



Dancing between Circles and Lines

What has fascinated me is the manner in which most of my colleagues have written theory and engaged in the social sciences in relationship to African people. They have often assumed that their “objectivity,” a kind of collective subjectivity of European culture, should be the measure by which the world marches. I have seldom fallen in step, insisting that there are other ways in which to experience phenomena rather than viewing them from a Eurocentric vantage point.

My work has increasingly constituted a radical critique of the Eurocentric ideology that masquerades as a universal view in the fields of intercultural communication, rhetoric, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, education, anthropology, and history. Yet the critique is radical only in the sense that it suggests a turnabout, an alternative perspective on phenomena. It is about taking the globe and turning it over so that we see all the possibilities of a world where Africa, for example, is subject and not object. Such a posture is necessary and rewarding for both Africans and Europeans. The inability to “see” from several angles is perhaps the one common weakness in provincial scholarship. Those who have delighted us most thoroughly and advanced thought most significantly

have been those thinkers who explored different views and brought new perspectives.

My objective has always been to present a critique that propounds a cultural theory of society by the very act of criticism. In other words, to provide a radical assessment of a given reality is to create, among other things, another reality. Furthermore, any criticism of society is, definitionally, a criticism of the ruling ideology of that society. I have the insight that comes from having been born black in the United States. That fact puts me in a critical mood within the intellectual and social milieu I share with Eurocentricists. As the critic, I am always seeking to create a new world, to find an escape, to liberate those who see only a part of reality. Similarly, Countee Cullen, the noted poet, could say:

Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
to catechism by a mind too strewn
with petty cares to slightly understand
what awful brain compels his awful hand.
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
to make a poet black, and bid him sing!

By the act of being a poet, Countee Cullen was criticizing the dominant ideology of the society. As a writer in cultural and intellectual alignment with his basic human values, he was, by definition, in defiance of an oppressive situation.

The crystallization of this critical perspective I have named *Afrocentricity*, which means, literally, placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior.' For example, the communicationist who defines a speech as an uninterrupted spoken discourse demonstrates either a disregard or ignorance of the African tradition of speech, much as Leslie Fiedler was using a purely European conception of fiction when he contended that romance was a central theme in literature. Fiedler's reaction to literature was essentially a Eurocentric contextual affair.' Familiar with the classics of American and British literature, he apparently ac-

cepted Western literature as world-defining. Although an able critic of Eurocentric culture, he failed to analyze his genre from a worldwide perspective—or, at least, to acknowledge the possibility of such an analysis. Traditionally, African writers are not concerned with the romance variety of literature, but Fiedler, like many Eurocentric writers, gives us no awareness of this fact. We are thus left with his word for literature—a truncated word, parading as universal.

Charles Larson wrote a perceptive essay, “Heroic Ethnocentrism: The Idea of Universality in Literature,” in which he examined the European notion of universality.⁴ Larson had first come face to face with the problem of universality while teaching an English literature course in Nigeria—a good place, I might add, to come to grips with ethnocentric ideas of all kinds. His students did not understand the idea of kissing in the Victorian novel, and how Larson handled the situation is revealing. He groped for words to explain the work of such a celebrated writer as Thomas Hardy to his African audience. He learned, of course, how culture shapes the interpretation of literature. But since culture itself is shaped by the constant demands of society and the environment, Larson concluded that kissing and description have not found counterparts in the African novel—not yet, at least. He writes, “Usually, when we try to force the concept of universality on someone who is not western, I think we are implying that our own culture should be the standard of measurement.” Larson is correct to see Fiedler’s assertion that the romance is universal as another Western analysis imposed on world literature. Since there are entire cultural areas where the romance is nonexistent, its universality is doubtful. There are no major African novels where the plot progresses because of a hero’s attempt to attract a mate. An Afrocentric discussion of literature thus would guard against this ethnocentric promotion of a group universality.

The central problem with Fiedler and others who write in this vein is that, just as fifteenth-century Europeans could not cease believing that the earth was the center of the universe,

many today find it difficult to stop viewing European/American culture as the center of the social universe. Thus, the work they produce seldom considers the possibilities of other realities or, indeed, shared realities. A number of scholars have challenged such a narrow view of the arts and the social sciences. Their works speak to the abiding problem of Western formulations based on parochial observations.⁶

But Robert Armstrong declares, in a more direct way, that Europeans tend to speak as Fiedler had, tying themselves to all that is supposedly universal, because they have “an ethnocentric crypto-aesthetics” that links them to what they perceive as a “universal cultural phenomenon.” What is particularly troubling in these formulations by European and some African and Asian writers, who have been thoroughly trained in Eurocentrism, is that they assume that everyone else should simply acquiesce in their expansive provincialism. They not only make their arguments with a bewildering array of tropes, figures, and oxymorons, but they assert them as if there were no other reality, no other perspective.

It is striking that some feminist critics have addressed the same conceptual issue, though from a different point of view. For example, Karen Sacks has attacked Social Darwinist anthropology for its industrial-capitalist bias. In her study of six African societies, she argues that anthropology’s inherent hierarchical and competitive dimensions create, as well as reinforce, beliefs in the natural superiority of men over women. According to Sacks, “the center of the struggle lies in changing institutionalized patterns of behaviors and allocations of social roles.”⁸ Since Marxism does not presume such inequality, Sacks extols its analytic advantages in the feminist movement: Social Darwinist and Marxist theories “are diametrically opposed ways of seeing the same social order(s), and they represent opposed class views and needs.” However, her argument, like those of other Marxist theorists, rests on a reaction to the industrial-capitalist order and must use its language to demonstrate the opposition. Thus, though the opposition is real, the balance is weighted toward Social Darwinism.

While Afrocentric thinkers must also confront presumptions of inequality, Marxism is likewise not helpful in developing Afrocentric concepts and methods because it, too, is a product of a Eurocentric consciousness that excludes the historical and cultural perspectives of Africa. I am sympathetic to Sacks view to the extent that she criticizes the Social Darwinist perspective and attempts to find, as I have done, a way of seeing based on people's needs and experiences. But because Marxism emerged from the Western consciousness, it is mechanistic in its approach to social understanding and development, and it has often adopted forms of Social Darwinism when explaining cultural and social phenomena.

I have challenged the African American Marxists, who have claimed to be radical democrats under the new philosophical regime in which Marxism appears weakened by the demise of the Soviet formula, to understand that the structural problems they identify in the American system are not primary causes of the economic dislocation of African people. While it is true that the American system, with its new technological thrust away from the old industrial order, is structurally organized by the energy it gathers to dislocate and disorient African people, it is dependent on the cooperation of systemic racism. In other words, the system exists because of the racism, not the other way round. One cannot claim that the industrial age was any better for Africans than the new structural situation. Furthermore, what appears to Cornel West¹⁰ and others as evidence of nihilism in the African American community is simply the failure of the American economic system to deliver its goods equitably, not some imperfection in African people. Actually the system, as designed, has worked quite well in marginalizing the African American and other ethnic populations. Interestingly, in trying to pinpoint the nature of this nihilism in the African American community, of West, Angela Davis, and Manning Marable," radical democrats all, none has been able to offer a way to eliminate the nihilism, except to argue that there must be some sort of structural change in the American economy. To be sure, Mar-

able is more specific in calling for a socialism committed to human equality in which liberty is not simply a function of the power and privilege of the wealthy.

What I, as an Afrocentrist, am concerned about is not nihilism per se but the underlying problem of a strictly class analysis of the African American situation. I do not accept the thesis that the material condition creates ideas in an absolute sense. One sees this precisely in the manner race operates differently for the white worker and the black worker. There is no consistent, provocative revolutionary sentiment, as Harold Cruse" would say, evident in the white proletariat. On the other hand, African Americans want fundamental change in the way we are perceived. It is clear to me that Afrocentricity assists us in understanding how people come to create material realities, whether those realities are based in class or race conditions. Furthermore, it is not true now, nor has it ever been true, that the white poor see themselves as united with the black poor against the white elite in the struggle to bring about a more equitable society. In fact, the white poor and working classes believe (witness the various white separatist and paramilitary groups) that the black poor and the white establishment work in tandem. While radical democrats argue that the failure of the Soviet Union was not the failure of communism, Soviet communism is the only grand communism that we have known. Such is the limit of class thinking in racist societies.

While inquiring into the nature of the African condition in the Americas, Cornel West concluded that the fundamental problem was the loss of values, a sort of nihilism that has derailed the best intentions of the African American genius. Although West has expressed this belief in many places, it is especially pronounced in *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times*, where he contends that the period between 1965 and 1992 produced "the highest level of forms of self-destruction known in black history." With the passion that only West can bring to an issue, he reiterates in his unique manner that "these demons which are at work, the demons of mean-

inglessness, of hopelessness, a sense of nothingness conjoined with the institutional and structural marginalization of large numbers of black people. . . . But, for the most part, it has produced the highest level of self-destruction known to black people since we arrived."¹³

My response to what West sees as nihilism has been to present an Afrocentric vision wrapped in the optimism that remains the attitude of the African multitudes in the United States. By raising some important issues in regard to the loss of values, West has struck the same chord as the African American conservatives from whom he distances himself. They argue that the loss of values means that African Americans need to acquire the habits and values of the white population in order to become fully functioning citizens of the United States. To his credit West does not go this far and indeed has taken issue with the conservatives Glenn Loury and Thomas Sowell, who have made a rather straightforward critique of the conservative position by framing this question of values in terms of individual choices rather than in terms of what the structural dimensions of society have created as choices.

But the concentration on the loss of values by the conservatives, West, and, to a lesser extent, Marable and other radical democrats is misplaced. I have tried to demonstrate that there is no loss of values in the African American community, and that the values that we honor and respect are as strong today as they have ever been. Of course, changing economic and political realities do highlight certain antihuman behaviors by some individuals, but these actions are neither acceptable to African Americans nor unprecedented in our nation's past. Although our traditional values such as harmony, justice, equality, patience, diligence, and good-naturedness are not foreign to us today, they are rarely represented in the media, which instead produces a flood of images and ideas about how nihilistic we have become. Although I do not dismiss the realities of violence and other destructive behaviors, I believe that the media make them seem more pervasive than ever.

If we have lost anything, it is our cultural centeredness; that is, we have been moved off our own platforms. This means that we cannot truly be ourselves or know our potential since we exist in a borrowed space. But all space is a matter of point of view or interpretation. Our existential relationship to the culture that we have borrowed defines what and who we are at any given moment. By regaining our own platforms, standing in our own cultural spaces, and believing that our way of viewing the universe is just as valid as any, we will achieve the kind of transformation that we need to participate fully in a multicultural society. However, without this kind of centeredness, we bring almost nothing to the multicultural table but a darker version of whiteness.

There is therefore nothing strange about the Afrocentric idea. All distorted or otherwise negative understandings of it are rooted in the society's manner of viewing Africans. This is not to say that all who reject the Afrocentric idea are racists, but rather that their failure to appreciate its context and objectives suggests their seduction by the structural elements of a hierarchical society that fails to recognize African agency. We have, however, arrived at a point at which the entire process of human knowledge is being assessed and reassessed in order to help us discover what we know about each other. As we open the doors to return to our own platforms, we greatly enrich the world.

What makes Afrocentric concepts more inclusive is that they seek to reorient our world view in ways that challenge Social Darwinism, capitalism, and most forms of Marxism—all of which are grounded in their own particularity. The invalidity of an idea arises not from its exponents but from its own fundamental flaws. This is the point at which the feminist critique converges with the Afrocentric line of reasoning. What I seek to do here is to move closer to a post-Eurocentric idea that makes true transcultural analyses possible; this can be accomplished alongside a postmale ideology as we unlock creative human potential.

It should be clear that while numerous issues remain unre-

solved in the discourse of Afrocentricity, I am not opposed to any conception of the human being that is rewarding and liberating. Indeed, we can only advance communally in the context of freedom, personal liberty, and collective liberation as conceived by many scholars.

While I, as an Afrocentrist, argue the primacy of the cultural crisis in the context of a heterogeneous racist society, I am aware of the varieties of oppressions in our contemporary situation, and, like other Afrocentrists, I believe that it is necessary to confront all forms of discrimination, persecution, and oppression simultaneously.

But what of the poststructuralist and, by extension, postmodernist concern about the perceived restructuring inherent in Afrocentricity? This question is meant to sharpen the conflict that frequently exists between the postmodernist and the Afrocentrist on the cultural issue. Afrocentricity cannot abandon the structuralism of modernism without betraying the achievements of culture. African Americans are a preeminently cultured people within American society, and our contributions to what is called “popular American culture” are immense. To seek to transcend the African cultural presence in contemporary society is to quest for anonymity at the very time that African Americans and Africans are most capable of asserting their culture. Robert Farris Thompson has argued that the modern world is fundamentally a world created by the presence of Africans in the Americas.¹⁴ Thus, African presence in art, science, Egyptology, literature, politics, and democracy is a decisive force in the modern world as it either affirms or rejects that presence. That we Africans have been involved in making the modern world is precisely why Afrocentrists question the abandonment of modernism. We are not, however, running away from ourselves, and while we are in the midst of projecting ourselves to the world, we do not lose sight of the structural ideas of *location*, *place*, and *stance*.

Nevertheless, the quest for transcendence, in the sense of going beyond the simple affirmation or rejection of African presence, does not have to be detrimental to good society; it

can be affirming and fulfilling so long as an Afrocentric agency is constituted in the creation of a new world. We must conclude that modernism's problem is with the *use* of Africans rather than with the *agency* of Africans. If this unsettles some to the point that they question the restructuring of the world, it serves to demonstrate that the deconstruction process was never completed in the first place. If it had been completed, it would have had to serve up the abandoned concepts of white racism on the altar of progressive sacrifice so that we could have a more fully creative world. What needs to be deconstructed are the means by which human beings in the Western world have defined a triumphal vision that diminishes other people. I know that this is a difficult road for those who are committed to the detours of literary analysis and historical speculation, because once again we are in the area of the forbidden when we question the Eurocentric ideas about culture.

Unless they are subjected to severe criticism, the preponderant Eurocentric myths of universalism, objectivity, and classical traditions retain a provincial European cast. Scholarship rooted in such myths obviously lacks either historical or conceptual authenticity. The aggressive seizure of intellectual space, like the seizure of land, amounts to occupying someone else's territory and claiming it as one's own. When this occurs, cultural analysis takes a back seat to galloping ethnocentric interpretations of phenomena.

Applied to the African world, such conceptions become limiting, restricting, and parochial. For example, a discussion of African cultural history rarely calls forth African culture in **the** American context when the discussion is made by Eurocentric writers. Like the literary critics, the historians dismiss the African elements that survived and developed on the American continents as purely temporal. They usually refer to them **as** "Negro culture," or speak of "the African slave in the New World or "Negro emancipation." The fact that the spatial referent is Africa is ignored, and *Negro* becomes a crypt-term that is used to designate our degradation. In this way

the Eurocentric writer ties the African to the Negro, a false concept and a false history, separate from any particular spatial reality. The word *Negro* did not exist prior to slavery; both the term and its application were products of the social and economic context of the slave trade. Consequently, the attachment of the term *Negro* to African means a negation of history and culture.

Furthermore, the Eurocentric formulations recognize neither African classical thought nor the African classical past. We are essentially left with a discontinuous history and an uncertain future. By contrast, the Afrocentric analysis reestablishes the centrality of the ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) civilization and the Nile Valley cultural complex as points of reference for an African perspective in much the same way that Greece and Rome serve as reference points for the European world. Thus, the Afrocentrist expands human history by creating a new path for interpretation, making words like *Negro* and *colored* obsolete and anachronistic. *African* is identified with time, place, and perspective. Without the Afrocentric perspective, the imposition of the European line as universal hinders cultural understanding and demeans humanity.

Such deliberately separatist views carry the false assertion that Africans in the Americas are not Africans connected to their spatial origin. While differences exist between Barbados and Zimbabwe, these differences are much like the differences between Florence and Brisbane. African American culture and history represent developments in African culture and history, inseparable from place and time. An analysis of African American culture that is not based on Afrocentric premises is bound to lead to incorrect conclusions. In a similar manner, the interpretation of historical data from a strictly Eurocentric perspective can cause serious intercultural conflict, based on wrong premises.

Let me give an example of how cultural misunderstandings can be propagated by different views. In the nineteenth century, Cecil John Rhodes sought to gain control of a large territory of southern Africa that was ruled by the Ndebele King

Lobengula, and he sent emissaries to the powerful king in an effort to secure his consent. After many days of discussion with Lobengula, the white emissaries returned to Rhodes with the king's signature on a piece of paper. They told Rhodes that Lobengula had given him all of his territory, and Rhodes sent a column of soldiers into the area with the instruction to shoot any black on sight. Thus began the country of Rhodesia.

Rhodes may have believed that King Lobengula had given him title to the land, but Lobengula never believed that he had. Thus, their two cultural views of the world clashed, and the Europeans automatically assumed the correctness of their view. An Afrocentric analysis points out that Lobengula could never have sold or given the land away, since it did not belong to him but to the ancestors and the community. He could grant Rhodes permission to hunt, to farm, and even to build a house, but not to own land. Only in this manner could the king follow the discourse of his ancestors. It took nearly one hundred years, two revolts, and a seven-year war to correct the situation. A rigid Eurocentrism made Rhodes believe that Lobengula had signed his country over to him.

Similarly, I am certain that the American Indians did not believe they had sold Manhattan Island for twenty-three dollars worth of trinkets, no matter what the Dutch thought. Native Americans revere the land in much the same way that Africans do. No king or clan leader could sell what did not belong to him. On the basis of European contractual custom, the Dutch may have thought they were purchasing the island from the Indians, but this was obviously a view based on their own commercial traditions.

One has to ascertain other points of view to understand human phenomena. African responses and actions, however, have too often been examined from Eurocentric perspectives." The misunderstandings between Europeans and others have provoked in me an interest in alternative perspectives. What I attempt in these pages is a critical reevaluation of social phenomena on the basis of an Afrocentric orientation.

A Place to Stand

I turn now to a related area of concern. I have been criticized as an essentialist, a bad thing to be, according to deconstructionists. They believe that when one argues for certain characteristics of culture that constitute a given community, one is taking an essentialist position. The problem with such a position, according to these critics, is that it denies the fluidity of cultures and the possibility that cultures can change. As developed by Cornel West, the idea is that "Molefi Asante believes that one has to be centered, rooted, but I believe that one must go with the flow, move and groove, and be dynamic." My reply is that I, too, believe that one must be "open to the possibilities of dynamism, moving and flowing, but you have to be moving and flowing from some base. Those who do not move from a base are just floating in the air."¹⁶ It is clear to me from my own study of history that cultures do exist and in fact persist for centuries with many basic characteristics hardly changed. This is the nature of human societies operating on the foundations of myths, history, and memories. The African American community is no different from others in this regard. There are certain essential characteristics that identify the contours of our African American community. These are not immutable characteristics, in the sense of being inborn, but rather the fundamental outlines of what we regard and preserve as characteristic of our society.

Thus, while I may answer to being an essentialist, I am not an immutabilist. It is unreasonable to expect African Americans to divest themselves of culture when such unilateral divestiture is neither required nor expected of other cultural groups. Imbedded in the suggestion is a notion of power and hierarchy according to which only communities considered of low status are required to abandon their essential characteristics, while others seek to preserve their characteristics for generations yet unborn. Look at the degree to which the French are fighting to preserve their cultural essentials. Look

at the concern among Japanese Americans and Jewish Americans that high rates of intermarriage will erase their cultural heritage. To claim an African identity and an Afrocentric place to stand is no more essentialist than the positions taken by critics in feminist, gay/lesbian, and cultural studies and others who challenge established hierarchy.

The Afrocentric critic's chief problem is finding a place to stand—so to speak—in relation to the Western standards that are imposed as interpretative measures on other cultures. I have familiarized myself with the leading proponents of the logic of scientific discovery, only to find their reductionist views of the world incapable of adequately dealing with African cultural data. In fact, I question whether they are able to examine any data that are dynamic and transformational. Since the time-space domain is not stationary and has not been considered to be so since the Newtonian view was shattered by the quantum theory's evidence of particle-wave behavior, there needs to be an accommodating, flexible frame of reference that permits the dynamic.

A promising attempt to account for the harmony of opposites and break down the false dichotomies that occur in much social science and physical science research is found in the work of Thomas Kuhn. It is promising as a heuristic, not an accomplished, end, because Kuhn does not question the ground upon which he stands. The procedure for scientific discovery, in Kuhn's view, has two components: verifiability and falsifiability." However, the Kuhnian paradigm has been considered a copy of Karl Popper's logic of discovery. Kuhn pointed out the similarities and differences between his views and Popper's in a rather lengthy paper" that contrasts the logic of discovery and the psychology of research. Although he admits that he and Popper selected the same scientific aspects to investigate, he says they differ in how they perceive these aspects and in how they evaluate their significance. The two agree on the following: (1) scientific development is a dynamic process; (2) science is not the accretion of concepts but rather a transformation of conceptual frames; (3) history of-

ten provides facts; and (4) outstanding science should be viewed as revolution. However, Kuhn argues, he and Popper arrive at these conclusions by different analytical modes.

Both Kuhn and Popper are primarily concerned with falsification and verification. While Popper believes that scientific revolutions occur when there is falsification of a theory, Kuhn argues for the joint approach of verification and falsification. The progress of science is supposed to occur when the crises of revolution are resolved. In my view, both the Kuhnian and the Popperian arguments, while certainly powerful within the context of European science, fail to raise the first-order question, which asks for a justification of the scientific endeavor itself. Rather than discuss the relative differences between revolutionary and normal science, one might question the scientific perspective itself or, as Stephen Toulmin did, the notion of the revolutionary when used in connection with science. Yet it is clear that Kuhn has introduced a controversial and creative idea, although he must, as he says of scientists, defend his own commitments while assuming a universal role. He cannot question the ground he stands on. It is essentially a materialist view.

The materialistic view of reality seems to have its roots in Greek philosophy. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), who is sometimes described by Westerners as “the master of all who know,”” defines the soul as the function of the body and argues that body functions are the individual’s behaviors that are observable and therefore should be measurable. This is a stance that articulates the empirical trend in Greek philosophy. The inductive approach for collecting data and, later, for verifying it by the logical, deductive approach is a major contribution of Aristotle. His view of humans is, in the final analysis, a reductionist, deterministic, operationist, positivistic view that motivated the modern behavioristic school to call for real science, free from mentalistic concepts and subjective methods.

I consider Aristotle a reductionist because he views behavior as a function of the body and assumes that nothing goes beyond what the organism does. He views the psychological

functions in relation to physiological mechanisms. He is deterministic because he assumes that everything that happens in the universe can be accounted for by definite laws of causation. His view assumes that human behavior is subject to natural laws and must, therefore, be explained in terms of causative factors within the individual's heredity and environment. Aristotle is an operationist since he instructs the scientist to check the validity of his or her findings by examining the validity of the operations used in reaching them. He is a positivist since he assumes that the goal of the scientist is to verify a hypothesis by searching for a natural principle as it exists in nature.

Fundamental to the materialist idea is the separation of mind and body. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, philosophers assimilated new information of scientific discovery in physics, chemistry, and biology, and, accordingly, sharpened their philosophical views to articulate new opinions on human nature. The mind-body dichotomy persists in the literature of Western philosophy to the present day. The psychologist William Quill points out:

In considering the body-mind problem, one embarks upon a tradition of inquiry which many have undertaken during the long history of philosophical thought—however, the whole issue of mind and body has been periodically discredited as a pseudo-problem and hence repressed. This latter attitude has been predominant during the last forty years, particularly in positivistically oriented “philosophies” and “psychologies.” One of the increasing number of current testimonies to the fact that [the] mind-body problem is still highly problematic is that the Minnesota Center for Philosophy of Science devoted an entire volume, entitled *Concepts, Theories, and the Mind-Body Problem*, to studying the issue. . . . Obviously men of great ability—men who formerly regarded the mind-body problem as a pseudo-issue—in response to valid criticism, now find the problem to be a genuinely substantive one.²⁰

For whom is this a genuine problem? The Afrocentric writer knows that oppositional dichotomies in real, everyday experiences do not exist. The speaker or the writer is fully engaged in every way, not merely in ways that seem measurable. You may use the computer, but you cannot understand all that is involved in my writing by simply observing my fingers. I may experience hunger, joy, pain, or pleasure while I write. I might even get an electric shock or two, but you would not know that from observing my hands, unless I shrieked. I might experience the most delightful romantic thoughts while I strike the keyboard to produce unromantic prose. This flow of energy cannot be accounted for by the mere observation of my physical movements as I write, nor by my report of what I describe in my writings, nor even by what I say has crossed my mind while I was writing. The interaction of my physical and metaphysical world leads to my behavior at the moment, and this interaction cannot be reduced to separate units of an either/or nature of body-mind. It cannot be assumed that the body causes the mental activities or that mental activities cause the body to function. Accounting for different perspectives or allowing them to emerge becomes the principal aim of a truly liberating perspective.

While the contributions of the Eurocentric philosophers and scientists have been important and valuable, they have not been fully expressive of the extent or power of human ways of knowing. The arguments that have been advanced for the Western formulation of science are not convincing. Marvin Harris, for example, writes as good an apologia as anyone for the values of science:

Science is a unique and precious contribution of western civilization. . . . No other way of knowing is based on a set of rules explicitly designed to transcend the prior belief systems of mutually antagonistic tribes, nations, classes, and ethnic and religious communities in order to arrive at knowledge that is equally probable for any rational human mind. . . . The real alternative to science is not anarchy, but ideology; not peaceful artists, philosophers,

and anthropologists, but aggressive fanatics and messiahs, eager to annihilate each other and the world if need be in order to prove their point.²¹

Harris characterizes the scientific approach as superior to others and claims that it is uniquely rational among systems. He is perhaps at his Eurocentric best as an interpreter of the nonscientists of other cultures. He readily admits that there are “domains of experience the knowledge of which cannot be achieved by adherence to the rules of scientific method.”²² But he sees this “nonscientific” knowledge, particularly “the ecstatic knowledge of mystics and saints; the visions and hallucinations of drug users and of schizophrenics; and the aesthetic and moral insights of artists, poets, and musicians,” as being beyond his understanding.* This is almost fantastic: an admission that he cannot distinguish between the euphoria of drug users and saints or schizophrenics and the insights of artists and poets!

Harris’s characterization of the Western scientific method is by no means unique. Yet his ability to denigrate other ways of knowing creates a false impression of science itself. Science does not exclude moral or aesthetic insight. The special disciplines and rigors of the arts and the regularized, methodical procedures of the so-called mystics cannot be easily discounted, for they have added knowledge and richness to the human experience.

What Harris and other apologists of this peculiarly narrow version of the scientific adventure argue against is what they perceive as the random, mystical type of discovery. They see it as valuable only when it is transformed into precise, logical verification. Thus discovery is separate from verification. In effect, Harris’s view would dismiss the creative process, divest itself of discovery, and concentrate on the verification process. My desire is to see a paradigm of complementarity that integrates discovery with verification where necessary. In this manner, Afrocentricity expands the repertoire of human perspectives on knowledge.

The Afrocentric View

Because the Afrocentric idea is unthinkable without African agency, I feel compelled to resolve the confusion surrounding the terms *Afrocentricity* and *Africanity*. How one approaches these concepts in large measure determines the efficacy of a challenge to hierarchy. The substance of one term is not that of the other, and the consequences of one can create problems for the other. In other words, one—Afrocentricity—seeks agency and action, and the other—Africanity—broadcasts identity and being. Actually, Africanity refers in its generality to all of the customs, traditions, and traits of people of Africa and the diaspora. On the other hand, Afrocentricity is very specific in its reliance on self-conscious action. To say, for example, that Afrocentricity has no role in Africa because the people there already have an African perspective is to misunderstand the practical dimension of Afrocentricity. To be African is not necessarily to be Afrocentric. It is possible, however, to develop a nexus between Africanity and Afrocentricity in order to generate a more productive architectonic African culture of balance and harmony.

The term *Afrology*, which I coined in *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*,²⁴ denotes the Afrocentric study of African concepts, issues, and behaviors. In recent years Winston Van Home of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee has promoted *Africology* as a more fluent term to describe the discipline, and his department is now known by that name. I have adopted his word since the publication of the first edition of *The Afrocentric Idea* and believe that in time it will replace such names as African American Studies, Africana Studies, and Black Studies. As used by Van Horne, *Africology* is the transgenerational and transcontinental Afrocentric study of African phenomena.

Studies of Caribbean culture, the African presence in South America, and the African trade with India as well as African American experiences in the United States are all within the purview of this discipline. Most of the relevant research

involves the systematic exploration of relationships, social codes, cultural and commercial customs, and oral traditions and proverbs, although the interpretation of communicative behaviors, as expressed in spoken or written discourse, and techniques found in jazz and urban street-vernacular signifying, is also included. There are three fundamental existential postures that one can take with respect to the human condition: *feeling*, *knowing*, and *acting*, which are sometimes known as the *affective*, *cognitive*, and *conative* positions. Africology recognizes these three stances as being interrelated, not separate.

The affective component deals with a person's feelings of like or dislike about an object or idea. The cognitive refers to how an object is perceived, or its conceptual connotation. The conative stance is the person's behavioral tendencies regarding an object. In Africology, an object or idea is best studied when all three components are interrelated. This present book, therefore, is an Africological undertaking.

Perhaps the most important theoretical impetus to this line of study came from the theorizing of Wade Nobles and Maulana Karenga.²⁵ Nobles is primarily concerned with the psychological states and conditions of an oppressed people, whereas Karenga is interested mainly in developing theories of cultural reconstruction. Both argue that because diasporic Africans are often disconnected from positive African values, cultural reconstruction is necessary. Their work has thus contributed to my Africological enterprise and to my understanding of the enormity of the task Afrocentrists confront in challenging the intellectual taboos of the academy.

My aim in writing *The Afrocentric Idea* was to inject the agency of Africans into the equation of social and political transformation. (Augusta Mann has focused on educational transformation in much the same way.)²⁶

Heretofore the discussion of African Americans has always taken place within the framework of Europe and then most frequently in the margins of Europe. Since Europe was the center of the world and European people the centers of history in these constructions, Africans did not have any agency

except as it was granted by Europe or by contact with Europeans. Thus, Robert Speke's search for the source of the Nile is historically significant because the river's origin had not yet been discovered by Europeans, even though it was not unknown to Africans. African American communities became important because whites developed an interest in them and decided they must be studied, modified, or eliminated. African scholars were declared honorary whites when they expressed anti-African sentiments. Whatever whites decided about blacks became the ultimate determinant of the fate of blacks. In almost every field of human endeavor, the situation was the same. If whites considered a black person important to the advancement of the ideological framework of Western triumphalism, then that person took on significance to whites even if he or she were anti-African. Some Africans may have been given positions, promoted in jobs, and paraded by whites as significant (although they had no social or political legitimacy in the African community) simply because they were useful smoke screens for the continued attacks on the African community. Certainly, some of these blacks so used by whites have turned the tables and become outstanding antiracist campaigners. However, it is their anti-Africanness that defines them as important within the context of the ideology of white supremacy. When they no longer express their dislike of their own cultural traditions, or when they no longer condemn their own ancestors, they are without worth to the racists.

Afrocentricity liberates the African by establishing agency as the key concept for freedom. I am most free when I am most active on the basis of my own volition. Even if I am active and believe myself to be free under the will of another, I am not truly liberated. In the early years of African American Studies, I was the director of the Center for Afro American Studies at UCLA and wrote an essay calling for the development of courses from a black perspective. I had not called that perspective "Afrocentricity" in the 1970s, but the incipient idea existed in the notion of self-defining characteristics and self-determining actions. Furthermore, the opening of the cultural discourse to the topic of African agency pushed

through the conception of African people as subject rather than object in the European experience. For the non-African, the Afrocentric idea positions intellectual discourse in the African agency that is often denied by Eurocentric conceptualizations of our roles.

What I have done is to bring the consciousness of rhetorical structure to the study of African communication, particularly discourse. I will try to set a conceptual field for exploring the Afrocentric perspective on discourse. In doing this, I will explain the rhetorical condition as a phenomenon with an implicit structure and establish the position of a metatheory for African communication. I examine African American oratory as the totalization of the Afrocentric perspective, emphasizing the presence of *nommo*, the generative and productive power of the spoken word, in African discourse and in specific instances of resistance to the dominant ideology. In the oratorical experience, much as in the jazz experience, the African person finds the ability to construct a discourse reality capable of calling forth *nommo*. My goal in this book is to propose what an Afrocentric theory might examine and to perform an interpretation of discourse based on Afrocentric values in which *nommo* as word-force is a central concept.

I will rely to some extent on the work of David R. Burgest, who has argued that there are *Afro-circular* and *Euro-linear* values at work in social relations between blacks and whites in the United States.” This view is similar to the position I advanced in intercultural communication theory regarding the Afrocentric-personalism, Asiocentric-spiritualism, and Eurocentric-materialism categories of reality. Burgest’s concepts are useful when I want to identify the essence of the two principal views, although I do not agree with him on all details of what constitutes Afro-circularity and Euro-linearity. (He considers these two views the only ones of significance, including Asian with African as *Eastern*, and calls the European view *Western*. We know now that if there is an alliance of views, it is European and Asian combined, for a Eurasian view, and another called an African view.) Nevertheless, the terms *Afro-*

circular and *Euro-linear* adequately express my conception of the views of Africans and Eurasians. One can see the emerging outlines of the constraints of an Afro-circular view within the Euro-linear definition by examining almost any genre of Western thought.

In the succeeding pages, I demonstrate that the structural conditions implicit in the process of intellectual discourse suppress African agency and are responsible to a large degree for the inequalities between Africans and Europeans in American society. But by “structural conditions” I mean something more than the material conditions normally referred to by radical democrats.

For me, the idea that the political and social protocols of a society are based on the very nature of the laws and customs of that society leads to the formation of a structure that dictates the relationships between people. Just as it is possible to speak of a culture that seeks to predict and control and another that seeks to understand and interpret, one can also see that different human objectives are derived from different historical and cultural experiences. What occurs in any science or art is a debate over mode, structure, and condition; that is, the guidelines for the valid discussion of discourse are at the center of any polemic. On a larger scale, a topic is an ongoing conversation about the plurality of visions in the context of reality.

We all possess the cultural capacity to see, explain, and interpret from the vantage point of our existential location. In the West and elsewhere, the European, in the midst of other peoples, has often propounded an exclusive view of reality; the exclusivity of this view creates a fundamental human crisis. In some cases, it has created cultures arrayed against each other or even against themselves. Afrocentricity’s response certainly is not to impose its own particularity as a universal, as Eurocentricity has often done. But hearing the voice of African American culture with all of its attendant parts is one way of creating a more sane society and one model for a more humane world.