Intellectual Dislocation: Applying Analytic Afrocentricity to Narratives of Identity

Molefi Kete Asante

To cite this article: Molefi Kete Asante (2002) Intellectual Dislocation: Applying Analytic Afrocentricity to Narratives of Identity, Howard Journal of Communication, 13:1, 97-110, DOI: 10.1080/106461702753555067

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/106461702753555067

Published online: 11 Nov 2010.

Article views: 113

Citing articles: 5 View citing articles
Intellectual Dislocation: Applying Analytic Afrocentricity to Narratives of Identity

Molefi Kete Asante
Temple University
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

In this paper I discuss the nature of intellectual dislocation as argued in Afrocentric theory. To delineate the main contours of the critical canon of analytic Afrocentricity, I seek to establish the idea of sentinel statements as positive identifiers in the process of cultural and historical dislocation. Two narrative works—Glaude’s Exodus and Diawara’s In Search of Africa—are examined within this critical frame in order to more adequately demonstrate how the telling of the African story in America, whether from a historical or sociological standpoint, is often outside the reality of the masses of African people.

KEYWORDS Afrocentricity, dislocation, sentinel statement, African American narratives

In this article I discuss the nature of intellectual dislocation as argued in Afrocentric theory. Two narrative works, Eddie Glaude’s Exodus (2000) and Manthia Diawara’s In Search of Africa (1998), are examined critically within the framework of Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity is the conscious process by which a person locates or relocates African phenomena within an African subject content or agency and action. It is therefore location as opposed to dislocation, centeredness as opposed to marginality.

To delineate the main contours of the critical canon of analytic Afrocentricity, I seek to establish the idea of sentinel statements as positive identifiers in the process of cultural and historical dislocation. The objective of such a critical process is to determine the degree to which a writer or speaker, from a rhetorical point of view, demonstrates centeredness with the African or African American cultural experience.

The Position of Theory

Africans have always asked questions about life, literature, nature, religion, and humanity. It is the nature of humans to ask questions when confronted with difficult issues...
and then to search for answers. Unfortunately, in this historical age it is necessary to emphasize that this search for solutions is not a European idea; it is a profoundly human process.

When the first human in Africa came to the bank of a river she or he had to decide how to cross it. This is not a unique process in our human thinking. Now, how we decide to cross it, what motifs we use to decorate our craft or our bridge, and what rituals will be performed, and to what deity, are all cultural issues. But one thing is clear; the crossing of rivers is a common human problem. Afrocentrists are like the traditional African doctors, trying to protect the society against evil forces by analyzing conditions, determining possibilities, and suggesting effective ways of managing our quest for answers.

In this regard the Afrocentrist is a scientist; that is, she gathers facts, verifies data, and subjects her interpretations to rigorous tests if she is studying human behavior. On the other hand, if the Afrocentrist is examining text, history, or events, he seeks to gain insight into these phenomena by making unambiguous statements about them. The Afrocentrist does this by distinguishing between the language of centeredness and the less precise language of decenteredness in relation to culture. One way Afrocentric scholars have constructed a response to the intellectual and cultural decenteredness of so many writers of African descent is through what I have called the use of sentinel statements as clues to marginalization and decenteredness.

Sentinel statements—those statements that signal a text’s location during the earliest parts of an analysis—are used as standards by which the Afrocentrist views an entire text. For example, if you are reading a text and the author introduces his theme by the statement, such as “Harvard is my home,” you have a fairly good sentinel statement by which to evaluate the remaining text. This does not mean that the person has abandoned Africa or his cultural grounds; it means that the potential for abandonment appears early in the text. Since it is possible that there is textual confusion throughout the document it might be that the author comes around at last.

Follow my explanation of this phenomenon in order to move toward a deeper appreciation of how theory assists us in social analysis. Theory is important because it directs us to the proper questions to ask and methods to use to acquire data that can be interpreted in a way that makes cultural, psychological, and literary liberation more certain. Liberation, for the African American, is to be free from the unwarranted assertion of White racial domination in our minds and lives. Of course, anything done to us without our permission is a measure that takes away our freedom. In communication this means that our paths are complicated often by the unwieldy use of concepts, symbols, arguments, and opinions that hound our intellectual discussions. It is as if Jews were left with only the concepts and ideas of Nazi Germany for their own explanations of self and community. The limitation of such language imprisonment is profoundly demonstrated when we are unable to break through to our own cultural realities. Theory, particularly Afrocentric theory, drives us closer to explaining how conceptual distance from our own centers leaves us on the margins of the European reality.

There are expectations that come from theory. We learn to accept that if an Afrocentrist follows the protocols of the theory, is able to examine the text, observe the phenomena, apply the assumptions, and gather the data, certain results will happen. For instance, we could expect that the information is either supportive or nonsupportive of the Afrocentric theory. To that end, it might be necessary to rethink the theory. Afrocentricity is open ended; it is not a closed system. Of course, since it is a paradigm and a para-
The First Narrative: *Exodus*

The history of all discussions of race in Europe and America has been nothing more than the attenuation of the conditions of White dominance. Whether we have talked about race, racism, or race relations, we have done nothing more than to play on the shifting authority of Whites to dominate other races. In fact, the discussions or antidiscussions of race, such as those by Cornel West (1993) and Paul Gilroy (2000), have been about shifting authority. Most of the time those discussions have been accusatory of Black people, whether by saying that we suffer some form of nihilism or by telling us how we ought not be African.

It is easy to see how this array of intellectual confusion can create double vision. They say racism is deeply embedded in Western culture and then they say, there is no race because it is only a social construct, and then they say the only real racists, that is, people who talk about race, are Black people who should stop talking about it as if it exists. And anyway, they say, we are certainly not Africans or if we are, we are so committed to other cultures that we have little to call our own. This brings me to a discussion of the first narrative of location or dislocation, a narrative that purports to deal with our sojourn in America and our liberation from enslavement. It is written by a bright but dislocated young scholar who has not yet discovered his audience.

Eddie Glaude has written an odd book, *Exodus* (2000) is an ambitious work that seeks to demonstrate that the Biblical image of the Jewish exodus was appropriated by African Americans to give an account of “the circumstances of their lives” as well as to serve as “a regulative ideal to guide action and to define the nation, it ensured retribution for the continued suffering of God’s people” (p. 10).

The initial problem Glaude faces is not with this rather strange sentence but more profoundly with the evidence for such a thesis. The premise is simply a flimsy foundation. This idea that African Americans looked to the Jewish story as a way out of suffering and pain is apocrypha, and it does not matter how long this construction has been in the making, the building is on loose gravel. It is a sentinel statement, a giveaway to the problems that would come later. Glaude never questions the thesis he sets out about the relationship of Africans to the Jewish myth, he attempts to build upon it. This is curious, because not to engage the trope of Egypt with all of its contradictions in the American mind is a horrendous omission. How did African writers manage a factual Black Egypt given that they
saw White America as Egypt also? This alerted me to numerous other difficulties with *Exodus*.

The book is divided into two parts: exodus history and exodus politics. It is essentially a book about the Black nationalist tradition, which Glaude seeks to base on the tradition of the Jewish exodus. He argues a postmodernist bias in relationship to the nationalist question and that is the first real oddity in the book. Glaude dismisses three arguments for nationalism: self-liberation, racial solidarity because of condition, and unity of moral community. However, the way he sought to dismiss them haunts the rest of this book. For example, he states, “What exactly this self liberation entails remains a critical issue” (p. 10). But it remains “a critical issue” only for him since nationalists have always claimed that the goal is freedom from the assertion of Europe in our lives without our permission.

He digs a deeper hole by stating that “a number of different political positions with very different aims assume the need for African Americans to take responsibility for their liberation” (p. 11). Glaude can give no example of any political position with the aim of self-liberation that is not nationalist in intent. Indeed, his mention of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, of which I was chair of the UCLA chapter, is curious because it was periodically a Black nationalist organization.

How Glaude can squeeze Justice Clarence Thomas into the discussion of Black nationalism boggles my mind. It is one thing to claim to have been a Black nationalist and it is another thing to have put your career and life on the line for your beliefs. Thomas is clearly an integrationist. This is so despite his appreciation of the rhetoric of Malcolm X. Even the most rabid racist could see that Malcolm X was probably the greatest orator of his day in America. I do not buy for one minute Clarence Thomas’s lip service to African American self-determination, self-definition, and resistance to White racial domination.

Glaude has a problem. Glaude, like many theologically oriented writers, has limited historical understanding. Let me see if I can state the issue succinctly. Glaude’s thesis rests upon the belief that Africans utilized the Jewish exodus trope from the Bible as a principal method of organizing themselves and creating a national identity. He further believes that the basis of African survival during the enslavement may rest in this trope. This is an odd and dislocated reading of African history in the United States. It is a rather non-African-centric reading of history and politics and, furthermore, a departure from logic and rationality. It is non-African-centric in that it denies African agency at the earliest of times in American history. It departs from reason inasmuch as it assumes too much reliance on the Biblical trope for the survival of Africans during the enslavement. But this latter problem is a common mistake, as we shall see, and it has clouded the work of several scholars. There is no excuse for Glaude, however, since he studied with the Afrocentric historian C. Tshloane Keto, who I am certain would have directed him toward a more concrete reading of African history.

Here is the problem. There is no early Christian public among Africans in colonial America. Glaude conveniently forgets 172 years of African history (1619–1791) during which time Africans were not flocking to White Christian churches or any churches. It is quite interesting that Glaude does what others have done when they cannot deal with African history from the earliest times in America, they start discussing Christianity in the “early nineteenth century.” This does not present a difficulty for me; they are right to do this if they are discussing Christianity, but they often do it without knowing why they are skipping the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Or they do not tell the readers why they are skipping out on the true story of the image of a nation.
When Africans arrived in 1619 to the English colony of Virginia they would be looking at more than 150 years before there was anything like a standing church among them. The African Baptists and the African Methodists were not founded until the late eighteenth century. They were essentially churches of the free Blacks. What about our enslaved ancestors? Whose church housed them and gave them sustenance and made them understand the Jewish exodus? There was no such movement. Indeed not more than 15% of the African population was Christian at the end of the Civil War. Yet there was a definite belief in certain African concepts and ideas that gave rise to group feelings of solidarity and expressions of freedom. In 1822 Denmark Vesey was ably assisted by Gullah Jack, an African priest who held power over the masses because of his spirituality, eloquence, and ability to demonstrate the presence of God. So it was not so much the Black Church that gave us our nationalism, but rather nationalism was used by the Christian church to effect its own mission. Missionaries who flooded the South sought to save the souls of the newly emancipated Africans in a variety of churches. It was probably not before 1900 that the majority of Africans could be called Christians. Thus, there is no evidence that the “church stood not only as the institutional organization of the community’s resources and a kind of ideological and cultural common ground for every day interaction or association among antebellum blacks” (p. 21).

Glaude argues without evidence that the “analogy with the Jews of the Old Testament occupied the religious and political imagination of antebellum blacks” (p. 29). No, it did not! It occupied the minds of a few Blacks in the North who were influenced by Whites, who heard the myth, and who believed it. There were nearly four and a half million Africans by the end of the Civil War. Glaude concentrates on the a Northern leadership class, but no such class existed in the description he gives except in the mind. The South was where the overwhelming majority of Africans lived. Who led them “between 1777 and 1818” (p. 28)?

Unfortunately, this is the thesis of the book and hence its biggest problem. Yet it was only in the North during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century when Africans were free to practice the Christian religion. Africans had been led by those calling themselves preachers during the nineteenth century in slave revolts, but Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, or Nat Turner were not formally African Methodists or African Baptists. The first African Methodist Church was organized in 1793; the first African Baptist Church was organized in 1805. So, what were the Africans doing before this time since we were present for nearly 200 years before the first African Baptists?

Another issue that lurks in the background of this discussion is the compromising role of the church among Africans, that is, the church as a dissuader of nationalist ideas. More often than not, the church was an extension of the White denominations in the North. Even in its reach to express a desire to have a public space, the Black Church during this period was often a space to deal with “the irreligious and uncivilized of the race” (p. 26).

If you seek to engage a master you must meet him in the arena, not throw stones from outside the walls. Not once did Glaude engage the philosopher Maulana Karenga’s ideas in his discussion of ritual in regards to Kwanzaa. Instead, he misrepresented Karenga’s name and called him a “self described cultural nationalist,” a gratuitous reference to the scholar’s political and cultural orientation. Normally one would simply say, “the cultural nationalist” just as one would say, “Marxist” or “integrationist.” But to call Dr. Karenga “self described” is almost like saying that his intellectual work has no content. More distasteful, however, is Glaude’s comment that Maulana Karenga envisioned Kwanzaa “as
a vehicle for the proliferation of certain political ideas” (p. 88). Unable to deal with the philosophical underpinnings of Kwanzaa as an expression of Africans celebrating themselves, Glaude is constrained to say that sometimes those who practice Kwanzaa are empowered to act regardless of the creator’s intent.

In discussing William Whipper’s position on the American Moral Reform Society, Glaude admits that Sam Cornish’s view of Whipper was that he was “vague, mild, indefinite and confused,” and in an odd, dislocated way Glaude seems to continue Whipper’s awkward position. Glaude looks for a place for Whipper to stand, but there is no stasis, no primordial mound, not even for a college professor, here. The ground is shaky. Whipper had argued against all-Black institutions, because this reinforced prejudice against Blacks. Glaude derides the historian Sterling Stuckey’s position on Whipper, seeking to resurrect him in the public’s mind. But why should an all-Black institution create resentment except in a society already geared against Africans? Does an all-White or all-Japanese organization create such a problem? Glaude is not finished with his rehabilitation of Whipper; he writes, “the fact remains, however, that Whipper never advocated the rejection of all things African in his people’s culture. He simply rejected the use of racial language by all Americans” (p. 137). This is the highest form of double-speak. Glaude’s resurrection of Whipper is akin to his attempted resurrection of Judge Clarence Thomas, but alas there are no Anokyean miracles in this book. In a racist society, how can you speak of your culture without racial language if you are Black? Of course, Glaude is unable to offer any example.

Finally, the epilogue is the oddest part of the book. Here the author wants to use nation language but not be seen as a nationalist. How does any nation exist? Does a nation exist apart from land? Was not modern Israel a nation before it occupied land? Is Palestine a nation now even without its own capital? What does nation have to do with White people? These are questions that are never answered directly in this book, because Glaude makes one more incorrect indictment of nationalism, claiming that it “is predicated on definitions of sameness and otherness grounded in nature” (p. 163). Black nationalist tradition has always found its source in the will of African people to act in their own interests and to oppose those interests, White or Black, capitalist or Marxist, integrationist or reactionary, that seek to demean, undermine, destroy, or stifle freedom; in this way it becomes the most revolutionary ideology in a racist society. This is a position not “grounded in nature” but rather one rooted in historical and cultural experiences.

The Second Narrative: In Search of Africa

Diawara, a professor of African Studies at New York University, is a gifted technician in the postmodern sense and In Search of Africa (1998) keeps my attention, which is supposed to be the aim of the postmodern style, although at times the organization of the book is rather challenging. Quite frankly there are entire sections that could have been edited out, such as the piece on Superfly and Shaft, without any loss to the main points in the book.

The book is organized around four vignettes: Sartre and African modernism, Richard Wright and modern Africa, Malcolm X: conversionists versus culturalists, and homeboy cosmopolitanism. The idea is to loosely follow Sartre’s organization in Situations. This is the first mistake for an African writer. Rather than seek a pattern from his own traditional discourse methodology, he abandons it for something that he obviously believes
is better, is more intellectual, is superior as a technique. Thus, although Diawara is writing about Africa, his book has the feel of a quilt rather than a *Kente* cloth; it is *pieced* rather than woven. One gets this experience even though the editing of the project tries hard to make the seams invisible. The quality of Diawara's gift with conversation and his ability to self-reveal, in the Western mode, holds the attention of the reader. As an African reader, you wonder, what is the meaning of this self-display?

**Source**

The principal myth in Diawara's work revolves around exile and modernism. Diawara has spent most of his life outside of the community of his birth. In a sense, the story he tells in the book is one not just of uprootedness but of unrootedness, fluidity, fleeting moments, disconnections, and historical discontinuities. Diawara finds in his childhood experiences with an African playmate, Sidime Laye, the only groundedness to his own life. Laye's story is both a compass and ballast for us to locate and center Diawara. When they were young in Guinea, Diawara and Laye were inseparable as friends, enjoying the possibilities of the revolution as envisioned by President Sekou Touré, the legendary African leader who defied De Gaulle and claimed independence for Guinea. Laye was the brightest, most charismatic, and most likely to succeed of Diawara's compatriots. In the end they would both tire of Sekou Touré for different reasons.

Diawara's father, a Malian, was accused of working against the Guinean Revolution and the family was forced to leave Guinea along with many others soon after independence. And although Sidime Laye's family stayed, instead of being “a big person” in the government, as Diawara had predicted when young, Sidime Laye became an accomplished sculptor. Diawara had become “modern,” the cosmopolite; in other words, he became the person he had thought Sidime would become. Instead, when Diawara found Sidime, he was creating ritual masks, in effect keeping tradition.

**Orientation**

I have serious arguments with the point of view, that is, place of view, in most of this book despite my appreciation of Diawara's masterful narrative style in his various vignettes. You see, an Afrocentrist can appreciate how a person turns a phrase and yet find the work unacceptable as a way to explain African phenomena. *In Search of Africa* is one more book in a growing line—Kwame Appiah's *In My Father's House* (1992), Keith Richburg's *Out of America* (1997), Henry Louis Gates's *Colored People* (1996)—of works that might be seen as *une révélation complexée*. In English, the idea is to “put down” not just oneself but one's culture, particularly African culture. The interest appears to be the denial of Africa in its historical context and the location of Africa in the Western mind and mode. Thus, Diawara, an intelligent man, demonstrates the tension in his own insights into Africa. He searches for it and, I believe, finds it, but because he is blinded by the concepts of the West he cannot recognize the object itself. It remains invisible even as he handles it, discusses it with writers, and comments on it. Yet he does not embrace it because for him to embrace Africa as seen by William Sassine and Sidime Laye is to embrace essentialism, and for Diawara there is nothing more antmodernist than essentialism. He says of Salif Keita, he “is modern because he defies the dictates of clan and
caste” (p. 96). But, of course, it is not essentialism that is problematic, but immutability. Joel Kotkin’s book, *Tribes* (1994), explained precisely how the British, Jewish, Japanese, Hindu, and Chinese people were prepared for the postmodern world by virtue of their strong sense of ethnic and cultural identity. Why should rebellion against ethnicity or cultural heritage necessarily be a mark of modernity? Rebellion against ethnic triumphalism and ethnic dominance is much more a key to modernity than the simple appreciation of one’s ancestors. Opposition to racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Africanism are far more telling about our belief and acceptance of modernity than our denial of ancestral cultures.

I believe that what lurks underneath Diawara’s *In Search of Africa* is the fear of inferiority or, perhaps, the fear of being left behind Europe. The aim, therefore, is to recast African history in the light of European intellectual traditions. This is a lethal form of racism, the latest manifestation of the old form.

One of the reasons the Afrocentrists have claimed that Kemet must be the foundation of any rewriting of African history, any true understanding of the African personality, and any spark for creating a new fire of civilization is to avoid the default position of seeking Europe or remaining indebted to Europe as a junior partner (Asante & Abarr, 1996). We can and must stand on Africa’s own legs. This does not mean that the discourse on Kemet is the only discourse of the Afrocentrists. Clearly it is not. We must be engaged in the contemporary world, must examine the social and economic plight of African people today, and must question all forms of oppression. But we must do this on the terms of our own agency.

**Refining the Search**

There is a tendency for Diawara to overstate his case, and thus to the knowledgeable reader he frequently misses the mark. For example, he says of Sartre’s introduction to the anthology *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poesie Negre et Malgache* (1948) that “it is the most famous essay on the Negritude movement” (p. 3). Not only is this inaccurate, it detracts from the African intellectuals who defined in the movement their own core place in the history of an idea that they originated. Aimé & Césaire, Leon Damas, Jacques Rabemananjara, and Leopold Senghor each contributed to the Negritude movement, and Senghor’s essay on Negritude and humanism is clearly the most famous on the subject.

In a similar vein Diawara turns the tables he turned on Senghor and Negritude on Afrocentricity by stating that Senghor’s speech at the 1956 Paris Conference “is one of the founding texts of Afrocentric philosophy and art criticism” (p. 62). This speech is not only 23 years before the birth of the Afrocentric movement with the publication of the first edition of my book, *Afrocentricity* (1980), but Diawara’s statement also suggests that he is unaware of the Afrocentric critique of Negritude. Senghor would never have conceded to call himself an Afrocentrist, but he called himself a proponent of Negritude. These are two different perspectives. Senghor remained firmly a Eurocentrist in most of his practical and intellectual life. Diawara’s mistake is common for those who are dislocated; they assume that when we say Afrocentric we mean anything about Africa. Thus, Senghor, giving one of the first speeches on African art by an African, is called an Afrocentrist.
**Diawara’s Dilemma**

I see the “separation anxiety” Diawara speaks of manifesting itself in his approach to African culture. Although he claims that Americans wanting to identify as Westerners are exhibiting separation anxiety, his approach to his own origins and evolution suggests his inability to cope with his own place. One can gain a country, but culture is far more lasting and no one can divest self of culture; either you accept your own or you claim another.

It is unfortunate that Diawara has continued to use the Afrocentrist as a whipping boy, without referent or reference, in trying to defend a certain cultural position. One must ask why he would write that “Afrocentrists define their Negritude by resorting to the binary Euro-modernisms, which freeze black and white, good and evil, sedentary and nomadic, sun people and ice people into an eternal antagonism” (p. 10), without any authority for such statement except to pander to reactionary postures on African agency. Clearly Afrocentricity argues that African people, concepts, and ideas, must be viewed from a subject rather than an object position (Asante, 1999). The aim is agency, not division. But you would only know this if you had consulted such authors as Maulana Karenga, Ama Mazama, Mekada Graham, Jerome Schiele, and many others.

There are a number of words that hint at Diawara’s path to Africa, for example, “ethnophillosophy” and “tribes.” It is not from a sense of antagonism that the Afrocentrists say that to use “ethnophillosophy” for Africa and “philosophy” for Europe is to impose Europe over Africa. Or to refer to “tribes” when speaking of Mandinka, Yoruba, and Akan while using “ethnic groups” when speaking of Serbians, Croatians, and Albanians is to buy into a European construction that parades as essential. Such constructions are responsible for maintaining the structures of White racism, hierarchy, and dominance in thought and practice.

Diawara admits what his friend Laye would never admit, that he suffers from “identity fatigue” (p. 13). This condition exists because he has a unique situation in the Sartrean sense. He has followed a nomadic path, fully not able to connect with Africa since his childhood. He is like Richard Wright, missing from Mississippi, exiled on the Left Bank. And so Diawara was vulnerable when he traveled to Africa, although he tried everything not to show his vulnerability there. He spoke Mandinka so that the taxi driver would not take advantage of him (p. 17). He spoke the Susu language so that others would not take him for a stranger, and yet he felt like a stranger. The disconnect was not produced by Africans; they remained as they had been, but it was a discontinuity induced by deliberate divestiture. What if he had embraced Africa?

**Africa and Modernity**

In the 1990s, Africa was already in the modern world as defined by Westerners. In fact, Africa may have been the first explicit area of modernity’s expression in the individualism of White missionaries, the quite outrageous undisciplined and unattached actions of the merchant hunters, and the White renegade criminals of the African interior, acting as if they were God’s agents on the earth. They were without kin, community, constraints, and often without principles. They were thoroughly modern. When Karl Peters of the German occupation of East Africa took his revolver and shot dead the members of the royal courts of villages to demonstrate the power of European technology he was most definitely acting out of the modern mold. No moral restrictions or spiritual taboos or com-
munal restraints could have stopped his senseless assault on the people of the German East African colony. When Karl Peters was arrested by the German authorities, it was not his individualism in regards to the lives of African people but that he had taken an African woman to bed. In every sense this was a modern act. Thus, I am puzzled by Diawara’s idea of modernity, the idea that Africa had to “catch up with the modern world” (p. 11). In one area it was preeminently a modern venue, that is, in terms of White behavior in Africa; but in the moral area, Africa had nothing to learn from Europe.

While in Accra, I spoke extensively with the eminent Akan scholar, Kofi Asare Opoku, about individualism. He reminded me that Akan traditions like those of most African people are based on observation, long years of natural observation. He says that Africans had to have been the first to try individualism at the very dawn of human existence and quickly abandoned it. Maternal and paternal affections did not just happen but evolved over the years. Africa’s philosophers have emphasized communalism, collectivity, and cooperation not because they are unfamiliar with individualism, but because in thousands of years they have seen the value of the collective idea. Indeed, the collective idea is, in Africa’s eyes, the more progressive one. Two proverbs make this point: (1) Hama, hama kyere ketebo—one string joined to another can bind the leopard; and (2) Atwe abien boro evi—two small antelopes beat a big one.

Diawara’s modernity, or rather his desire for Africa to seek modernity, is actually a search not for modernity, but for Westernization. He writes, “The independence movements brought it [Africa] back into history, and devised various structural strategies for catching up with the industrialized countries” (p. 57). Africa was never out of history, and the self-consciousness of African people was never at stake for them; Diawara is describing a Western problem. It is like Mongo Park being cited for “discovering” the Niger River.

Is this modernity as expressed by the West that Diawara seeks for Africa? Is it technological warfare, personal alienation, sexism, apartheid, racist murders, street gangs, and individuals fending for themselves against the aggressive powers of state institutions and petty criminals? The state in this modern world breaks down community to create individual problems. Group identity is degraded and community is called backward. Democracy is labeled the modern electoral system of government, and all other systems are condemned. While democracy is more convenient, efficient, and precise than consensus, it is not a better system of representation. It might even be worse when the majority dominates the minority.

**Afrocentricity and Afro-Pessimism**

In many ways Williams Sassine says the most provocative and real things in the book, and it is to Diawara’s credit as a writer that he is so fair to an author who is at odds with his own position. Sassine is quoted as saying, “Afro-Pessimism is a style which resists the tendency to use pessimism and blackness as a way of putting down black people. It’s like the Afro-hairdos or Afrocentricity, you know” (Diawara, 1998, p. 49).

One detects une révélation complexée in the questioning of this philosophy by Diawara. He asks Sassine, “Don’t you think your kind of literature is a false resistance to modernization,” to which Sassine responded, “clichés!” In the end Diawara comments, “The Afrocentrists proceed by investing in the past as the only site for identity formation and for the continent’s renaissance into a scientific, political and economic empire” (p. 55). There are many problems with Diawara’s perception of Africa, Afrocentricity, and iden-
tity formation. The central issue of the Afrocentrists, like the Afro-pessimists of Sassine's type, has never been "identity formation" for the sake of some mythical empire, it has rather been about an investment in African agency. This is a self-selected category like European or Asian or Arab. It does not have to be created or fabricated, it exists. Those who are African in this sense seek their agency based appropriately on the best wisdom from the past. Furthermore, all renaissances are based on the past as inspirations, motivations, and stimulants for contemporary creativity. To the degree that Africa lacks a functional past, it will never be anything but a dark imitation of the French, the English, and the German cultures. Indeed, what regime have we been experiencing for 500 years if not a neo-Greek rebirth begun in the fifteenth century and reinvigorated in the nineteenth by the neo-Graco-Roman energies?

This brings me to another issue that is not only found in Diawara's type of "put down," but also has been seen in the writings of the English African scholar Kwame Appiah's works. Diawara warns us of the Afrocentrist's motivation to posit a "black anterior superiority" as a way to deflate the fear of inferiority (p. 55). There is no truth in this position as far as I have read in Afrocentric works. It is historical and scientific fact that modern humans originated in Africa. No superiority is either suggested or possible by the statement of this fact.

**New Definitions**

What goes for modernity as Diawara sees it? Individualism, universal education, and women's emancipation (p. 96). Africa is firmly in the grip of an approach to society that claims essentially that to be human one must be human in the midst of community. As the !Kung say, "You cannot dance alone." This does not mean that there is nothing personal in terms of history, latitudes, and possessions. Individualism and personalism are two separate ideas: One is the human, detached and fluid, the other is the human, attached and centered.

Not even in the West is there free education for all children. Diawara assumes that schooling will bring modernity. Schooling is not education, and in Africa where there has been nontraditional schooling, institutions brought by the Christians or the Muslims, we have seen imitation and duplication, not innovation and tradition. The Akan people who created *Kente* cloth never attended the Rhode Island School of Design or the London School of Design. Yet their creations rival those of the most trained students of the West.

Women's emancipation, as Samora Machel (1972) said, can never be an act of charity; rather, it is a fundamental necessity of any mature society. But to assume or to assert that Africa is behind other cultures in regard to this issue is false. Women in some European countries, for example, received the right to vote within the past 30 years. No African nation has been born where women lacked the vote, and even historically the rights of African women were protected by tradition more than in Western societies. What is the source of this cry for women's liberation in Africa? It is mainly the issues of polygamy and sexual inequalities. These are not small matters; nevertheless, it is only recently that European women have shared equal rights with men, while in Africa women roles in society have protected them from the common abuses of individualism. The numerous communal taboos and rules against bad treatment of women are often forgotten in any analysis of women's issues in Africa, the continent with the most women rulers in history.
Richard Wright and Africa

Diawara’s reading of Richard Wright’s appearance at the 1996 conference in Paris, like his interactions with Sidime Laye and Williams Sassine, is cast in the same light as his own reading of his exile. Wright clearly did not understand or appreciate the complexities of African history and could not have addressed the issues raised by Nkrumah with a simple American vision of modernity. The idea of Africa was too involved in the history of colonizations and abuse to be adequately assessed by an African American who still saw himself as an American Negro. Those who regard themselves as Africans are Africans. Nkrumah said, “We regard West Indians as our brothers.” Identity is only complicated in an oppressive, racist, heterogeneous industrialized nation. That is why I cannot believe and Diawara does not give proof that “Wright was even more disappointed with Nkrumah . . . . than with colonial force for surrendering the weapon of individual freedom to religious and political power” (p. 71). If Wright was so disappointed it was because he, like so many of us on this side of the ocean, did not understand the intricate and revolutionary ideas inherent in the African traditions themselves.

The assault by African American and continental African writers on Africa is relentless and persistent, and as long as continental Africans refuse to examine the content of their cultures rather than fall into blind Westernization, Africa will not be able to find itself, let alone be visible for others. The mistake in this book is that Diawara searches for Africa with the same lenses as the Europeans. The Africa he finds will not be the one the masses of Africans understand. This is the situation of a decentered people; and Wright’s predicament is no better than what he found in Africa. Diawara is, as John Henrik Clarke (1992) once lamented of an African scholar, “betrayed by his education.”

Laced with contradictions, the book is a tour de France of unnecessary compromise. What is the meaning of a passage where Richard Wright wishes that “Africa could be the new place of hope, given that Europe and America had betrayed the traditional hopes of westerners” (p. 5) when Diawara has just spent considerable time speaking of how Wright wanted Africa to adopt European ideals? What is definite is that Africa could never be the place of hope running after sectarian wars, racism, destruction, sexism, and the pollution of the earth’s atmosphere and waters. Africa must not reject modernization, but it must find its path out of its own tradition, even if that means a cultural reassessment of the principles of the ancient cultures. In fact, the modern history of Africa has been a mad rush to emulate Europe in wars, ethnic cleansing, and official injustices. Africa has not been itself.

I wish Diawara had explored how both Wright and Baldwin in so many ways were beguiled by the French notion of culture and saw their differences with continental Africans through their own experiences of Western oppression. Had he done this, it would have been exceedingly clear that there was no “resurgence of Africanism” among African Americans (p. 73). There has never been a period devoid of the African energy. During the time of the giants Wright and Baldwin the African energy was as strong as it had ever been in America’s African community. This is to be expected; these were African people.

Why would Diawara titillate his Western readers by repeating Wright’s unfortunate comment on “fifty women, young and old, nude to the waist, their elongated breasts flopping loosely and grotesquely in the sun” (p. 74)? Wright is obviously unable to process what he saw except through his Western lenses. Modernity had destroyed his ability to grasp
the dancing forms of the human body, to appreciate true freedom. Yet he may have approved of pale bodies in all sizes and ages, flopping about in the nude on the banks of a Wisconsin River or some other nudist camp at the beach!

**Innovation and Tradition**

Innovation must always derive from tradition to lead to stability. If you do not rely upon your own traditions, you will find others with which to establish your innovations. Yet there is nothing easier or more consistent than the elasticity within one’s own culture. Diawara is critical of Africans who “renounce modernity to engage in still-celebrated medieval performances” while not being able to see how Western forms, such as medieval caps and gowns in university commencement exercises, reflect the Westerners continuation of tradition. We do not say that these Westerners renounce modernity, because they do not: Neither does the African who is attached to traditions renounce modernity.

Diawara spends considerable time with the traditional Mande story of *Sundiata*. He correctly discusses Djibril Tamsir Niane’s philosophical and literary contributions to Africa and the world. In his analysis of *Sundiata* as written by Niane, however, he criticizes the worship of the hero, but this valorization in Africa never reaches the point of Europe’s valorization of Alexander, Napoleon, or Joan of Arc. Indeed, the religions of Jesus and Muhammad are the ultimate expressions of hero worship. Out of Niane’s *Sundiata*, new plays, movies, values, and ideas have emerged to suggest that it will always be a loved tradition bringing forth innovation. Because he does not accept the value of tradition, Diawara cannot truly appreciate African American culture.

African American culture is a degradation in Diawara’s conceptualization. He sees the elements of deviance as the central tenets of African American culture, for example, “Detroit Red sinks to the bottom, and the narrator with him as if black culture has died with them” (p. 123). From this passage he continue with a discussion of Billie Holiday’s drug addiction. African American culture is not pathological. In fact, the true repositories of modernity have been Black institutions in terms of transparency. Whether our institutions have followed the cultural need or been forced to do so by a governing board, our business is in the streets.

This is why I cannot understand Diawara’s misunderstanding of Malcolm X, as when he recalls that Malcolm X “identifies with lawbreakers” (p. 130). The implication is that the petty criminals are cultural interpreters. No one would permit the claim that French petty criminals are cultural ambassadors. Manthia Diawara can only allow this of Africa because he does not appreciate the traditional cultures of African Americans, derived from creative resistance. The spirituals, blues, jazz, and gospel traditions predate hip hop. The linkage is real, and you cannot fully understand the war music of the young generation without understanding the resistance in the spirituals. Tradition generates innovation. Take Diawara’s statement in the homeboy cosmopolitan that “The same transformative energy at play in Sidime Laye’s work is found in hip-hop, a transnational cultural form that started with young African Americans (p. 237). But is the “Duga” a transnational form or a Mande form that is now played by other people? In reality, hip hop is an African American cultural form that has become transnational (Walker, 1997).

My critical locating of Diawara as a leading exponent of *une révélation complexée* is based on his approach to Africa. In a cogent and telling passage he writes that the cementing of a relationship between modern technology and European man guarantees that “any par-
ticipation in the technological revolution must necessarily import European culture” (p. 148). This is a strong statement, but it is inaccurate. The problem with his insight at this level is that he has distorted the idea of technology to mean only Western technology. Culture is not just things—objects or materials; culture can exist if nothing material is produced. Technology, also, is not European. I sense that this is a search undertaken by Diawara while looking over his shoulder.

To say In Search of Africa is complicated is a way of saying it has a confusing rhetorical structure. More importantly there is no guiding philosophy and in that regard the writing is considerably postmodern. The writer engages Africa in a provocative, almost combative manner. Immediately it becomes clear that he does not distinguish Africanity—customs, traditions—from Afrocentricity—self-consciousness—and this leads to a major problem. Diawara demonstrates a truism that being born in Africa gives no special advantage from which to discuss the continent and convinces me that as far as Africa is concerned, it is possible to see and not see at the same time. The aim of Africa should not be to catch up to Europe but to be Africa.

Now we return to the initial problem of this essay—How does the theorist interested in language and communication determine the nature of dislocation in a text? What is demonstrated by both the Glaude and Diawara texts is something all too normal in a racially hierarchical society: the search for a way to compromise African existence with marginalization. This cannot be the answer to the problem of dislocation, because the only way to return from the margins of history, literature, culture, economics, or any other sector or sphere of life is to reassert a centered place within one’s own experiences. So any determination of dislocation must begin with the place where the writer stands culturally at the moment of writing. When this is done it is easy, by virtue of sentinel statements, to see both the extent and the depth of the problem that must be confronted to reestablish a centered place.

References