, and others to tell her. And soon after the wedding, Modou moves with his new wife to a new house he bought
with money that is part of Ramatoulaye’s sweat, thus abandoning his first wife and his children to concentrate on his Binetou, his new wife.

In spite of all this, Ramatoulaye remains married to Modou, at least in theory, and refuses to divorce him even after her daughter (Daba) persistently insists on her doing so. Even though Modou is no longer around to contribute to the upkeep of the family, Ramatoulaye manages very well with the help of her friend, Aissatou.

In this same novel, the same fate that befalls Ramatoulaye also catches up with Aissatou. But in Aissatou’s case, she chooses to leave Mawdo Ba and escapes with her four children after Mawdo Ba takes a second wife. Aissatou survives the ordeal and becomes a diplomat all on her own.

As for Jacqueline, she becomes temporarily insane after Samba Diack, her husband, engages in explicit philanderous affairs with very young “slender Senegalese women” (p. 42). But she eventually overcomes the ordeal successfully.

This is Ba’s novel. In light of the plot of the novel, is Ba a feminist? Do her works fit the model prescribed?

From Ogundipe-Leslie and other feminists’ point of view, the fact that Ba is a woman automatically qualifies her as a feminist. Certainly, being a woman, she knows a woman’s point of view and knows how to present it better than any man. But what about in light of the three criteria under consideration?

As far as the first criterion is concerned, none of the major female characters allow themselves to be consumed by the trappings of tradition. Ramatoulaye, Jacqueline, and certainly Aissatou refuse to share their husbands. Of course, there are those who think otherwise, such as Frank, who contended that “Ramatoulaye . . . assumes that posture of the traditional, obedient African wife and submits to her husband’s second marriage” (pp. 18-19). But even though Ramatoulaye does not physically leave the house, she does psychologically leave the marriage. She opts to stay in the house—her house—after her husband abandons her. Yes, she still loves Modou, but she lets him go because she cannot partake in a polygamous marriage. Throughout the novel, we see no evidence of her
fighting to keep Modou, scheming to bring him back to the house, or engaging in any sexual relationship in spite of her frequent spells of terrible loneliness. Yes, again, she participates in mourning Modou’s death, but this is because of the never-fading power of love and a deep sense of commitment. Ramatoulaye psychologically lets Modou go not because she does not love him but because she refuses, unlike the minor female characters, such as Ouleymatou and Binetou and Nabou, to be a party to polygamy.

In terms of the major male characters of the novel, it is obvious that Ba portrays them as the scum of the earth. Modou, Mawdo, and Diack represent the obstacle to rediscovery of the aforementioned value systems and the redefinition of a new Senegal.

In consideration of the criteria of the background of the major characters, we see that both male and female characters are properly well educated and financially strong. But in contrast to male characters, female major characters—Ramatoulaye and Aissatou—use their educational backgrounds to sustain their independence and sense of freedom. There is a character development of progression. When one first meets the heroines, they are just like all the rest of their lot: simple, ordinary housewives and likely preys to manipulation. The heroines are introduced to us already grown. They appear predictable, flat, and stereotypical. Nevertheless, each of them later undergoes a change or changes that not only warrant our respect and admiration but demand admiration, respect and emulation. In a sense, then, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are dynamic, revolving, and unpredictable. Their backgrounds help them to become even better persons.

On the other hand, Ba presents male characters with questionable moral traits and uncontrollably high sex drives, especially in the case of such major characters as Ramatoulaye’s Modou and Aissatou’s Mawdo. Like their female counterparts, these male characters indeed undergo changes. But unlike the females whose changes demonstrate growth, the changes of the males are of decline. The males represent the classic case of fall from grace to disgrace or from sublime to ridicule. The characters first appear right in the middle of the falling process. For instance, Modou first appears to us when he starts developing interest for his daughter’s
girlfriend, Binetou. By the time one adjusts his or her seat to take a comfortable reading posture, Modou gets married to Binetou and expels himself from the house of his wife of 25 years and 12 children. Ba gives us a glimpse of Modou’s life and attitude toward his family for the longer part of their lives together. Because she does not tell us anything obtrusive about Modou in their marriage, the optimistic reader can only conjecture that Modou is a devoted husband during this time. Another thing: Ba wants the reader to believe that Modou’s departure is solely due to Ramatoulaye’s declining physical features and age, but that sounds very illogical. In another instance, there is nothing about any of Mawdo’s good qualities as a husband and father. All that is clear is that he is a philanderer. This is evident from what Ramatoulaye says and from a note that Aissatou scribbles to Mawdo before she flees from her matrimonial home. Essentially, in her literary character portrayal, Ba sees men as being morally bankrupt, cold-hearted, deplorably ungrateful, and sexually exploitative.

Then there is the third criterion of how female characters react to the complexities that befall them. Stereotypically, the reader expects the characters’ ordeal to cripple and defeat them as evidence of their inability to assert themselves. But as I have earlier indicated, the heroines in *So Long a Letter* in one way or another triumph.

From the above discussion, based only on the criteria stipulated, one can now safely say that Ba is undoubtedly a feminist. This novel succeeds in changing the stereotypical images that male writers have managed to implant on the readers’ minds. Irene Assiba d’Almeida (1986) maintained that “one of the key concepts that emerges from Mariama Ba’s novel is that of choice,” and d’Almeida (1986) added that “the act of choosing is shown as being pivotal in human experience. It is indeed a powerful act which gives shape and direction to human existence” (p. 161). This is no doubt a brilliant deduction. However, this reading of the novel under review undermines the importance of Ba’s heroines’ accomplishments. Certainly, there are evidences of choice in these novels, as d’Almeida herself pointed out here:
In a society where parents have great influence on the choices of one’s spouse, Ramatoulaye rejects her mother’s preference for Daouda Dieng, a medical student who wants to marry her. Instead her choice goes to Modou Faal who was then a high school student like her and who will eventually become a lawyer. (p. 162)

Ramatoulaye, one later comes to know, loves both Daouda, and, of course, Modou. At the time, both suitors seem promising. But she marries Modou. This is unequivocally the case of choice. But can a person refer to refusing to share one’s husband for several years with whom she has had several children with a cowife or cowives a choice? Does Ramatoulaye choose to raise 12 children on her own? Certainly not. The important decisions that Ba’s heroines make in the event of their adversities are not choices. True choices are made out of one’s volition. For the heroines, they have no choice in choosing their lines of action. For one thing, true choice requires the presence of at least two logically competing alternatives.

As I have already maintained, even if I disregard the obvious fact of her being a woman, Ba’s literary skills alone, and this is what should count here, qualify her as a feminist writer. But does her feminist approach enhance the spirit of politics and feminism? We shall return to this later. In the meantime, let me now turn attention to Ousmane’s (1983) *The Last of the Empire*.

Being a man, considering the feminist’s position as Ogundipe-Leslie (1987) earlier suggested, Sembene Ousmane hardly qualifies as a feminist because only a woman can best present a woman’s point of view. Certainly, this is true to a large extent, but as I have done in the case of Ba, let me also briefly analyze Ousmane’s work on the basis of his adherence to the three cannons with which I evaluate Ba’s work.

In *The Last of the Empire*, Ousmane places women at the forefront. Here, a woman, Nafissatou, holds a cabinet position as Minister for Women’s Affairs (p. 30), but the male characters dominate. The importance of the women is accentuated only in association with their husbands, as in the case of Doyen Cheikh Tidiane Salle’s wife, Djia Umrel Ba, and other ministers’ wives. All in all, Ousmane’s *The Last of the Empire* is a story of the struggle for political power between two men—Daouda (David) and Mam Lat...
and their supporters—in the hope of being the one to lead in the practice of the ancestral political philosophy of “Authenegrif- canitus” (p. 73). Of course, all this comes when the president of the nation is presumed to have died or to have been kidnapped.

It is now time to determine the extent of Ousmane’s commitment or lack of commitment to the struggle for the feminist cause. This is what Eustace Palmer (1979) believed:

One of the hallmarks of Ousmane’s writing is the great importance of women. One can say, in fact, that his world is one in which women seem to be supreme. They are always much more powerfully portrayed and demonstrate much greater moral courage than the men. One thinks of Ngone War Thiandum and her daughter Khar Madiagua Diob in White Genesis, Dieng’s wife Metty in The Money Order and Ramatoulaye, Penda and Maimouna in God’s Bits of Wood. (p. 195)

Had this been the case in The Last of the Empire, the reader would have not hesitated to respond in the affirmative about his being a feminist. Unfortunately, in this novel, there is absolutely no significant importance associated with any of the women characters other than tokenism, as in the case of Nafissatou. As a matter of fact, the same is true of the male characters. Even though men hold important positions, there is no evidence that they merit these positions or that they do anything that is slightly indicative of importance. The one major character that seems a bit developed and somewhat dynamic is the Minister of Justice, Doyen Cheikh ‘Tidiene Sall. Toward the end of the story, he changes his political approach. He can no longer continue to keep quiet when he sees the constant depletion of the public treasury. His speech and his escape from arrest when the army takes over lead us to believe him. But he changes too late, and he is too old. As for the women, the Doyen’s wife, Djia Umrel Ba, proves to be much more than she shows of herself. Her wish “to avoid contradicting her man in front of a third person, thus conforming to the three pillars of her upbringing—submissiveness, docility, and modesty” (p. 132) has always forced her to remain in the background. However, when circumstances compel her to show her resolve, there emerges a strong, insightful,
and well-informed person, perhaps more so than any of the male characters, including her husband. Her knowledge is vast. For example, on the subject of first ladies, Umrel believes that “the first lady of a country should have been born in that country. To be precise, I will be in favour of denying all men and women married to foreigners access to highly political positions” (p. 133). She backs up her argument with lucid examples that even a seasoned rhetorician or historian or lecturer will envy. Maintaining the same thread of thought, she continues,

Fear of what “people” will say is a sign of weakness on the part of the elite, and of governments. We live like pebbles in a creek, tossed from one bank to the other. When the African side suits our needs of the moment, we cling to it. But as soon as it hinders us, we fling ourselves in the stream to cross to the modernity imported from Europe. We are forever fleeing our African realities. In the case of Senegal, this two-sidedness dates from a long way back, before you were born. (p. 134)

Furthermore, she wonders,

What model of society are we offered through the media? We’re made to swallow outdated values, no longer accepted in their countries of origin. Our television and radio programmes are stupid. And our leaders instead of foreseeing and planning for the future, evade their duty. Russia, America, Europe and Asia are no longer examples or models for us. (pp. 134-135)

In fact, it seems to me that Umrel is the spokesperson of “a new type of society” that Ousmane is attempting to define: a society in which women, just as men, can express their views freely and equally participate in shaping the national reality.

Directly dealing now with the three criteria of feminism in The Last of the Empire, with the exception of the president’s murdered driver and other minor characters, none of the major characters engages in polygamy. In any case, this does not make the situation better for the housewives. The husbands’ preoccupation with their professions leaves them without time—quality time—to spend with their wives. As far as the backgrounds of the characters are
concerned, Umrel and Nafissatou are prepared to face the world on their own without necessarily resorting to prostitution. But others cannot. They are also educationally and economically capable of making informed judgments. In terms of the self, with regard to their ability to act where action is required, no female character really stands out in Ousmane’s novel. Perhaps one might say that Umrel is a likely candidate, but her strict adherence to the aforementioned “three pillars of her upbringing” does not permit her. Therefore, one is right away tempted to conclude that Ousmane is not a feminist. But a close scrutiny of his approach to politics and feminism gives a different view of this man.

Ousmane’s approach to assigning women characters with little or no role of importance in the novel with which we are concerned, it seems, is to draw attention to the status quo to engender change. By leaving women out of key positions, he is calling to question the morals of the politicians of Senegal. In a way, *The Last of the Empire* is a political satire that exposes the intolerable indignities that African women face in Senegal and Africa. And as is the goal of every satire, the hope is that Ousmane’s method would force those in power to change their attitudes toward women in granting equality to everyone in everything. In the hope that this method succeeds, and such methods are known to have succeeded, can anyone then say that Sembene Ousmane is an antifeminist? I strongly doubt it.

One of the major aspects that legitimize the importance of feminism in literary discourse is the need to change the negative images of women portrayed in literature. For those who are smart and for those who claim to have any iota of humanity in being, no matter their gender, the decent thing to do is to attend to this noble call. It is a noble call because it is the right thing and because all decent people always want to do or attempt to do the right thing. Certainly, being a good person as she was, Ba, may her soul rest in peace, played her part in giving us characters that are worthy of realistic emulation. However, in this novel, she has ended up doing to the male characters what she despises when done to female characters. In *So Long a Letter*, as I earlier point out, she seems to develop major male characters that fit a certain category. Such an approach
is divisive and therefore counterproductive in Senegal and anywhere else in the world. This in a way demands a redefinition and/or rediscovery of the self as an individual, a writer, a scholar, and as a nation.

There is no doubt that Ba’s and Ousmane’s approaches are different, but they do not necessarily oppose each other. The fact of the matter is that each complements the other. Ba emphasizes the shortcomings of traditional and religious practices while hitting below the belt of economic and political disparity. Ousmane, on the other hand, emphasizes the question of the politics of economics while he shows how some aspects of tradition and religion undermine the attainment of progress in maintaining equity for both genders. Fusing politics and feminism will produce a new definition of our nation and a rediscovery of a new value system. In the end, the hope is to end up with a feminist movement that teaches us how to treat one another and a nation that frees itself of all traces of oppressive tendencies. The world I am referring to is not a utopia. It is the kind of world Ousmane is seeking when he insists that “we must achieve synthesis. . . . Yes a synthesis. . . . I don’t mean a step backwards. . . . A new type of society” (p. 135). It does exist; we only need to rediscover it. Ba and Ousmane are equally helping us to locate this world.

REFERENCES


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This article critically analyzes the popular television show, *Ally McBeal*, with a specific focus on how women and ethnic minorities are stereotypically portrayed. Through Complicity Theory, Standpoint Feminist, and Womanism, this article contends that the mediated representations of women and ethnic minorities on *Ally McBeal* are largely negative, and that stereotypical images of these groups continue to be perpetuated in the media. In an effort to interrogate and problematize these mediated images; that is, what is “womanhood” and who are “ethnic minorities,” a move from complicity to implicature theory is offered.

*Ally McBeal* premiered on FOX television stations in 1997 and has remained popular with both female and male audiences. In its short duration on TV, even as the show continues to create controversy, *Ally McBeal* has received 13 Emmy nominations and in 1999 won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Comedy Series (www.fox.com). The show also won a 1999 Peabody Award (www.mrshowbiz.com). Calista Flockhart, who plays Ally McBeal, won a Golden Globe (www.ally-mcbeal.com), received the “Favorite Female Television Performer” at the 26th Annual People’s Choice Awards (www.amcb.hypermart.net/emmys.html), and was a two-time nominee for the 2000 Golden Globe Awards for best TV series in a musical or comedy and best performance by an actress in a musical or comedy (www.fox.com). Some of the more popularized controversies center on Ally’s love life and her increasingly short skirts. Other seemingly controversial issues go unnoticed or are
normalized: the definition of womanhood and the representation of ethnic minorities. This article suggests that negative stereotypical images of womanhood and ethnic minorities continue to be perpetuated in the media. Furthermore, this article problematizes the stereotypical perception of women and ethnic minorities. Three research questions are posited:

Research Question 1: What is the history of ethnic minorities in television?
Research Question 2: Who is the embodiment of womanhood and how is this shown?
Research Question 3: How are ethnic minority characters portrayed in *Ally McBeal*?

**ETHNIC MINORITIES AND TELEVISION: RELEVANT LITERATURE REVIEW**

The controversy surrounding who gets to speak for whom and how someone or a group is represented has been an issue since the beginning of mediated forms of communication. Research Question 1 helps reveal that the history of ethnic minorities in television and movies has been and continues to be contentious. According to Atkin (1992),

Social changes during the past twenty years thus may have contributed to changing media images of minorities. But true parity in representation will remain elusive so long as white cultural ideology—glorifying white norms, mores, and values—works to maintain a status quo for blacks [and other ethnic minority groups] as second class citizens. (article 3)

On the surface, early television seemed to be almost colorblind.

Insatiable in its quest for talent in the later 1940s and early 1950s, the new industry, frequently featured black celebrities. On local and network programs, blacks appeared in a wide variety of roles. Black dancers, singers, musicians, and comedians were an important part of the nascent medium. Many felt that TV promised a
Radio and motion pictures maintained demeaning characterization of African Americans, that is, Uncle Toms, coons, mammies, and so forth. For example, we can see this in *Amos ’n’ Andy* radio show, *Birth of a Nation*, *Gone With the Wind*, John Wayne movies, Shirley Temple movies, *Stepin Fetchit*, Tarzan movies, and *The Two Black Crows in Africa* (made in the 1930s and shown well into the 1950s).

Television held great promise as a medium of equality for African Americans. Some of the most influential people in the 1940s and 1950s “openly proclaimed that black people would be given a new deal not that the medium was becoming popularly accepted” (MacDonald, 1992, p. 4). In 1945, President Harry Truman established a special Committee on Civil Rights that published a book, *To Secure These Rights*, and in 1948, President Truman presented a legislative plan to end racism. In 1950, Ed Sullivan and, in 1955, Steve Allen, then host of the *Tonight Show*, said that through the medium of television, African Americans can receive the equality promised in the Constitution and that talent is the “cutting edge” of television and that talent in effect is colorblind (MacDonald, 1992, p. 4). In 1951, NBC launched a public relations campaign to improve its relations with African Americans. Furthermore, NBC “published guidelines for the equitable portrayal of minorities on TV. All programs treating aspects of race, creed, color, and national origin would do so with dignity and objectivity” (MacDonald, 1992, p. 4). The National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters also in 1951 “ratified a television code in which members pledged: Racial or nationality types shall not be shown on television in such a manner as to ridicule the race or nationality” (MacDonald, 1992, p. 4).

However, despite the steps toward positive representations of African Americans, change was slow. The same radio corporations that continued to produce racist representations of non-Whites often controlled television corporations. Furthermore, commercial airtime had to be sold and acceptable to a wide audience, a fear of alienating White consumers (particularly in the South) emerged,
audiences responded more favorably to the entrenched stereotypes of African Americans (Uncle Tom, Coon, Mammy, etc.) than to realistic portrayals of African Americans, and television executives were not immune to prejudice. Some examples of these stereotypes can be seen in *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (1951-1953 and in syndication until 1966), *Beulah* (1950-1953), *Jungle Jim* (1955); *The Little Rascals* (1951-1953) (once a movie, *Our Gang*), *My Little Margie* (1952-1955); *Make Room for Daddy* (later called the *Danny Thomas Show*) (1953), *Ramar of the Jungle* (1952-1954), *Sheena: Queen of the Jungle* (1955-1956), *The Trouble With Father* (1950-1955), and *Waterfront* (1954-1956) (MacDonald, 1992, pp. 23-25). Television shows that featured African Americans as their host or guest star, for example, *Today With Mrs. Roosevelt With Paul Robeson* (1950) and *The Nat King Cole Show* (1956-1957), were cancelled due to politics, poor ratings, and/or inconsistent sponsors (MacDonald, 1992, p. 58).

The slow integration of African Americans into television was a reflection of the times. During the civil rights era (1957-1970), the beginnings of Black studies programs, and Black Power and “Black is Beautiful” social movements, as President Kennedy found, “support in public opinion, out of their need to placate government and to please audiences, network and production executives began to respond with relevant programming (MacDonald, 1992, p. 121). However, despite the beginnings of the “golden age” in television for African Americans, exclusion and stereotypical representations remained. For example, *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960), *Green Acres* (1960), *Hee Haw* (1969-1986), *Mayberry* (1969), *Mayberry R.F.D* (1968), * Petticoat Junction* (1963-1970), and *Riverboat* (1959-1961) did not include one ethnic minority.

*Eastside/Westside* (1963-1964) and *I Spy* (1965-1968) with costar Bill Cosby were notable exceptions. However, these shows were not on the air very long. As MacDonald (1992) discussed, television shows that depicted African Americans as equal to Whites were seen as too integrated, too assimilated, or too patronizing. White racism, racism, stereotyping, and a lack of ratings played a part in the cancellation of these shows. Furthermore, the
public wanted to see entertainment shows; thus, shows dealing with current politics were relegated to the news, documentaries, or PBS.

Anger was an integral part of black existence in the late 1960s. If the intensity of that anger were to be encountered on television, it would not appear on entertainment shows. It would have to be seen in non-fiction TV, in that realm of news, documentary, and public service programming which—despite boundaries—still had helped make the civil rights issue a problem of national scope. (MacDonald, 1992, p. 137)

As MacDonald (1992) aptly named it, 1970 to 1983 was “the age of the new minstrelsy” (p. 155). Social issues were no longer a part of television; situation comedies with entrenched racial tones dominated the airwaves (many of these TV shows continue to appear in syndication on Nickelodeon). “The mature comedic series which typified the late 1960s now gave way to bolder situation comedies purporting to be racial satires but actually reviving chronic racist stereotypes” (MacDonald, 1992 p. 165). As MacDonald noted, “Not since Amos ‘n’ Andy had television portrayed blacks in such stereotypic ways” (p. 178). For example, it became fashionable and funny to joke about race riots, skin color, hair texture, speech, welfare checks, poverty, and ethnic minority experiences. Some of these shows include All in the Family, Benson, Checking In, Diff’rent Strokes, The Facts of Life, Gimme a Break, Good Times, The Jeffersons, The Love Boat, Sanford and Son, What’s Happening, and WKRP in Cincinnati and the movies Car Wash, Roots (made-for-TV movie), and Shaft.

In the 1980s, we saw the continuation of the racist stereotypes. However, this does not mean that the show and the characters were void of marginalizations and stereotypes. For example, there was Just Our Luck in 1983 (a Black genie liberated from a green bottle proclaimed his willingness to serve his White master for 2000 years or until the master’s death), The Cosby Show, Designing Women, Fresh Prince of Bel Air, Magnum P.I., Martin, Saturday Night Live, and Webster. Also, it was not until the 1980s that African Americans were able to write about African Americans in television; however, there were still stereotypes.
For example, *The Cosby Show* embodied middle-class ideals and portrayed African Americans as middle class. However, critics did not believe that the show was realistic. As Atkin (1992) found, *The Cosby Show* was “criticized for being idealized and white-washed” (CommSearch 95, Article 3). In *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, the African American characters may be rich and educated, but they still had a cousin who came to live with them from the hood. Finally, *Martin* seemed to be a cross between George Jefferson and *All in the Family*, and the stereotypes were evident. For example, there was the scheming, loud, money-hungry “coon” Martin and the mammy Pam (who was often disparaged because of her looks and deemed “sexless”).

In the 1990s, issues of mediated representation continue to be at the forefront. For example, there was *In Living Color* and *All American Girl*. Margaret Cho (an Asian American woman), whose show had a brief prime-time slot, was not popular with the audience in general and did not even last a full season. Since this show, there has not been another Asian American–centered show or a main character who is Asian American. The fall 1999 television lineup was no different.

Although token efforts toward diversity and inclusion have been made, for the fall 1999 television lineup, Hollywood produced shows that nearly excluded African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino/Latinas, and Native Americans in new dramas and comedies. Due to the exclusion of these groups, protest against ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX has begun. According to Braxton (1999), the protest is headed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and its Beverly Hills/Hollywood branch; the Brotherhood Crusade; the Asian American theater group East West Players; Native Americans in Film; Nosotros, an advocacy group for Latinos in the entertainment industry; and We Won’t Be Ignored, a newly formed organization of “frustrated performers of color” (p. B-7). Not one of the 26 new comedies and dramas premiering on the aforementioned networks featured an ethnic minority in a lead role. Furthermore, Braxton finds that “there are very few African Americans in secondary or supporting roles, and Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and other ethnic groups are
virtually invisible” (p. B-7). The void of ethnic minorities in favor of the virtually White-only landscape is counter to the claim network executives have made over the past several years to include more ethnic minorities in television (Braxton, 1999).

Based on this brief list of television and films and the contention surrounding ethnic minority representation that exists, it is fair to say that most of what society learns about ethnic minorities comes from the media (Feagin & Vera, 1995; van Dijk, 1987). In particular, the Euro American view of ethnic minorities is what is represented or not represented via the mediated forum. van Dijk (1987) found that “most information about ethnic minority groups is formulated by or transmitted through mass media, primarily T.V. and the newspaper” (p. 126). Through mediated images, many of the stereotypical representations of ethnic minorities are with African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino/Latinas, and Native Americans who can be seen as corrupt, evil, exotic, ignorant, lazy, sexualized, and a threat to the White hegemonic order. According to Feagin and Vera (1995), these stereotypes exist because

stereotyped portrayals of African Americans and the unrealistic sanguine views of contemporary racial relations often presented in the mainstream media help perpetuate the racist myths held by ordinary white Americans. Leonard Berkowitz (n.d.), among many others, has argued that the mass media play an important role in reinforcing antisocial images and behavior. The U.S. media are overwhelmingly white-oriented and white-controlled. White control of powerful institutions—from mass media to corporate workplaces to universities to police departments—signals white dominance to all members of the society. (p. 12)

The media, in effect, play a primary role in shaping dominant attitudes and beliefs about ethnic minorities. Furthermore, visibility does not necessarily equate to equity in mediated representations of the other. As hooks (1995) explained,

For the most part television and movies depict a world where blacks and whites co-exist in harmony although the subtext is clear; this harmony is maintained because no one really moves from the loca-
Ethnic minorities are often trapped and controlled by stereotypical and marginalizing representations because the power to redefine images is often in the hands of media industry executives who tend to be Euro American males who do not see the need to change the status quo. Feagin and Vera (1995) found that

the deepest racial propensities of white Americans are based on concepts that are part of the normal “order of things.” Racist images are not just the product of intentional propaganda and manipulation of symbols by political leaders or the media. They are also perceptions of the world generated in everyday socialization, perceptions often so subtly inculcated that most whites accept them as self-evident. The common images, symbols, and icons of U.S. racial rituals have been created in white American homes, schools, and political and media institutions with no input from African or other minority Americans. (pp. 133-134)

Wilson and Russell (1996, p. 244) found that the media, in all its forms, ultimately mirror and maintain popular notions of women and African Americans. Therefore, these socially constructed stereotypes can be seen not only in the construction of all ethnic minorities, but also in how women in general are constructed.²

THE EMBODIMENT OF WOMANHOOD: ALLY McBEAL THE IDEAL

Research Question 2 helps us examine how the mediated image Ally McBeal has constructed of gender and ethnic minorities perpetuates stereotypical knowledge of women and the “other.” Gender stereotypes emerge because woman is constructed as White woman. Whiteness as a whole and Euro American women in particular are reprivileged because one standard of womanhood is promoted.

The show centers around Ally McBeal, played by Calista Flockhart, a young, White, single, educated lawyer who is in search of the
ideal fantasy. In her own words, she wants to have it all: love, couplehood, partnerships, career, and children. Through McBeal’s introspective nature, we learn about her psyche, her world, and everybody in it. McBeal can be described as someone who is a bit neurotic as she comes to grips with various aspects of reality, such as being single and being in love. McBeal is portrayed as a competent and often successful lawyer. She seems open, genuine, and accepting of difference. For example, she befriended a cross-dressing Latino male prostitute, she dated interracially, and her roommate is an African American female. Thus, McBeal seems to have the acceptable values that seem to be popular. However, McBeal is often portrayed and socially constructed as innocent, vulnerable, angelic, delicate, and pure. For example, we often see McBeal with soft lighting, beautiful music, halos over her head, and walking on air. The episode where she was visited by a unicorn reified the angelic portrayal into being. As it was said in this episode, “Only the purest of hearts get this privilege” (a visit from a unicorn). These virginal qualities are bestowed upon her even as she has sexual desire and fantasies and has been fulfilled sexually by many partners. The virginal attributes that McBeal possesses reinforce stereotypical notions of what is a woman and, in particular, what is a White woman. Therefore, McBeal’s qualities, whether through script or lighting, reinforce some of the stereotypical and socially constructed ideals of White womanhood. According to Collins (1991), in “the cult of true womanhood, ‘true’ women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Elite white women and those of the emerging middle class were encouraged to aspire to these virtues” (p. 71).

According to Wood (1994), “there is not single meaning of feminine anymore” (p. 87). Views of femininity have changed from women seen as frail and too uninformed to vote to women accessing their rights and privileges (p. 91). It can be argued that these changes grew out of rhetorical social movements that altered cultural stereotypes of women, that is, the various phases of the women’s, feminist, and womanist social movements. The type of feminism Collins (1991) described above is “domestic feminism,” which was characterized in the 19th century and valorized and sup-
ported patriarchal definitions of feminism. McBeal is a far cry from representing a domestic feminist, particularly given her numerous sexual escapades and the fact that she seems not to have any qualms about fulfilling her sexual compulsions and desires. Furthermore, McBeal is far from being submissive and domesticated. If anything, she embodies liberal feminist attributes that validate women’s progress and encourages women to be independent, sexually liberated, capable, and competent rather than confined to domesticity. Some may even argue that McBeal represents a postfeminist perspective because McBeal relishes her independence at the same time that she explores her neurosis, loneliness, search for love and fulfillment, and so forth. In other words, postfeminism explores the costs of feminism and the notion that one cannot have it all. In this sense, McBeal may not represent the ideal woman because she has the power of the subversive female gaze, which challenges hegemonic patriarchal notions of femininity and female sexuality. However, McBeal is still granted the rights and privileges of being White.

The stereotypical notions behind White womanhood make allowances for her behavior, because even though she is overtly and overly sexual, she is not bound by the negative stereotypes of her sexual behavior as are non-White women. Her deviant behavior is indulged due to White supremacist hegemonic constructions of White womanhood, whereas Renee Radick and Ling Woo (her ethnic minority coworkers and friends) are sexually deviant because of their color, not their behavior. Thus, White stereotypes of Whiteness, the depiction of Whiteness as privilege, and a certain type of Whiteness compared to non-Whites as other will always be at odds with one another unless there is action and interrogation of our language, images, and stereotypes. According to hooks (1995), “television does not hold white people responsible for white supremacy; it socializes them to believe that subjugation and subordination of black people [and other non-Euro Americans] by any means necessary is essential for the maintenance of law and order” (p. 112). This idea may not only be because of White supremacy but also due to the way ethnic minorities are socially constructed in general.
The producers may not have intentionally tried to produce overt racist stereotypes. However, inferential racism is produced. Inferential racism is considered more dangerous than overt forms of racism because “it is harder to identify because it is often exerted by liberals with an explicitly non-racist intent” (Fiske, 1996, p. 37). For example, *Ally McBeal* can be seen as nonracist because the cast is interracial and all of the ethnic minorities (except for the cross-dresser Latino male prostitute who was murdered) are college-educated professionals. They are not cast in administrative supportive roles. Through the critical analysis of the ethnic minority characters, it is clear to see covert forms of racism. Fiske (1996) stated that “inferential racism is the necessary form of racism in a society of white supremacy that proclaims itself ‘non-racist’” (p. 37).

It is important to note, however, that not all types of Whiteness are valued. Rather, a stereotypical or exclusionary virginal Whiteness is valued. Not all White women emulate the stereotypical White woman. Only a few women inhabit the virginal White woman. Those White women who do not inhabit or deviate from this type of Whiteness are displaced like ethnic minority women for their departure from pure White womanhood. For example, the other Euro American women on the show do not inhabit the virginal qualities bestowed to McBeal.

Elaine Vassal, McBeal’s secretary, played by Jane Krakowski, is seen as the office tramp. She is single, dates often, and is very sexually active. However, her behavior is not seen as virginal; rather, her lifestyle is seen as lonesome and pathetic even as her behavior is not that different from McBeal’s, because Elaine too wants love and couplehood. She lacks the innocence that McBeal possesses. Nelle Porter, a lawyer in McBeal’s firm, played by Portia de Rossi, is single and a competent lawyer who is often portrayed as cold even when she was desirous of a relationship with John “the Biscuit” Cage (another lawyer at the firm), played by Peter MacNicol. There is not something welcoming and safe in her womanhood compared to McBeal’s ideal womanhood. Finally, Georgia Thomas, played by Courtney Thorne-Smith, a lawyer at the firm who was married to Billy Thomas, is seen as insecure in her womanhood because she was the woman who took McBeal’s former boyfriend, Billy, played
by Gil Bellows, away. On one hand, Georgia can be seen as the woman because she was the one who got the man in the end, but on the other hand, her successful gain put her in a precarious situation. Georgia feels she must constantly compete against McBeal because she knows that Billy is still attracted to Ally and vice versa. In other words, Georgia’s womanhood is not quite on par with that of McBeal’s because McBeal still has the lure of the ideal womanhood. Thus, an idealized hierarchy of a certain type of White woman is protected through hegemonic privilege.

*Ally McBeal* has not only representational issues associated with gender but also with race. The ethnic minority female characters develop in juxtaposition against McBeal. Thus, stereotypes of ethnic minorities are promoted because all we know of non-Euro Americans in the television show is through the eyes of Euro American stereotypes. McBeal possesses all of the stereotypical qualities associated with Euro American women: pure, angelic, virginal, delicate, in need of protection, and so on, whereas Renee Radick (African American) and Ling Woo (Asian American) are seen as alien, evil, erotic, and hypersexualized (these characters will be talked about later in this article). Instead of constructing meaning about these ethnic minorities through open dialogue rather than stereotypical language and representations, the producers and writers of *Ally McBeal* reified the belief that we only know ourselves through marking the non-White other. According to Crenshaw (1997), “whiteness functions ideologically when people employ it, consciously or unconsciously, as a framework to categorize people and understand their social locations” (p. 255). This hierarchy creates several problems because there is no sensitivity or understanding for other types of womanhood depicted in *Ally McBeal*—that door is closed due to the stereotypical images of ethnic minorities and Whiteness.

Furthermore, the stereotypes and promotion of Euro American woman in general as perfect and ethnic minority women as deviant is detrimental to all women because gender becomes a site of power that “works in conjunction with institutionalized racism to create a gendered and racial oppression that, in fact, affects us all” (Davis, 1998, p. 79). For example, the problem for ethnic minority women
is the fact that we rarely see ourselves represented in positive images. Instead of having our beauty, traditions, hair, language, and culture reified as something positive, we are often portrayed as the antithesis of the White woman, that is, not attractive, oversexed, alien, and so forth. The second problem is body image/weight image. This was a prominent issue that Calista Flockhart (who plays McBeal) faced.

Early in the show, there had been media frenzy surrounding Flockhart’s weight and her supposed anorexia. There were mediated images and split screens depicting a heavier Flockhart in the first few episodes of *Ally McBeal* compared to a thinner Flockhart in later episodes. The difference in her weight spawned much criticism and concern about the message Flockhart was sending through her thinness. Numerous discussions on talk shows centered around Flockhart, her weight issues, and her supposed anorexia. Flockhart’s body image and influence on teenage women was central to these talk shows because of the inherent belief that teenage women will want to emulate what is popular and beautiful, that is, the waiflike image. This in turn leads to many young women becoming anorexic or bulimic. The issue surrounding Flockhart and her weight became so prominent she had to publicly say she was not anorexic and on numerous occasions stated that she ate and felt she had to be photographed eating so people would believe she does not have an eating disorder.

In light of these weight issues and controversy that Flockhart faced, a *20/20* broadcast in May 1998 reported that Euramerican women, as opposed to African American women, tend to be more prone to anorexia and bulimia due to the mediated body images that tell women what they need to aspire to. Euro American women see their body image and beauty reified and generally accepted by mainstream society, as opposed to African American women, whose body image has traditionally been defiled through negative stereotypes. For example, the study shown on the *20/20* broadcast found that only 10% of Euro American women were happy with their bodies due to the pressure Euro American women feel about their body and beauty expectations—these same expectations that *Ally McBeal* may be creating. Conversely, 70% of African Ameri-
can women were happy with their bodies despite the negative stereotypes. The difference in attitude in Euro American versus African American women’s bodies according to Susan Taylor, editor of *Essence* magazine, is that African American women have not seen and do not see themselves in the media traditionally, so African American women create their own standard of beauty. This trend among African American women may be changing. Although there is not much research about African American women and anorexia and bulimia, the 20/20 broadcast found a 1990 study that indicates that there seems to be more binge eating among younger African American women, which can lead to higher rates of anorexia and bulimia. In addition, many African American women (younger and older generation), including those who grow up in predominately Euro American areas, state that they are beginning to feel pressure to conform to the Euro American standard of beauty.

The pressure to adhere to a certain standard and type of beauty is overwhelming, and *Ally McBeal* may be a promoter in this pressure to conform to certain standards. If *Ally McBeal* is to be a show largely from a woman’s perspective, then why do the female characters on the show embody so many stereotypes largely promoted and supported by a White supremacist Euramerican patriarchal society? Although *Ally McBeal* has never proclaimed itself to be a feminist or womanist show, in fact one might argue that David E. Kelley makes a statement by invoking stereotypes to the extreme, a standpoint feminist/womanist reading of the program could shed light on stereotypes surrounding women in general.

In general, Sandra Harding’s feminist standpoint theory advocates the inclusion of all people and perspectives rather than reifying the status quo or inverting the current hegemonic order. According to Allen, Orbe, and Olivas (1999), feminist standpoint theory “seeks to expose both acts of oppression and acts of resistance by asking disenfranchised persons to describe and discuss their experiences with hope that their knowledge will reveal otherwise unexposed aspects of the social order” (p. 409).

The ideas behind Alice Walker’s womanism complement standpoint feminism because womanism also advocates the inclusion of
the traditionally oppressed and marginalized as well as promotes consciousness raising for both the oppressor and oppressed. Womanism, like standpoint feminism, recognizes that society is stratified by class, gender, ethnicity, race, and sexuality; however, the placement of race, the importance of race, and the experiences ethnic minority women have had to deal with regarding race and racism are central and key points in womanism. In critically analyzing *Ally McBeal* through the standpoint feminist/womanist lens, we find contradiction between the portrayals and stereotypes of women and standpoint feminism/womanism because there is a lack of understanding between how different women experience womanhood. According to Brooks-Higginbothom (1992) “gender is located in a racialized context and as a consequence has racial meaning. Race both constructs and fragments our understanding of gender” (pp. 257-258). Thus, through the construction of knowledge, there is one dominant perspective or standpoint that reflects and encompasses womanhood, that is, White womanhood. In terms of *Ally McBeal*, this means that the stereotypical and/or White supremacist way of portraying Euramerican and ethnic minority characters needs to be challenged because of the negative influence and detrimental impact these socially constructed stereotypes can have on women and the ways in which they view themselves.

Socially constructed stereotypes create obstacles that prohibit change in our thinking about women in general and ethnic groups other than our own. These stereotypes fail to challenge representational privilege, that is, who gets to speak for whom or how someone is portrayed. Therefore, what should be examined is the intention behind the character portrayals and adherence to a stereotypical representational system—the signs, symbols, and mediated images of women and ethnic minorities who have been represented in negative and stereotypical ways. In analyzing the three non-White characters on *Ally McBeal*, Renee Radick, Ling Woo, and Dr. Greg, we can see some of the negative manipulation of symbols used to construct ethnic minority characters in juxtaposition against the idea of Whiteness and White womanhood that *Ally McBeal* constructs. Research Question 3 helps us to understand the stereotypical ways in which the three non-Euro American
characters have been represented on *Ally McBeal*. It is important to note the stereotypes represented: the Super Black Buck/Jezebel, the Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom, and the Asian Fantasy Woman/Dragon Lady.

**THE SUPER BLACK BUCK/JEZEBEL**

The term *super Black buck* is a term coined by Bogle (1973) and often refers to an African American man. Movies such as *Shaft* perpetuated the idea of this super Black buck who is someone not afraid of anyone, especially whites, and has an incredible sexual prowess. I believe that a jezebel is the feminized version of the super Black buck. Historically, a *jezebel* has been defined as a “scheming, shameless, betraying, or evil woman. When used for an attractive black woman, this is a derogatory reference to her alluring ways, regarding as tempting white men” (Herbst, 1998, p. 130). West (1994) defined a jezebel as a “seductive temptress” (p. 119). The super Black buck/jezebel refers to Renee Radick, played by Lisa Nicole Carson, who is a district attorney (DA) and McBeal’s roommate.

Initially, Radick was all business. We saw her character as very competent and pretty but very career motivated and career driven. She, like McBeal, is in search of love, couplehood, and partnerships. However, the more we learn of Radick, the more she is portrayed as the sexualized other rather than a competent DA. Radick begins to encompass the term *super Black buck/jezebel*. In all but one of the cases Radick has tried against McBeal’s firm she loses. If a DA had really lost that many cases, that DA would probably be fired.7 Through the development of Radick, it seems as if her sexuality and seductive mannerisms have been brimming below the surface, and now the oversexualized Black female stereotype has erupted. In fact, the shorter McBeal’s skirts have become, the more cleavage Radick reveals and the more overtly sexual Radick becomes. One example is the sexual act called the “knee pit” (a sexual act learned from Richard Fish, a Euro American man and one of the partners in McBeal’s firm). In the act of receiving the knee pit,
Radick says, “if you stop, I’ll kill you.” Although this could be a statement attributed to someone in the throws of sexual excitement, it can also be seen as another indication of Radick as a sexualized being. Radick embodied the hypersexuality stereotype given to Black females.

Radick’s competence has been overtaken and shrouded by the emphasis on her breast size and her sexuality in general. Thus, Radick’s true exotic and erotic nature overtakes any skill, savvy, or intelligence she may have. The stereotype would seem to suggest that she is, after all, a Black girl. A second example is with the sharing of the inflatable White male doll that she and McBeal share on lonely nights when neither wants to sleep alone nor with one another but with the ideal of the man they have invented but cannot find. McBeal is often seen cuddling the doll, innocently sleeping in his arms, whereas Radick is often seen saying she needs a man and checks the inflatable doll for his penis size under the covers.

A third example involves a man that Radick meets at a bar the attorneys frequent after work for dinner, dancing, and socializing. The sexual attraction between the two of them is potent as seductive touches are given, looks are exchanged, and the camera angle is fixated on Radick’s breasts. Radick and the man end up at her apartment where the man is expecting sex after the sexualized dancing the two of them shared at the bar. Radick says “no,” but the man does not take no for an answer. She slaps him, he slaps her back, and Radick kick boxes him and breaks his neck. The man lives and sues Radick for his injuries. Radick employs McBeal’s firm, and the defense argument is that “no means no.” Radick only kicked the man in self-defense. According to hooks (1981),

The white public has always seen Black women as sexually permissive, as available and eager for the sexual assaults of any man, black or white. The designation of all black women as sexually depraved, immoral, and loose had its roots in the slave system. White women and men justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by arguing that they were the initiators of sexual relationships with men. From such thinking emerged the stereotype of black women as sexual savages, and in sexist terms a sexual savage, non-human, an animal cannot be raped. (p. 52)
Luckily, the jury is able to see past the stereotype of the oversexed Black female or the sexual tease and finds in favor of Radick. Had the jury been unable or unwilling to see past her sexuality, which is tied with her African Americanness, she would have not only lost the case but also her career. Although this was a good episode in the lesson of “no means no” and date rape issues, Radick’s sexuality was manipulated, as was the African American man’s sexuality.

First, the African American man was seen as a pawn. He was the chosen, sought-after man whom Radick manipulated. Radick was seen stimulating him one minute and as a tease the next (in the man’s mind). Even Radick admits to McBeal that she was using her sexuality because “that was the only type of attention I received from boys.” In other words, she did not know how to interact with a man without using her sexuality because most of the men she has known have treated her as a sexualized object.

Second, the African American male falls right into the stereotype of the oversexed Black predator. Perhaps he deserves to be seen this way because he nearly date raped Radick and did not understand the word *no*. However, his character reified the stereotype of the sexually aggressive Black male. We do not see any Euro American males on the show react in this depraved manner. For example, John “the Biscuit” Cage is very awkward with women. Even though he gets the girl (Nelle) in the end because she was the initiator, we see him struggle with his attraction to her through Barry White songs and various and creative ways of therapy. His display of awkwardness is, at times, endearing. Richard Fish, played by Greg Germann, is not a competent lawyer. He is also portrayed as sex crazed and money hungry. Finally, Billy Thomas is a married man who is still in love with McBeal. He even goes so far with his attraction for her to put his marriage in jeopardy by kissing McBeal. Through a few brief episodes of counseling (which eventually he and Georgia quit), his marriage is in tact and he is still seen as the good guy.

If we juxtapose these Euro American men with the African American man, the aggressive action is solely attributed to African American males (except Dr. Greg, who is discussed later in this article). Olmsted (1998) noted that “to be raced as black in the
United States translates symbolically into being inferior to whites, lazy, immoral, boisterous, violent, and sexually promiscuous” (p. 326). Furthermore, Black sexuality is seen as fear: fear that all African American males are rapists, murders, and criminals and prey on the unprotected Euro American woman (this was seen in the film Birth of a Nation); fear of the so-called primitive; and fear of the power of sexuality ascribed to African American males, which has historically resulted in rape and lynching.

Whiteness is particularly adept at sexualizing racial difference, and thus constructing its others as sites of savage sexuality; the Black man and Black woman are victims of this hypersexualization of the other. Deeply inscribed in the white imagination is the figure of this white female capture by the male “other,” whose savage masculinity symbolizes the intensity of the threat, and whose race is determined by the central antagonism of the time. Thus, when the West was being conquered the figure of the white woman captured by the Indian appeared frequently in journalism, fiction, and painting, and then World War II brought us propaganda images of the same white woman being carried off naked by a grinning soldier. This hypersexualization of race is strategic, for it permits whites to view their racial assault upon the other as no more than a defense of their own position. White racism, then, is cast not as imperialist, but defensive. The jury agreed that the white police were not assaulting Rodney King, but were defending themselves and white society against the threat that he posed. (Fiske, 1996, p. 45)

The implications of portraying the African American male as the sexual aggressor reify the stereotype of the deviant African American male. African American males are seen as something from which one needs to be protected. Furthermore, it limits the scope in which African American males are seen in relationships. Rarely do we see African American couples in healthy, loving, fulfilled relationships. More often, we see exactly what was exhibited on Ally McBeal and what is stereotypically expected: the oversexualized African American couple and the criminalized African American male. This socially constructed stereotype is contrasted with the castrated African American man, that is, the Aunt Jemima/Uncle Tom.
AUNT JEMIMA MEETS UNCLE TOM

Dr. Greg is at the other end of the African American male pendulum. On one end of the pendulum, we have the aggressive male and/or sexual threat or predator. On the other end, we have Greg, the male version of Aunt Jemima or an Uncle Tom. An Aunt Jemima is the woman traditionally found on the pancake boxes with the red scarf tied around her head. She is also the version of the sexless, long-suffering nurturer or mammy figure. Dr. Greg is the male version of this stereotype: an Uncle Tom. Traditionally, an Uncle Tom is a subservient African American man who is overly accepting of White values. The term was popularized in 1852 by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Herbst, 1997). West (1994) described an Uncle Tom as “the spineless, sexless—or is it impotent?—sidekick of whites” (p. 120). Although I would not classify Dr. Greg as subservient to Whites or a sidekick to Whites, he has been rendered sexless and impotent by the stereotypical White fear of Black male sexuality. In effect, Dr. Greg is subservient to Whites because he is a victim of Euramerican stereotypes of the African American male.

Dr. Greg, played by Jesse L. Martin, is an African American medical doctor whom McBeal cares about intensely. In the show, there was a perceived, old-fashioned innocence about their nonsexual relationship—the long walks, the talks, and the closed mouth quick kisses. The innocence about the relationship is perpetuated because there were never any overt expressions of passion between the two characters. For example, we never saw McBeal and Greg engaged in a passionate embrace. Although the show may lead us to believe that the relationship was cutting edge because it showed an interracial relationship, the relationship was so atypically nonsexual for McBeal because there is a continued lack of desire to see a passionate, loving, interracial, sexual relationship on television. If we look historically and presently at interracial relationships or non-White loving relationships, there tend to be two stereotypical categories. The first category encompasses interracial relationships often shown in acts of aggression, criminality, obscenity, or invisibility. For example, a rape between an African
American man and a White woman is shown, with the African American woman a prostitute and the White man her client; or the African American man is the pimp: abusive, a brute, dangerous, threatening, or sexless. We can see these categories demonstrated in films such as *The Color Purple*, *The Crying Game*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Do the Right Thing*, *The Pelican Brief*, and *Witness*. We can see these stereotypical representations also in police dramas such as *NYPD Blue* or in television character portrayals, such as Mr. T from *The A-Team* or Hawk from *Spencer for Hire*. We can even see these portrayals in music videos, such as Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” video. Political campaigns are not immune from capitalizing on stereotypes. For example, presidential candidate George Bush used Willie Horton, an African American man, to illicit fears about rising crime and the Black menace.

The second category encompasses interracial relationships portrayed as innocent (nonsexual), overtly sexual, or unable to work out. We can see this in movies such as *The Body Guard* and *Jungle Fever*. It is clear from *Ally McBeal* that McBeal had no problem kissing a wide variety of Euro American men or engaging in sexual intercourse with a wide variety of Euro American men, yet she cannot or will not or the producers of the show will not allow McBeal to cross the color barrier they have erected. The show has essentially said that McBeal can have an African American female roommate, she can work in an interracial office setting, and she can have a myriad of sexual escapades with Euro American men, yet she cannot share her life, love, and bed with anyone non-White, thus rendering Dr. Greg impotent.

According to Fiske (1996),

the white sexualization of racial difference derives from the fact that whiteness is carried by a recessive gene, and if whites allowed inter-racial breeding, the white race would become extinct. The Black male, with his threat to the race’s genetic survival [the survival of the white race], thus becomes magnified into a figure of immense sexual prowess, whose lynching/ castration is therefore a defense of the white race rather than an assault on the Black. (p. 45)
Thus, Dr. Greg has been rendered impotent or castrated to erase the fear and taboo surrounding interracial relationships. The tame Black man serves the Euramerican imagination in terms of being able to continue to exert power and control over the other. Dr. Greg, in essence, has been paralyzed.

**ASIAN FANTASY WOMAN/DRAGON LADY**

Music that once signaled the entrance of the evil witch on *The Wizard of Oz* is now the theme music used to signal the entrance of the only Asian American character on *Ally McBeal*. Ling Woo, played by Lucy Liu, is an entrepreneur and lawyer and, most of all, McBeal’s nemesis. Woo has most of the other characters on the show on edge, except for her best friend, Nelle, who also works at the law firm. Woo is blunt, rude, crude, and secure—the antithesis of McBeal. Furthermore, Woo is the embodiment of sexuality. Due to the stereotypical constructions of Asian women, early on Woo is constructed as the Asian fantasy woman. Woo embodies the Asian fantasy woman because she is the seductive temptress and expert in eroticism. Woo is the person who can turn on both women and men by uttering the word *sex*. She is also the person who has a number of unknown sexual tricks (sexual finger sucking and the wax trick followed by the hair tickle) that she uses to keep her boyfriend interested without having to have intercourse with him because she does not like sweat. And, unlike McBeal, Woo has sanctioned sexual interracial relationships.

Woo dates Richard Fish, a Euro American male and partner in the law firm. What is different about this interracial relationship is the fact that Woo and Fish’s sexual escapades are shown on television. This interracial coupling and sexual relationship is portrayed on television because partnerships between Asian American women and Euro American men are generally more accepted by Euro Americans. In fact, interracial coupling between Asian American women and Euro American men is the most popular interracial type. Samovar and Porter (1995) found that “mixed marriages among different racial and ethnic groups now total over one mil-
lion, and they are doubling every five years” (p. 15). Schlesinger (1992, p. 133) found that almost half of Asian American marriages are interracial unions. Furthermore, “recent polls have found that as many as three in every 10 white Americans still oppose black-white marriages, but are more accepting if whites marry Latinos and Asians” (O’Connor, 1998, p. A-1). Based on this evidence, the union between Woo and Fish is much more accepted and, therefore, much more likely to be represented intimately on TV than an African American and Euro American union. However, this is not to say that stereotypes are not evident in this coupling or in how Woo is viewed in general. For example, Woo is also constructed as the dragon lady.

_Dragon lady_ is a term from 1973 and refers to “a stereotype of an East Asian female as mean, deceitful, domineering, or mysterious” (Herbst, 1998, p. 72). It is easy to see how Woo embodies this stereotype because she is depicted that way in her relationship with her coworkers and boyfriend. For example, Woo has been portrayed as evil, McBeal as good; Woo growls, McBeal purrs. In one episode, McBeal literally floats on air due to happiness. When Woo walks into the room, McBeal is plunged from her ethereal, angelic state—Woo is the cause of McBeal’s downward spiral from her angelic state. Woo did not ingratiate herself to her future coworkers due to all of her lawsuits.

For example, her coworkers were forced into defending her lawsuits (of which many were deemed frivolous) often because she manipulated her boyfriend through promises of money she could bring to the firm and/or sexual promises. Woo’s actions, attitudes, and portrayal of the evil manipulator have spiraled so much so that she was and is seen as the alien of the law firm, and many of the lawyers in the firm did not want her hired. Campbell, a Euramerican male at the firm and McBeal’s ex-boyfriend, stated, “With her as a lawyer, the whole thing [the dynamic make-up of the firm] will change.” Not only is her non-White presence questioned but her competency too. Even though she was the law review editor in law school, the presumption was she got the job mainly because Fish could not say no to Woo and her sexual promises. Woo is seen as an
unwelcome addition to the law team despite her expertise and her success in law school.

For example, in one episode, Woo literally turned into an alien, reminiscent of the one from the movie *Aliens*. Woo’s transformation into an alien is not just a comment on her not fitting in with the other lawyers. Rather, it is also a comment on her citizenship. The assumption is often made that a second-generation White immigrant is an American citizen, but that same assumption is not granted to non-White bodies—in this case, Woo. Woo is not constructed as American (because an American is constructed as White), nor is she constructed as human. In fact, Woo is the only non-Euramerican member of the law firm. Woo is constructed and seen as foreign or alien. Furthermore, Woo is seen as alien to the culture of the law firm, particularly when she transcends the boundaries of an Asian fantasy woman/dragon lady.

Woo is the epitome of the stereotypical Asian woman who is supposedly knowledgeable in the art of sexual pleasure unknown to the Western world. This stereotype of Woo has impact not simply because stereotypes of Asians and Asian American women are reified but because Woo is the only representative of Asian American women on television. The portrayal of Woo as this oversexualized, evil seductress reinforces the stereotypes of Asians because there are none to counteract the prominent mediated stereotype *Ally McBeal* has reified.

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FROM COMPLICITY TO IMPLICATURE

It is easy to identify how others with more power discriminate against you. What is harder to realize is how you, by virtue of your membership in some privileged group in society, may discriminate against others. Only when we finally work to bring an end to even those types of discrimination that don’t personally affect us, will we truly be sisters beneath the skin. (Wilson, 1996, p. 271)

The media, like education or the legal system, is a structure where inequality can be produced and subsequently reified as the norm. The stereotypes on *Ally McBeal* result in miscommunication
or mixed messages about the so-called other, because the stereotypes are produced by the majority (Euro Americans) who adhere to the status quo provided for by the institution (the media as a whole). In turn, these stereotypes can further marginalize women and ethnic minorities and perpetuate misinformation that can lead to entrenching marginalized and stereotypical socially constructed ideas. Is it the intention of the media to adhere to those often negative mediated representations? Rather than maintain stereotyped characters, what is needed is to account for human agency.

First, recognition of human agency is required. The viewing public can access their agency by no longer viewing the show until changes are made. As we have seen historically, a reduction in ratings is often the reason why shows are cancelled barring massive changes. Second, recognition of human agency can not only create the potential for change but also shed light on the fact that we are swimming in and struggling against the current of White dominant hegemonic values that have plagued mediated forms of communication. In recognition, knowledgeable audiences would have the choice in digesting stereotypical representations that reify hegemony rather than being force-fed these representations. According to hooks (1990),

there is a tendency to perceive members of diverse public cultures as objects rather than subjects, as socially constructed stereotypical pawns rather than contradictory human agents who mediate, read, and write the world differently. The politics of such a position often either leads one into the exclusionary territories of Eurocentrism, elitism and colonialism, or into the political dead end of cynicism and despair.

As hooks cautions against treating “diverse public cultures as objects” who are simply acted upon by language as “socially constructed stereotypical pawns,” an active audience may collude or actively resist ideology and the current White hegemonic order.

Although we must remember that audiences may not have access to their power or even recognize that they have access to power, hegemony continually struggles to maintain the current status quo. Audiences who recognize their agency can create powerful
change that has the power to alter the continuance of stereotypes (this can be seen in White resistance to the perceived equality African Americans had in television). Contradictory audiences who mediate change can create empowering social movements of resistance, thus challenging hegemony. One way to begin to challenge the current hegemonically defined mediated representations of women and ethnic minorities is through complicity theory and implicature theory.

McPhail (1996) defined complicity theory as “a failure to acknowledge and call into question the essentialist presuppositions of critical discourse grounded in either foundationist or conventionalist justificatory strategies” (pp. 74-75). Thus, complicity theory not only makes us consider our essentialist conceptions of knowledge in the construction of social reality but also makes us reflect on the complicitiousness with which we have defended our own privileged critical positions via argumentative discourse or represented them via mediated communication. One way complicity can be evidenced is through representation of women and ethnic minorities. Representation remains a site of power and the media in general, as well as the producers and writers of *Ally McBeal*, who have the power of regulation. Spitzack and Carter (1988) believed that “it is not enough to change the faces of those in power; what is required is a transformation of power itself” (p. 33). Language as well as image/representation is the medium where power thrives. Olson (1998) stated, “language [mediated images] always entails collusion with its terms in the process of using it. For any listener, at risk are not only a sense of self, place, and society, but also a knowledge of one’s own complicity with oppression” (p. 448). The roles of Radick, Woo, and Dr. Greg are part of this representation regulation. In addition, women and ethnic minorities are objectified due to the stereotypical language and action given to each character.

The continued reification of certain forms of Whiteness and ethnic minorities in mediated forms is one bastion where Euro Americans can control how ethnic minorities are viewed. According to Scott (1991), “the evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how differ-
ence is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (p. 777). Vision is not a passive reflection as Haraway (1988) in “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” noted. Mediated and visual representation affect all who are represented as well as make a statement about who deserves to be represented, depicted, or seen. Only through the recognition of implicature in the creation of marginalization can we explore complicitous issues surrounding representations of women and ethnic minorities in the media as a whole and specifically in *Ally McBeal*.

Implicature theory offers an alternative perspective to complicity, because one recognizes that he or she has been complicit in maintaining inequality and the move is made to change that behavior or action. As Dace and McPhail (1998) noted,

> Empathy, as traditionally conceived, assumes a view of the world in which self and other are essentially separate and distinct. Implicature extends the notion of empathy from the psychological to the physical by acknowledging that self and other are never separate and distinct, but are always interdependent and interrelated. (p. 440)

Therefore, implicature sees people are interconnected; we are all implicated in one another—we are together. It is important to note that merely acknowledging one’s complicity does not solely constitute the move from complicity to implicature. This movement begins to account for human agency, because dialogue has the potential to create change.

The essence of implicature theory can be seen in dialogue and representation. Dialogue is consistent with the tenants of not only implicature theory but also standpoint feminism and womanism. Engaging in dialogue requires one to move beyond the centered self to hear and include those other voices and perspectives that are often drowned out. In addition, dialogue promotes the interdependent and interrelated nature that moving from complicity to implicature requires. Finally, dialogue is one way that can promote
proactive change in mediated representations of women and ethnic minorities.

The narrow range of ideas concerning women and ethnic minorities supports the current White supremacist, capitalistic patriarchy (hooks, 1995). Through the stereotypes of women and ethnic minorities, *Ally McBeal* advances only the privileged, elite, and/or sexist and racist stereotypes of the so-called other. We must expose the old sexist and White supremacist paradigm to create room for new ideas, thoughts, and perspectives free of classist, heterosexist, racist, and sexist thought and action or we will continue to harm and be harmed. We need to recognize that we are complicit with the media and the stereotypes we allow to be maintained. Only when we critically analyze our interaction between self and other can we attempt to successfully challenge the sexist and racist stereotypes perpetuated in the media.

Furthermore, we need to recognize that gender and race are salient issues that are difficult to challenge, because gender and “race [are] very powerful ideolog[ies], the intellectual demystification of [gender] and race as social constructions will not eliminate their potency” (Crenshaw, 1997, p. 271). However, it is through our dialogue as women that we can hope to understand the complexities of how our experiences, lives, and oppressions are forever intertwined. “Despite our embattled history, white women and Black women [Alaskan Native, Asian American, Chicana, Native American, and Pacific Islander women, etc.] are connected by the fact that they are women. We have the ability—and the need—to move beyond the notion of sisters who are divided to become sisters who are united” (Wilson & Russell, 1996, p. 275). As women, we can no longer afford to remain complicit in the oppression of others while complaining we are oppressed. Now, more than ever, we must come to fight not only against gender oppression but also the oppression of ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities should no longer be constructed in ways that are convenient to those who benefit from or are centered by the White hegemonic order. The antiquated stereotypes of non-Euramericans that continue to dominate the media need to be challenged.
LIMITATIONS

*Ally McBeal* is just one of numerous mediated examples where sexist and White supremacist notions of gender and ethnic minorities are maintained and reified for entertainment. A limitation of this approach is that it might be too idealistic because it assumes audience knowledge of and access to agency. There is often great resistance to and backlash when people, businesses, education, media, and so forth take revolutionary steps toward change and equality (this can be seen historically and presently in a multitude of arenas—one arena is the media). Second, there are polysemic approaches to analyzing *Ally McBeal*, and this is just one example. Another approach may yield more light regarding ethnic minority portrayals and television.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

More research is needed to provide a broader understanding of ethnic minority representation in television. In particular, other television shows should be examined to see if there are trends throughout the industry. Second, a comparison and contrast of more shows and ethnic minority portrayals is warranted. It would be interesting to see how women and ethnic minority representation change over time.

CONCLUSION

An examination of women and ethnic minorities in television and how they become stereotyped and perceived is crucial. For the media in general, implicature begins with the interrogation of mediated images and the refusal to promote, accept, or portray any myths, stereotypes, and assumptions that privilege one experience, system of thought, or image over another in an attempt to deny equality and human experience. This would mean that the media industry in general as well as shows such as *Ally McBeal* would
have to accept responsibility for the various forms of stereotypes, racisms, and reductionistic images they promote on their show. Audiences would also have to acknowledge their complicity in more or less passively accepting what the media hands to us. Through dialogue and the recognition of complicity and movement toward implicature, we can begin to acknowledge the ways in which stereotypical representations of womanhood and ethnic minorities are perpetuated in mediated images and through our action, language, and thought (as well as interlocking systems of domination, i.e., class, ethnicity, gender, heterosexism, race, etc.). Through this dialogic movement, the hegemonic order can begin to be challenged.

NOTES

1. Ally McBeal is essentially a nighttime soap opera. Since the show began, characters have changed jobs, dated other people, or have died (e.g., Billy played by Gil Bellows). However, although the plot and dialogue of the show has changed, I maintain that the stereotypes are evident and have remained constant.


3. There is a polysemy of approaches in which to analyze Ally McBeal.

4. For a thorough discussion of ethnic minorities and television, see MacDonald (1992).

5. "Social construction theory teaches that reality is socially constructed and a product of group and cultural life" (Littlejohn, 1996, p. 34). Further interaction shapes language, and language can shape interaction and thought. Therefore, what we know of ethnic minorities can be communicated in stereotypical manners that can affect how we see, interact, and communicate with one another. This stereotypical socialization can then be transferred not only through language, thought, and interaction but also through mediated images.

6. Walker’s definition of womanism (1990) states that womanist comes from the word womanish: “Opposite of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious. A black feminist or feminist of color. From the colloquial expression of mothers to daughters. “You’re acting womanish,” i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown-up being grown-up. Interchangeable with other colloquial expression: “You’re trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious” (p. 370).

7. Renee is now no longer a district attorney but owns her own law firm.
REFERENCES


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Tracey Owens Patton is an assistant professor of communication at Iowa State University. Her area of specialization is intercultural communication with a largely domestic focus that examines class, ethnicity, gender, media, policy, race, racism, sexism, and White supremacy. Her other area of specialization is communication education and how the aforementioned areas can affect the classroom, education, and the university campus. She is particularly interested in intercultural/interracial representation and university diversity requirements and whether they have an impact on diversity or maintain the current status quo.
BOOK REVIEW


Mark Christian has written a perceptive, enlightening account of the international politics of racial identity. Here is the first example of a scholarly approach, using African agency, to the issue of race and identity in the United Kingdom and the United States. Thus, what Christian has given us is not so much a comparative discussion of multiracial identity but a discourse on the meaning of the term *multiracial identity* given the social and political history of the United Kingdom and the United States. It is easy to understand why this theme has not been attempted before *Multiracial Identity*. It is a difficult subject to plow through given the many stumps that stick out of the political ground to halt the would-be interpreter. Christian showed an unusual courage in taking on this deeply complicated subject. He has simply burst the bubble of racial quietude in both the United Kingdom and the United States by demonstrating how the concept of multiracial identity is wrapped up in the idea of White supremacy. Racism in Britain, we also discover, is hardly different from racism in the United States and other parts of the world. Although there have been British intellectuals in the past eager to suggest that Britain was categorically more progressive in its race relations than the United States or South Africa, Christian has shown that racism is an international phenomenon. This book is important if for no other reason than the fact that Christian has taught us that the elements of racism that appear pervasive and all too common in America’s national life occur with regularity in Britain and other nations as well. This is a profound point. He has demonstrated a broad and deep appreciation of the difference between Britain and the United States while recognizing that there is a commonality of the engine of racial animosity. Both societies operate on the basis of White racial supremacy. Furthermore, Brit-
ain’s construction of this dominance based on race is inherent in the conception of nation as biological. There is no way that an Asian or African could be British in the minds of the ordinary English person, and yet an increasing number of Britons are Black or brown. This has led to riots in the streets of Leeds, Birmingham, and London.

Christian tackles the problem logically by examining how the term *multicultural identity* came into prominence in the 1990s. He then explores the contradictions in the postmodern discourse around essentialism whereby some scholars criticize the idea of a Black subject matter yet advertise their books under some title of Black books or something to that effect. Christian is an astute observer of the issue of race, and his book will become a classic for those interested in new approaches to the question of multiracial identity.

The book is divided into six chapters, including “Theorizing Multiracial Identity,” “Speaking for Themselves: Definitions of the Racial Self and Parental Influence,” “Speaking for Themselves: Inside and Outside of Blackness in Liverpool,” “South Africa and Jamaica: Other Multiracial Case Studies,” “Assessing Multiracial Identity,” and “Conclusions.” Each chapter is based on concrete research, and his methods of interrogating the subject are clearly of the highest standards of scholarship. Taking the case of the “Liverpool-born Blacks” as his central focus, Christian is able to provide his readers with a generations’-old study in the development of race, identity, and racism. He writes of the Liverpool-born Blacks in this fashion:

> There has developed a mixed racial origin community which spans several generations. Although as a social group they were often in official circles described as “half-castes”, since the 1960s they have been largely referred to in the colloquial sense as “Liverpool-born Blacks.” (p. 22)

Clearly, by whatever name the Liverpool-born Blacks are called, their condition does not change from generation to generation.
They remain the least educated, the poorest, and the most discriminated against of all of Britain’s Black communities. There is, as Christian points out, a uniquely horrific structural racial discrimination at work in Liverpool, especially in the Toxteth community where most of the Blacks live. Although there have been community-based projects seeking to remedy some of the conditions in Toxteth, the British government for the most part has not done much to alleviate the high unemployment of Liverpool-born Blacks. The social landscape is dismal for the people who, in 1981, gave Britain its most destructive race riot.

Trying to capture the mood and the impressions of the Liverpool Blacks, Christian’s respondents showed the complexity of the issue of identity in a community with a mixed racial heritage. Older men respondents had mixed reactions to the idea of identity. One respondent, age 64, told Christian, “I’m very proud to be Black. I’m proud to be Igbo. I can’t say I’m not proud to be English, because I am” (p. 23). When told that his mother was of Scottish descent yet he referred to himself as “part English,” the respondent replied, “Well, I was never brought up in Scotland and as far as I know my mother wasn’t either” (p. 23). Here again, Christian is right on target as he indicates in his razor-sharp way that the man was emphasizing region rather than what he had inherited from his mother racially. Yet when he spoke of his father, he quite easily said he was proud to be Black and proud to be Igbo, although he had never been to Africa nor to the Igbo region of Nigeria. It was in stark contrast to his statement regarding his mother’s ethnicity and origin. The book is well written and has numerous accounts of respondents speaking of the complexity of their racial identity. Christian also believes that the situation in Britain is similar but different from those societies, such as the United States, South Africa, and Jamaica, where there is “a tradition of overt racialised stratification” (p. 103).

Christian very astutely sees the practice of miscegenation on the part of the colonizer as an exploitative activity meant to further subjugate the people and to obliterate every memory of their culture. He concludes with the following statement:
It is self-evident, whether it be in the UK, US, South Africa or Jamaica, that the social construction of “Black identities” is inextricably entwined with the development and growth of white European domination in terms of cultural, political, economic and social determinants. (p. 121)

This is a powerful book that should be read by every serious student of racism and racial identity.

—Molefi Kete Asante
Temple University