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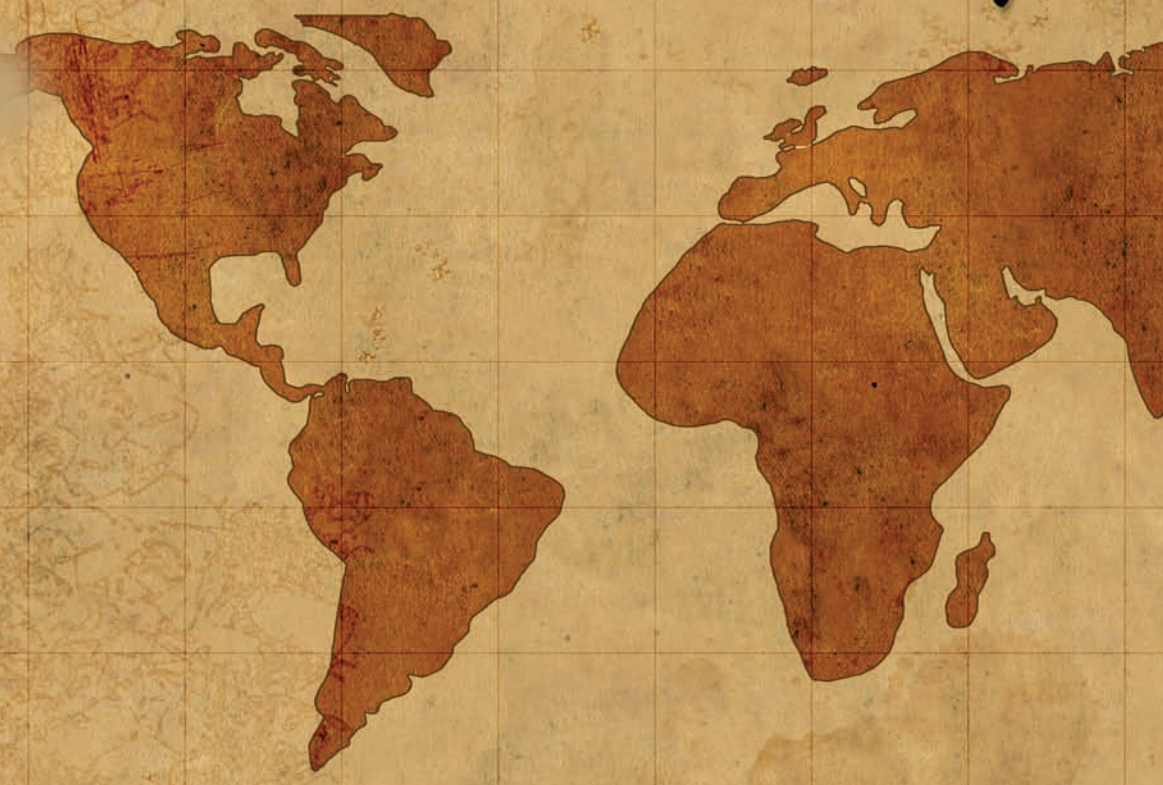

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# The Journal of Black Masculinity

C. P. Gause, Founder and Editor

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Manuscripts should be submitted in electronic form and should not exceed 35 pages in length (including endnotes and references). Authors should follow the *APA Publication Manual*, 6th edition (APA Press, 2010). A style guide for preparing manuscripts is located on the *JBM* website at http://www.blackmasculinity.com.

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# Contents

Contextualizing the (Re) Presentations of Black Masculinity ..... 1

Dear Racism ..... 3

The Stuff Of Sway And Nightmares ..... 6

Two Poems ..... 8

The Critical Nature Of Black Men In The Academy ..... 10

The History of Black/Africana Studies and Conflicting Epistemological Paradigms ..... 22

Middle School to High School Transition of African American Males: A Closer Look ..... 37

African American Men and Boys: Powerful Writers ..... 60

Problems for Young Men, Salient Concerns for Teachers ..... 61

Black Male Masculinity in Cinema: De-sexed, Feminized, and Absent ..... 70

The Other Brother ..... 92

My Experiences as a Community College President ..... 117

CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS: "Special Issue" & Edited Volume Obama's Presidency: The First Four Years ..... 123

# The Critical Nature Of Black Men In The Academy

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Miami University

*This paper was presented at the 21st Annual Conference on African American Culture and Experience co-organized by Dr. C. P. Gause and convened at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, October 14-16, 2010. The theme of the conference was "Exploring Black Masculinity Across Multiple Landscapes: A Global Perspective."*

I am very pleased to have been invited to keynote at this signature event, the 21st annual conference on African American Culture and Experience. What a powerful occasion this is to have this number of Black brothers, Black intellectual brothers in one place, at one time, talking and thinking, sharing and reflecting on our journeys in the academy. Such an amalgamation of Black thinkers and intellectuals ought to hopefully spell some kind of alarm to those who would otherwise minimize as well as exoticize our gathering together. What our coalescing, during this brief period of time, must do is to establish a formidable and yet radical agenda to achieve a number of things.

First, the agenda must include how the work of teaching, scholarship, and service can serve as a political, a revolutionary political vehicle to upset hegemonic notions of race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation that are solidly ensconced in the very fabric of the academy. The rhetoric of diversity is oftentimes merely that, rhetoric. Too often, diversity, in all of its facets, becomes a perpetual goal, some ethereal construct never intended to be realized or operationalized. But it appeases the neo-liberal consciousness that undergirds much of the work in the academy. It affirms some misguided notion that if we as a university are at least thinking about

diversity and make a vehement declaration that we are committed to diversity, we are at least doing something and not placating the racist, classist, homophobic, xenophobic foundations that generally underpin the lyrics of the university's voice. So our work during and following this conference has to take on a revolutionary tenor. It must be about upsetting the status quo and deeply infusing a voice of resistance and reconstruction through the work celebrated in higher education.

Second, our work together during this momentous kairos moment must be to release organic intellectuals to engender a civil rights agenda that not only impacts the university but society writ large. It is vitally important that we position our work in a critical space that asks the question of whose interests are being served through these academic machinations and how can our work not only expose the structures and processes that create and promote asymmetrical relations of power but also bring them down. I believe the work of Cornel West will be exceptionally helpful as he assists us to embrace the dilemma of the Black intellectual and establishes four distinct ways to think about Black men and intellectual work.

Third, I believe that all of this work must be motivated by a principled, purposive, and pragmatic paradigm that is grounded in a radical, more socially just notions of spirituality, critical spirituality, specifically.

May I delve into these issues by first delineating the conceptual framework as well as the experiential context that frames today's remarks. I have been a Black man for decades and, no matter what position I have held, many of the socio-political dynamics have remained consistent. My qualifications for position have always been second-guessed; my self-perpetuation of the Black man has to work twice as hard and produce twice as much—a family heritage, I might add, keeps the work doable but, at times, the socio-political dynamics almost become overwhelming. My goal is not to bore you with this autobiography but to simply briefly contextualize and historicize myself in such a way that my comments are linked to some relevant ambient and you more clearly see where I am coming from.

Allow me to cite one example from my days as an elementary school principal. I was the principal of a neighborhood school in inner

city Cincinnati. The school building was old, in disrepair, and predominantly Black. In Cincinnati, when I was a principal, those descriptors were pretty much pervasive—old, irreparable building; Black students. My building was cursed with metal steps so that, every time it rained or snowed, my students would fall down the steps in quantum numbers. I grew tired of sending hurt students home from involuntarily cascading down dangerously wet steps, so I called the buildings and facilities assistant superintendent and simply requested that treading be applied to my metal steps. I failed to pass this request through my immediate supervisor, an African American woman, who became livid because of my oversight. She came at me as though I had committed one of the seven unpardonable sins and, indeed, in her mind, I had. I had dissed her. Now, I know there were some gender dynamics at work then but I was not, at that time, wise enough nor sophisticated enough to have named them. But I had gotten the tread on the steps and my students had stopped falling. So for me, despite my procedural transgression, everyone won.

After that year, I was moved not more than a mile and a half, same neighborhood, to become the principal of a magnet school. This magnet school had been created to implement the court desegregation order our school district was under. The practical goal was to convince white parents to place their children in this predominantly Black school in this Black neighborhood. So, without hesitation, the superintendent came to my school and informed that I only needed to make requests to him for whatever I needed for my school. I was able to hand-select my faculty, buy new equipment; whatever I needed was at my disposal, including a brand new building. This was so different from my experience as the principal of a neighborhood school. Everything changed when my role was to recruit white children to my school.

For some time after that, I was plagued with the dynamics of those two divergent situations. The juxtaposition between the two, in my mind, needed some rational resolution. And the only explanation, to me, was institutional and blatant racism. While racism in and of itself is damning enough, I felt that, concomitantly, there were other confounding complexities at play in these two situations.

When I became an assistant professor at Miami University, my first office there was sandwiched between Drs. Peter McClaren and Henry Grioux. Through the crevices of my office walls flowed the tenets of critical theory. And it was through critical theory that I was able to, as Paulo Freire argued, read the word and the world, to actually name the injustices that I had lived through. So I embraced critical theory as the most advantageous way for me to think about what was happening in reality in schools. Critical theory helped me to name the asymmetrical relations of power and the debilitating and disenfranchising machinations of hegemony, as well as the determined agenda of the social and political status quo that grounded the work of schools to marginalize, discriminate, and perpetuate a capitalist agenda. So I come to this keynote assignment fully aware that at work in the academy are racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other forms of labeling while concomitantly minimizing the other. So I will build the rest of my remarks from a critical frame, but also a critical spiritual and prophetically pragmatic grounding as espoused by the eminent Black scholar, Cornel West.

I would like to look at what Cornel West calls the dilemma of the Black intellectual. I believe that much of what West has articulated some time ago, when his essay on the Black intellectual was written, is relevant even in these contemporary times. At first, I was not going to delineate three of the four models West outlines as the categories of Black intellectuals. But as I thought more of it, I realized that a quick covering of three of the four might help each of us to situate ourselves, even if very loosely, to how we see ourselves and how we wage the on-going fight as Black, intellectual men in the academy. West actually outlines four models of the Black intellectual, those being the bourgeois model: the Black intellectual as humanist, the Marxist model: the Black intellectual as revolutionary, the Foucaultian model: the Black intellectual as postmodern skeptic and, finally, the Insurgency model: the Black intellectual as critical, organic catalyst.

The bourgeois model of the Black intellectual follows the frames and contexts of the hegemonic notions of the academy. It prizes the legitimation process through degrees, certificates, and position. It sees placement in the white-dominated academy as something to be

celebrated, something to be tenaciously sought after because it spells for some the status of having arrived, of having been accepted in academe, of having made it. No doubt, there is some intellectual benefit to be gained through this process of legitimation, though the legitimation costs. Too often, in order for the Black intellectual to be tenured and promoted, the official badge of legitimation in the academy, one has to make choices and decisions that can often be filled with a plethora of "what if" anxieties. What if my research is Afro-centric; will that hurt me? What if my pedagogical style is not only intellectually rigorous but also indeed exceptionally challenging? Am I over-compensating for the inbred racist stereotypes that are alive and well in the academy especially as they relate to the brothers? I like how West says, "There is always the need to assert and defend the humanity of Black people, including their ability and capacity to reason logically, think coherently and write lucidly." Even if the bourgeois intellectual has been afforded entrance through the legitimation process, he must also recognize, as West puts it, "This hostile environment results in the suppression of their critical analyses and in the limited use of their skills in a manner considered legitimate and practical."

If the Black male intellectual embraces the bourgeois model, he has, in my opinion, been co-opted and commodified with little more to show for his labor than promotion and tenure or the celebration of academe. I recognize that I sit perched in a privileged position, being a full tenured professor, but I also sit here with the plethora of experiences, the sometimes excruciating self-reflection and personal inquisition of my own motivations and wonderings about the professional decisions I made in order to sit here. I had to determine how writing about the plight of Black children in urban schools under the auspices of neo-liberal and conservative regimes of leadership thought would impact my potential to be promoted and tenured. I had to deeply consider how unashamedly writing about spirituality—that is, a spirituality grounded in an African American prophetic tradition—would play to editors who might find my work not scholarly enough, pedantic, and trivial. But two things remained constant for me. First, I had to be true to my genuine or sacred self. I could not hide in the covers of acceptability and the reification of the status quo but believed

that my work had to open new frontiers and cross borders in order to cause educational leadership to have a more critical and impacting voice. Second, I had to write from my experience. I had to write from the depths of my soul about the issues that mattered most to me and that I deemed responsive to the needs of people who look like me. That was the risk, but it was an essential risk I had to take in order to produce my best work possible.

The second model of the Black intellectual Cornel West defines is the Marxist model or the revolutionary intellectual. I must share with you that I have never considered myself to be a Marxist, though the tenets of critical theory that have Marxist leanings have helped me to frame my intellectual inquiries and to name the world I've come to know. But indeed, there are shortcomings to grounding a Black intellectual perspective in a Marxist frame. Our issues cannot be confined to a social/structural polemic as Marxism celebrates. Marxism—while liberating the intellectual to develop a critical consciousness that deconstructs, troubles, and demystifies bourgeois underpinnings of societal functions and helps us to concretize our radical and revolutionary perspectives— remains, as West argues, "divorced from the integral dynamics, concrete reality and progressive possibilities of the Black community." Indeed, it is revolutionary thought without a pragmatic agenda. Black intellectuals must think critically, must ask the poignant questions, and must tie those inquiries with the vagaries of life for a Black human being in the United States. It is imperative that the Black intellectual unite critique with possibility and strategy. To simply point out the inequities and not project a solution is an exercise Black intellectuals can ill-afford to propagate.

The third and final category of Black intellectual West described is the insurgency model or the Black intellectual as a critical, organic catalyst. In this model, the Black intellectual articulates a new regime of truth that emanates from the everyday experiences including the microaggressions and instances of injustice, marginalization, and systemic dissing that Black folk face every single day. This is the work of the Black intellectual—to look more critically at what West calls the indigenous institutional practices that are demystified and deconstructed through the Black gaze. What is intriguing about this

critique is the ways in which the Black intellectuals' thinking often abandons Western canons of hegemonic truth in order to embrace post-Western or trans-Western thought. It no longer sees as sacred the celebrated thinking and philosophy that have undergirded hegemony. The work of this Black intellectual is to upset the status quo. It is intellectual labor with the explicit purpose to resist and to reconstruct society in such a way that notions of racism and sexism and ageism and homophobia and other disdaining attitudes and actions that undergird the many policies and practices, rites and rituals of society are not merely denuded by their place in grounding traditional and contemporary societal mores and behaviors. But an agenda of social action accompanies the revelation and uncovering of minimizing and dismissive practices. The primary goal of the Black intellectual as a critical, organic catalyst is to foment or initiate an insurgency. I like what West says about this. He offers, "The central task of postmodern Black intellectuals is to stimulate, hasten, and enable alternative perceptions and practices by dislodging prevailing discourses and powers." What is so compelling about this model is the fact that, unlike that of the bourgeois or the Black intellectual as humanist, the insurgency model sees our work as not mere labor for credentialing, licensing, promoting and tenuring or a grandiose scheme of self-aggrandizement. The Black intellectual as organic, critical catalyst situates our work in a communal space that sees our academic travail as an instrument of resistance as well as a foundation for collective civil rights action.

I have come to challenge particularly my Black intellectual brothers to release your minds, attitudes, and motivations from simply being celebrated by the powers that be in the academy. Understand that you can teach, serve, publish, and be promoted and tenured while racism, marginalization and heinous societal inequities continue to run rampant. You can be celebrated in the academy while African American young men continue to begin in colleges and universities but fail to persist and ultimately graduate. Does your work matter when another's condition is not made better because of the impact of what you have taught or written? What, then, is the purpose? What is the axiological grounding for our work? What is awaiting the outcomes of

our gathering here? To whom does it matter that we are meeting and even going through these series of meetings? I am at the age when every day has to matter. Every word I write or speak must be salient. Every academic practice must have meaning. In fact, my challenge to you and to me is to live a purposive as well as principled and pragmatic academic life. This is a spiritual imperative, and I would like to close my time with you inviting you to engage your spiritual selves to critically self-reflect and to embrace the imperative of purposefully and principally and pragmatically perceiving our academic and intellectual endeavors. My scholarship on critical spirituality will serve as the foundation for the closing portion of my remarks.

Let me begin by offering what I believe to be the three benefits of the spiritual dimension of our lives. I completely understand how some might argue about the existence of the spiritual dimension but I can only quickly offer that, without tapping into our spiritual dimension on a regular basis, many of us would find ourselves in a hopeless, almost depressed malaise because the craziness of the academy, the insanity of society, and the pathology of life itself push us towards an explanation and a resolution that are often not found in the everyday, not found in what we can so easily explain, rationalize, and hypothesize. It cannot be explained through our texts, our qualitative or quantitative analyses. Another interview, case study or t-test will not do the trick to comfort our deep sense of having to forever be in a proving stage, legitimating process and justifying modality. But it can be found in the spiritual space of our lives. There are three purposes of the spiritual dimension.

First, the spiritual dimension provides for us our ontology, as well as our teleology. In other words, the meaning and purpose of our existence are explicated through our spirits. The work that emanates from our intellectual endeavors has meaning and becomes tied to or aligned with a greater purpose as we employ our spirits in this work. The primacy of our existence is clearly highlighted through the revealing of our ontological and teleological foundations of our lives.

Second, our spirits motivate us to embrace connectivity, community, or meaningful relationships with others. It compels us to move beyond the confines of individualistic self-absorption and pushes

us to deeply consider the Other and the efficacy of being in relationship with the Other. Third, our spirits inform our sense of what is moral, ethical, and just. I won't take the time to articulate the differences between religion and the concept I have developed, critical spirituality. But suffice it to say that, when an individual subscribes to the tenets of critical spirituality, he or she interrogates the ways in which institutional spaces, like the academy and traditional religion, perpetuate the indignities of racism, classism, ableism and homophobia, among a number of other undemocratic practices.

There are four components of critical spirituality. They are critical self-reflection, deconstructive interpretation, performative creativity, and transformative action. When one grounds one's intellectual labor in critical spirituality, the work is moved from merely attaining the traditional achievements and measurements of success into a more political and socially just realm of academic endeavors. The critically spiritual intellectual has embraced his or her personal predispositions on issues of race, class, gender, ability and other markers of cultural difference and has interrogated just where through the process of socialization these notions have emanated. The critically spiritual intellectual puts the work in a much broader context, one that impacts the social and political spaces in which he/she locates his/her commissioned work. The labor of these intellectuals finds its genesis in a calling of sorts. It is an inescapable compunction to write and teach from a perspective grounded in societal transformation toward democratic practice. The achievement is not merely in being published but in publishing work that challenges the very core of readers, that troubles the genuine selves of those who consume the research in order to bring about radical societal change. We know that we all teach and write and even pose inquiries from a particular conceptual and experiential frame. Deconstructive interpretation allows the intellectual to unearth the origins of those conceptual and experiential frames while, at the same time, juxtaposing those particular positions against a platform of what is socially just, what does not perpetuate marginalization of others, and what predispositions are contrary to the democratic and equitable treatment of all people.

May I offer that to face ourselves in our raw state of unvarnished prejudices, proclivities, and predilections takes courage and preparedness to see the ugliness of the grounding of our actual public practices? Critically spiritual intellectuals see their work as purposeful and principled. The work is tied to a deeper meaning and has, at its core, the righting of the injustices that are the daily regimen for Black and poor people. The work is purposive and pragmatic because it is entrenched in the diurnal lives of those who are marginalized with however a prophetic edge. The prophetic edge is that change is going to take place. The prophetic edge is that institutions that have held people of color and people of no financial means hostage will find themselves either changing or facing their own demise. The pragmatic character of our work contextualizes our teaching and scholarship in a civil rights space where our intellectual labors also become the fodder of our organic or public work as agents for radical societal change. Black intellectuals do not have the luxury to do our work outside of a transformative agenda. Our research inquiries cannot only interest our individual intellectual curiosities but also must provide answers to dilemmas, motivation for revolution, and strategy for societal reconstruction.

Critical spirituality is all about releasing our creativity in a performative way to envision a new possibility and reality. It is the power of reimagination. It asks the intellectual to align her/his intellectual curiosities with a much larger project, that of creating a society where justice and equity are more genuinely practiced. I am certain that I am not fully articulating the dynamic that I hope to leave with you. Our academic labor must be tied to the understanding that what we say as well as what we write has creative ability. We literally are creating a whole new reality through our teaching and scholarship. People embrace what we say and what we write and for us to negate the power and efficacy of these academic practices causes us to completely misunderstand the purpose of our work. People's lives are impacted through our intellectual activity, and it is for this reason that our teaching and scholarship must be intimately linked with the very spiritual notion of creativity, performative creativity. That is not only the envisioning of a different reality, but also the envisioning of the

strategies to bring that reality to pass. Our questions must be tied to creating a new reality. They must be spiritually entrepreneurial. Our academic curiosities must be linked to creating, seeing beyond what already exists, and calling forth through our intellectual labor an existence that is not yet present but surely through our transformative action can and will come to pass. Before the critically spiritual intellectual engages the mind, he/she has engaged the spirit that frees him/her to see what has not yet been seen, to speak what has not yet been spoken, and to create what has not yet existed. It is the spiritual enterprise of calling those things that be not as though they were.

As I was writing the conclusion of these remarks in a Baltimore, Maryland hotel, across the street from the hotel was a protest of approximately thirty Black men and women with one or two white men mixed in. The men and women were carrying signs declaring that the Tricon Construction Company does not pay area standard wages and benefits. I put down my pen, left my hotel room, and went to the place of the protest. It would be exceptionally counter-productive for me to share with you what I did at that point. Better for us is for you to determine what should be the next steps for a critically spiritual, organic intellectual. As joggers continued to run by the site unscathed by the chanting and the protesting, as businesses continued to operate, visitors continued to gawk at the gold statue in the center of the cul-de-sac as if nothing was going to interfere with their predetermined occupations, what might be the strategies a critically spiritual, organic, Black academic should take regarding this situation? Should this incident become the substance of an article? Should it provide a case for teaching purposes? Should it be left to serve an academic's needs while the needs of the protesters are left bereft of attention? Just what should a Black intellectual do with this? I leave you to decide but, more importantly, to allow your spirit to guide what should be your next steps.

Thank you for your attention.

***Biography***

Dr. Michael E. Dantley serves as Miami University's Associate Provost and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and is also Professor in the department of Educational Leadership in the School of Education, Health, and Society. Prior to his current position, he served as the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the School of Education, Health, and Society. He teaches courses in organizational and leadership theory, ethics and leadership, the principalship, the philosophy of educational leadership, and leadership theory and change. His research focuses on leadership, spirituality and social justice.

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