
Constructing an Authentic Self: The Challenges and Promise of African-Centered Pedagogy

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Abstract African-centered pedagogy aims to cultivate a positive and productive culturally based identity for Black children, and African-centered schools endeavor to supply that cultural base, placing the history, culture, and life experiences of individuals of African descent at the center of everything that they do. Our study examines the historical contexts in which African-centered education has emerged and the justification for racially separate schooling. The article's major contribution is its examination of whether African-centered schools prepare Black children to participate in a democratic society and whether the construction of an essentialist racial identity might compromise their mission and success. We conclude that African-centered schools provide many of the same strengths found in other forms of community-based education but that they must continue to wrestle with essentialist notions of Black identity on which its discourse is built.

What manner of education will mold the African personality to thrive in a culture that has demeaned its character, denied its existence, and coordinated its destruction? How shall we sing our sacred song in a strange land? (Carol Lee)

[The] goal of education is not to prepare children to fit within the present system, but to revolutionize the system toward the promise of democracy articulated in the documents (but not the deeds) that shaped America. (Peter Murrell)

In 1954 a conservative son of Scandinavian immigrants and ardent supporter

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of the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II wrote the majority opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education* and thereby began the era of integration. Appointed for his conservatism, not for his activism with respect to racial equality, Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren famously wrote that “the segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children . . . and generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483). For the next 25 years, the drama of desegregation would be played out across the United States and the voices on both sides of the color line who called for segregated schools—from Lester Maddox to Malcolm X—would be demonized as instances of extremism best avoided.

Since *Brown*, one orthodoxy of educational research and popular opinion has been that the educational underachievement of African American children is principally the result of White racism rather than an inevitable outcome of how democracy, capitalism, and opportunity are instituted in America. On this model, Blacks typically are portrayed as victims incapable of directing their own destinies. Consequently, appeals for equity have been repeatedly issued—whether by means of voluntarism, state policy, curricular revision, or all the above—in order to rectify past wrongs and to narrow the achievement gap. Conventional liberal responses to Black underachievement implacably appeal to the ideal of racial integration (Kozol 2005; Orfield et al. 1996). Integrationists of all stripes have maintained that segregated schools are bad policy, bad for Whites but especially so for Blacks. Conversely, integrated schools, the argument goes, bode well for society, particularly for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Yet today many Black Americans¹ question the aims of integration—“diversity” and “multiculturalism,” in twenty-first century vernacular—claiming them to be little more than attempts to assuage liberal guilt and to maintain White cultural and economic dominance. Indeed, given the grim realities of Black community life in American cities, many African Americans believe most educational reforms to be either woefully inadequate or misguided.² In many urban neighborhoods, teenage pregnancy and crime rates among Black youth remain at worrisome levels, unemployment remains scandalously high, many children grow up in schools and neighborhoods overrun by gangs and drug trafficking, and more African American fathers are incarcerated than graduate from high school (Kunjufu 2004). Notwithstanding often dauntless efforts by ministers, parents, and community leaders to resist hopelessness, the

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sense of crisis—characterized by some as a slide toward nihilism (West 1993)—is palpable, a downward spiral continues for many youth, and despair abounds. One institutional concomitant of the general malaise of urban Black communities, particularly in northern states, is highly segregated schools characterized by poor achievement, dilapidated infrastructure, ineffective leadership and teaching, high levels of violence, and low high school graduation rates, particularly for males.

While people on both sides of color and economic lines—lines as tangible as street names in most cities—point the finger and pass the buck, a group of African-centrist scholars, educators, and community leaders have attempted to turn de facto segregation to their advantage by putting the educational process back in the hands of African Americans. Their efforts have spurred the creation of a small, but rapidly growing, number of African-centered schools across the United States. The creation of these schools has been facilitated, somewhat paradoxically considering their “radical” agenda, by the success of the charter school and school voucher movements, which are often identified with the most conservative elements of American society.

African-centrists consider blame, no matter where it is placed, to be a losing strategy that erodes the sense of nationhood required to develop Black consciousness; in its place are the inspiration and energy required to cultivate a positive and productive culturally based identity for “New World Africans” (Kunjufu 2004; Raton 2006). African-centered schools endeavor to supply that cultural base, placing the history, culture,³ and life experiences of individuals of African descent at the center of everything that they do. Those involved in the African-centered education movement believe that even institutionalized racism and unfavorable economic circumstances cannot determine one’s purpose and direction if there is a strong cultural base informing one’s community and family. As such, African-centered pedagogy⁴ (hereafter ACP) shares much in common with other identifiable groups (e.g., religious minorities and women) that defend voluntary separation as a means of building group efficacy. Indeed, ACP represents both a powerful and inspiring response to despair and a form of resistance from below.

Notwithstanding its many successes, ACP has been vulnerable to criticism, implicit and explicit, from several quarters. For example, ACP can be justly criticized for not recognizing the general diversity of Blacks in America, a “nation” of more than 30 million spread across a tremendous variety of lifestyles, locations, and historical circumstances (Dickerson 2004; Gates 1996). It also has been accused of abandoning the democratic purposes of the civil rights movement and repudiating its real successes. In addition to the ambiguities of Black identity, many difficulties also attend the conceptualization and implementation of ACP. To examine the various challenges that confront ACP, our essay will be framed by the following three questions:

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1. Does the historical context in which many Black children live justify the existence of African-centered schools?
2. Does ACP prepare Black children to participate in a democratic society?
3. Does the construction of an essentialist racial identity in ACP compromise its mission and success?

In response to the first question, we will briefly review the historical conditions and circumstances of American schooling for Blacks before considering both the motivations for establishing African-centered schools and the aims of ACP. Efforts to forge a parallel society and to foster Black consciousness and pride, including the establishment of separatist schools, are not new. We will limit our historical overview to the years following *Brown* and leave to others the examination of historically unique examples of separate Black schooling that predate the rise of African-centered schools in their present incarnation. We conclude that both historical and contemporary realities do in fact justify some forms of voluntary separated schooling such as African-centered schools.

Apropos the second question, we will examine the claim that some forms of voluntary racial separation in the interest of cultural coherence—provided that there are crucial supports in place such as strong leadership and a nurturing staff—can prove vital both to the psychological health and academic success of Black children and to preparing them to enter a democratic society in which not only are competing cultural, religious, and political notions of the good on offer but in which nearly all Black children will encounter racism in one form or another. In this connection, we will examine the importance of healthy identity construction, the claims of cultural coherence, and the requirements for democratic citizenship. Although our conclusions are tentative—because few studies to date have addressed empirically the question of whether African-centered schools produce these outcomes—we conclude that the aims of African-centered schools are at least compatible with democratic forms of education.

On the third question, we will evaluate the charges of essentialism made against ACP. While the motivations of ACP are well intentioned, essentialist notions of Black culture and identity always pose conceptual and practical difficulties. We suggest that, while ACP (like other community-based educational experiments) offers a particularly strong indictment of bureaucratic public education, its racially constructed, essentialized notions of Black culture and the “authentic self” are at best a provisional necessity. Essentialism depends in part on an historical reconstruction at odds with mainstream versions of Black history. Yet, while some psychological resources instrumental to healthy identity development can be liberating, many are not, and therefore they may aggravate, rather than remove, the psychic dissonance that many Blacks already experience.

As we proceed, we are aware that a variety of interpretations of African-centered education exist and that these are incorporated in schools in different ways (Akoto 1992; Asante 1991; Binder 2000; Giddings 2001; Lee 1994). Nevertheless, we attempt to supply a fairly conventional, or normative, reading of ACP in describing the curricular choices, learning goals, teaching strategies, and performance assessment of practitioners in African-centered schools. African-centered schools have many critics, White and Black. Few schooling experiments have elicited such vociferous debate. In this critique, we aim to be responsive to ACP's critics but also to be true to ACP's core mission, which is to educate African American children well. As our analysis will show, African-centered education, like other forms of community-based education that voluntarily separate, entails more than mere resistance; rather, as one of the opening quotes indicates, its overarching goal is to "revolutionize the system toward the promise of democracy."

Institutional Racism and Schooling: A Brief History

Notwithstanding the fact that many hoped that the *Brown* decision of 1954 (and subsequent rulings in the 1960s and 1970s) would correct the inherent inequalities in schools, for a large number of African Americans *Brown* effectively marked the dismantling of thriving segregated institutions and communities. To be sure, in fits and starts, mandatory desegregation did bring modest success. Proponents of integration, including many African Americans, have pointed to the fact that many schools, particularly in the South, became far more integrated than they ever had been previously. Yet the lived reality of desegregation in public schools would not have the salutary effects that integrationists envisioned. Indeed, the painful, and often violent, outcome of the integrationist agenda was that tens of thousands of Black children would leave their relatively safe—albeit manifestly "unequal"—learning environments for integrated schools where they would be rejected by many of their White teachers and peers.

The effects of school integration on the African American community were both immediate and devastating: literally scores of mostly Black schools were closed; tens of thousands of Black school personnel were displaced from 1954 to 1965, and by 1966, fewer than 2 percent of Black teachers worked in desegregated schools (Fultz 2004). Further, the 1970s witnessed ruined experiments with busing and rezoning that resulted in fragmented Black communities and a greatly diminished role for Black parents (Edwards 1996; Irvine and Irvine 1983). Time and again, Black children moved from an educational context in which their identities were centered on Black culture and communal life to one in which their endeavors inevitably would be compared with their

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White counterparts and found wanting. Some authors continue to argue that in most urban schools minority students are expected to exist in an environment that “negates their language, denies their historical existence, and de-means their culture” (Faltz and Leake 1996, 246).

A larger number of Black students in predominately White schools has contributed to “white flight” (involving either residential relocation or migration to private schools), as many Whites continue to see schools with a critical mass of minority students (save, perhaps, for those of East Asian extract) as a marker of poorer school quality and, where enrollment increases do not result from busing, as a guarantee of deflated property values (Rossell 1983). White teachers and administrators, from liberal to conservative, often have been inclined to view Black children as slower and as intellectually inferior in some fundamental way as compared with White children. Even as middle-class Blacks seek out greater social and economic opportunity, African American students frequently suffer from any or all of the following: “stereotype threat” in integrated settings, ambivalence and conflict in suburban schools, the pressure to “represent” for their group, pressures to form a raceless identity in order to assimilate, and the expectation that they express group loyalty as a form of “fictive kinship” in resisting institutional norms (Fordham 1988; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 2003; Polite 1993; Steele 1997).

Today many schools are, in fact, well integrated; they have effective Black leadership, and racial tensions are relatively minimal. But when Black students attend more integrated high schools (including magnet schools), racial stratification often occurs inside the building—through referrals for special education, a lack of mentoring, tracking mechanisms, and disciplinary procedures (Eyler et al., 1983; Harry and Klingner 2006; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Indeed, Blacks are far more likely to be grouped or tracked low, to be referred for behavioral and learning disorders, to be suspended or expelled, and to drop out. By disproportionately using disciplinary action and tracking Black students into lower academic tracks, “school systems were able to limit interracial contact and thereby reduce White flight. In the process, most Blacks received lower-quality educational opportunities. Consequently, [efforts] to desegregate defy the intent of *Brown*, as this nation witnesses the persistence of practices that result in inherently unequal schools” (Faltz and Leake 1996, 231).

Further, schools that have a majority of Black students are also far more likely to be located in urban districts with an eroding tax base, induced by the flight of businesses and social institutions that once sustained them; high unemployment rates; high mobility rates; high drop out rates; fewer teachers with terminal degrees in the subject they teach; and inadequate facilities and learning materials. All of these contribute, on average, to a substandard education (Gill 1991; Span 2002).

While the Black middle and professional classes have expanded greatly since the *Brown* ruling and while many African Americans have moved to the suburbs and exurbs, social and economic conditions for the disproportionately large Black lower classes have steadily deteriorated over the past 25 years and school segregation along seemingly intractable lines of residential segregation has increased. It is perhaps the cruelest irony that African-centered schools are accused of rejecting integration in favor of segregated schooling. Critics who charge that African-centered schools are segregative fail to reckon with the fact that a significant number of urban schools are already segregated; it is virtually impossible for African-centered schools to segregate their students any more than they already are. What is different about African-centered schools is the manner in which these are segregated. African-centered schools are one of several choices African American parents have vis-à-vis de facto segregation. In the absence of a repaired public school system, most Black parents prefer to have choices such as African-centered schools rather than to be assigned a school that could possibly fail to educate their child.

The Rise of African-Centered Schools

The first African-centered independent schools opened in the late 1960s. African-centered schools were organized as a response to the demand from the Black community for equity, high educational standards, and cultural expectations to which public schools, owing to the ways in which they were bureaucratically structured to maintain the status quo, had failed to adequately respond (Comer 1997; Lee 1994; Pollard and Ajirrotutu 2000; Ratteray 1992; Span 2002). In a few cases, entire schools districts (e.g., Atlanta and Detroit) have managed to infuse the curriculum with African-centered content with the support of teachers, parents, and school board officials (Binder 2000; Giddings 2001), while, in the private sector, the Council of Independent Black Institutions aids parents in locating schools with an African-centered character. Today there are more than 400 African-centered public schools, while in the private school sector, African-centered schools serve more African American youth than all but Catholic schools (Ratteray 1992).

The proliferation of African-centered schools in the 1990s coincided with a series of Supreme Court decisions related to the termination of court-decreed desegregation orders, the outcome of which was lifting, at least in part, most of these orders. The main message of the Court was that only school segregation that was related to past or present intentional discrimination or that produced the social and personal stigma that the *Brown* court identified as the main damage of de jure segregation could be judged unconstitutional under *Brown*. School segregation related to residential segregation or other causes was not proscribed

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(*Missouri v. Jenkins*, 495 U.S. 33, 1990; *Freeman v. Pitts*, 503 U.S. 467, 1992; *Grimes v. Cavazos*, 786 F. Supp. 1184, 1992). In this context, several legal scholars discussed the constitutionality of African-centered schools, some arguing for their permissibility and even necessity (Brown 2000; Jarvis 1992; Neely 1994) and others for caution in sanctioning any kind of ethnically segregated schooling (Brown 1993; Siegel 1996). No higher court has addressed this issue explicitly, but Clarence Thomas did offer his imprimatur for African-centered schools in his concurrence in the recent *Parents v. Seattle and Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education* case (127 S. Ct. 2738, 2007), in which the Court struck down voluntary desegregation admissions schemes as unconstitutional.

Together with churches, mosques, neighborhood organizations, and families, African-centered schools present themselves as an important vehicle for transmitting an alternative historical perspective that putatively embodies the core cultural values of the African/Black community. These values include self-respect, cultural pride, and communal responsibility. According to proponents of ACP, a school that does not live by these values cannot foster the ethos of institutional caring that is requisite for constructing a positive self-concept, working well with others, and succeeding in academic endeavors (Siddle-Walker 1996).

The founders and proponents of ACP have maintained that the quality of committed staff is critical to the success of African-centered schools; from the principal to the teachers and the custodial and kitchen staff—each must desire to work in the school precisely because it is an African-centered school, because they are committed to the core aims of ACP and to the character development and academic success of Black children. Each of the staff is expected to be a role model for the children, fostering trust-based relationships and a positive self-image. Teachers are expected by school leaders and parents to have high expectations for student learning and success, even as the teachers provide a strong basic skill foundation for greater continuity and stability. Teachers sometimes loop for three years with the same students in order to maintain trust and cohesion, while in some African-centered schools, teachers also are also expected to make numerous home visits each year so that they might establish strong connections to the children's homes and maintain rapport with the parents or guardians. To allow for further contact with families and with the community, activities are organized after school and occasionally on weekends. Children are also provided mentoring from other adults in the community who can support and advise students (Leake and Leake 1992a; Pollard and Ajiro-tutu 2000).

While African-centered schools aim to have strong parental support,⁵ they also strive to have strong leadership and a teaching staff committed to the core values of ACP. Of course, these desired outcomes are also supported by a number of ameliorating conditions, including small classroom size, family-

like bonds between the staff and the students, minimal regulatory features (often facilitated by charters), and the affirmation of African-centered practices in everything that occurs within the school. Each of these must come together to produce a school culture that is stronger than the home culture the children may bring with them, a culture compromised by the myriad problems associated with urban poverty and cultural disintegration. Indeed, African-centered educators maintain that absent strong community bonds, compelling role modeling, and effective cultural foundational development, teaching efforts aimed at bringing about the schooling success of Black children are a doomed project. Whether they are public by charter or other district arrangement, voucher-dependent, or private, African-centered schools have important affinities with other successful community-based schools.

African-Centered Pedagogy

Nearly all mainstream multicultural narratives assume that African American history and identity begin in slavery and move toward emancipation. In the traditional American story, emancipation is a long arduous struggle fought for by African Americans but also one that is given by Whites. African-centered pedagogy acknowledges that important changes have come about, at least partly, as a result of efforts to redress past wrongs. Still, the liberal doctrine is seen as falsely reassuring insofar as it operates on the assumption that educational opportunity for Blacks is largely dependent upon White altruism and magnanimity. African-centered pedagogy rejects this narrative—from degradation to freedom—as inaccurate and devastating in its psychological effects. African-centered pedagogy is not preoccupied with the narrative that puts White racism at the center of Black history and ontology, but this is not because White racism is not real. Indeed, institutional racism is assumed, and teachers are only too aware of what children will likely face in mainstream society. African-centrists are invested in rescripting educational opportunity in a different way, one that is not mired in a victim-focused curriculum.

Defenders of ACP accept as fact that most public schools facilitate the educative process in ways that further alienate Black children from their cultural heritage. Simply put, far too many Black children have been deculturized. *Deculturization* has been defined as “a process by which the individual is deprived of his or her culture and then conditioned to other cultural values” (Boateng 1990, 73). Deculturization does not require the complete absence of group or cultural identity but rather refers to the practice of denying access to, or refusal to acknowledge, an individual’s culture or the role that it may play in an individual’s well-being. Operating on the assumption that most African American children have lost touch with their authentic selves, ACP places Black

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children at the center of instruction by reenculturating students into the “majesty” of African/Black consciousness and identity. African-centered pedagogy aims to reenculturate Black children into a set of habits, dispositions, and behaviors—in short, an identity—that centers them on a firm understanding of who they are. In order to accomplish this, the Black child must occupy the space at the center of instruction, so that he or she may be viewed as the subject, and not an object, of that instruction. In doing so, the learner comes to interpret the world through a cultural understanding that has been constructed within, about, and for his or her own community. What follows, according to African-centrists, is greater self-esteem and higher academic achievement.

In order to reach these goals, Peter Murrell posits that Black children need a “figured world of African American culture and intellectual life that invites the participation, development, and achievement of African American children” (Murrell 2002, xxxv). Of what does this figured world consist? Although a number of interpretations are in circulation (Akoto 1992; Asante 1991; Karenga 1995; Kunjufu 2004; Lee 1994), complete consensus remains somewhat elusive, and individual schools approach the sources differently. However, some shared elements exist. There is, of course, an historical dimension whose inception is Africa, the cultural locus of all African-centered instruction. Therefore, ACP requires that children engage in a critical study of ancient and modern African history. Children in African-centered schools also study, *inter alia*, the ancient civilizations of Kemet, Nubia, Axum, Meroe, and Kush; these are linked to other African cultures, including the Zulu, Yoruba, and Ife. The periods of enslavement and resistance in the American diaspora are also examined but not in isolation from African and Asian slave trades; nor does the period of enslavement overshadow American history. Similarly, the roles of the Black Freedom and the Black Power movements on the African continent, in the United States, and elsewhere are also studied in light of important contextual realities. Critical study of modern African nation states requires that students be attuned to the colonial influences that subordinated previously existing cultural and ancestral norms. Consequently, knowing that African achievements continue to be evaluated in relation to European standards, caution is urged in appraising educational models in modern African states whose authorship derives from a colonialist perspective.

At its core, ACP aims to develop a number of collective cultural practices that embody a set of knowledge claims. These collective practices and knowledge claims are based upon a number of core axioms. Several are synthesized here:

1. Human cognition and intellectual development are socially and culturally situated in human activity; for persons of African descent, this means legitimizing African stores of knowledge.

2. The core of learning is meaningful and purposeful activity, which is embodied in practices and represented by a system of signs to communicate understanding and create a common system of meaning making.
3. Meaning making is the principal motive for learning and not merely reinforcement for the acquisition of information or new knowledge.
4. The most important form of learning is the appropriation of signs and practices of worthwhile adult activity.
5. Community and symbolic culture are significant to the learning of individuals—children grow into the cognitive life of those around them; these promote positive social relationships, reinforce community ties, and idealize service to one's family, community, nation, race, and world.
6. The development of children's capacity to think, reason, communicate, and perform academically is a matter of practice—a matter of knowledge-in-use that is enacted in socially situated and culturally contextualized settings.
7. Black achievement is linked to conditions of schooling that reduce racial vulnerability, and it imparts a world view that idealizes a positive, self-sufficient future for one's people without denying the self-worth and right to self-determination of others (cf. Lee 1994, 297; Murrell 2002, 46).

Building on these premises, ACP has a highly specific role to play in the reconstitution of the self. First, ACP plays a crucial therapeutic role that serves to inoculate children from the invidious effects of racism. However, its purpose is not merely to raise self-esteem but also to construct a culturally coherent, historically grounded self-concept.⁶ Identity construction works in tandem with character development and fosters a deep respect for oneself, the society, and the broader world and a sense of service and communal responsibility first and foremost to the African-American community (Kifano 1996). (We will return to both cultural coherence and identity construction in the next section.)

African-centered pedagogy is therefore a problem-solving pedagogy. Its proponents claim that children who internalize its philosophy undergo a transformation leading to enlightenment concerning their authentic self, empowerment concerning the options laid out before them, and self-determination concerning the choices they make. Thoroughly reconstituted selves are then impelled to rebuild and sustain the African American community. Of course, "enlightenment," "empowerment," and "authentic or reconstituted selves" are faith claims that are difficult to substantiate empirically, but as we will later argue vis-à-vis religious schools, this does not argue against using them as guiding principles or motivational descriptors.

Second, ACP epistemology entails the investigation, interpretation, and explication of all reality through an African-centered lens or from a perspective grounded in African-centered values. African-centered pedagogy assumes a

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cosmic order to the universe, an ontology in harmony with both nature and one's ancestors and forbearers, whose example and struggle are recapitulated into a quasi-transcendent present. This transcendent present is maintained through the veneration of, and blessing bestowed by, one's ancestors, whose collective wisdom continues to influence subsequent generations. Further, this continuity with both past and present means that persons of African descent are not individualized. Rather, Black persons are unavoidably incorporated into the collective; personal development is subsumed to community goals and purposes (Asante 2001; Dei 1995; Traoré 2003) and responsibility to—and solidarity with—others of African descent is paramount.

The collective practices of ACP are further guided by *ma'at*, an ancient Kemetite (Egyptian) concept that refers to the spiritual interconnectedness of all things. African-centrists refer to *ma'at* in terms of a spiritual force that encompasses and embraces all living things. *Ma'at* incorporates the understanding that humans possess a divine image, possess free will and are capable of ongoing learning and perfection, and engage in moral social practices that further human development (Lee 1994). *Ma'at* is made up of seven virtues: truth, justice, righteousness, order, mutuality, harmony, and balance. Closely connected to *ma'at* are seven principles that have come to be known as *Nguzo Saba* (Karenga 1995). These principles (which correspond to the seven days of Kwanzaa) are Unity, Self-Determination, Cooperative Work and Responsibility, Collective Economics, Purpose, Creativity, and Faith. Each guides classroom instruction and the general ethos in African-centered schools. The *Nguzo Saba* situates all instruction and learning in historically and culturally meaningful ways; stories, folktales, plays, songs, and reader's theatre activities are some of the ways in which its truths are illustrated, internalized, and enacted. While many African-centrists tend primarily to emphasize the historical-cultural component, others argue that ACP ought to “positively exploit and scaffold productive community and cultural practices [and] build upon the indigenous language” (Lee 1994, 299), including Ki-Swahili. Whatever method is chosen, African-centered teachers are exhorted to employ techniques that foster social interaction and continuous self-improvement but always on the understanding that learning is a collaborative activity and entails collective responsibilities.

Third, ACP promotes critical thinking skills that enable Black children to question, explore, and understand causes and their effects. This begins by situating children within a meaningful and relevant cultural framework so that learning can proceed from a coherent center. Only after children are properly centered, the argument goes, are they prepared to confront alternative understandings. In other words, they will not possess the tools for questioning their cultural bearings without first being led to a world view that focuses on the individual of African descent across the span of human history. Dei (1994,

17) suggests that ACP entails a political education that equips teachers and students with the cultural capital necessary to eradicate “the structural conditions that marginalize the existence of certain segments of the school population.” Because ACP is principally concerned with the emancipation and empowerment of Black people, its core beliefs are inspired by, and connected to, the struggles of African peoples around the world: “[ACP] seeks the truthful reconstitution of Afrikan [*sic*] history and culture and transformation of the Afrikan man and woman and their world. . . . It is informed by the struggles of fellow Afrikans and by similar struggles of other people. It aspires ultimately to inform concretely and positively the human condition” (Akoto 1994, 320).

This orientation toward demarginalization, on the one hand, and orientation toward a pan-African consciousness, on the other hand, then, is a precondition for “freedom” in learning. The aims of ACP, like those of many other community-based schooling practices, are to counter the depersonalizing environments of bureaucratic public schools by providing more meaningful curricula and instruction; stronger relations between teachers, staff, and students; more intimate surroundings; opportunities for exploration; and generally a more caring milieu. In many ways, this signals a return to Kohlberg’s (1972) notion of “education as development,” as a movement away from “education as achievement.” African-centered pedagogy, however, adds an essential curricular and political dimension with its emphasis on African history, culture, and values and its commitment to restoration (or creation from scratch) of children’s cultural self-concept. This is by no means a disposable aspect of ACP but instead relates directly to the historical conditions, detailed earlier, to which African-centered schools are a response. What DuBois wrote in the 1930s continues to be relevant: “The plain fact faces us, that either [the Negro] will have separate schools or he will not be educated. . . . Negroes are not welcome in public schools and universities or treated like fellow human beings. But beyond this, there are certain positive reasons due to the fact that American Negroes have, because of their history, group experiences, and memories, a distinct entity, whose spirit and reaction demand a certain type of education for its development” (Dubois 1935/1996, 424–28).

Because of the psychological and physical violence endemic to the experience of Black children in public schools and because of the historic persistence of systematically misrecognizing Black people in American society, achieved partly through the erasure of African American cultural history in schools, a strong case can indeed be made for voluntary separate schooling. Thus we answer the first question. What remains to be seen, however, is whether African-centered schools can withstand criticism on the other two fronts: preparation for living in democratic societies and essentialist notions of authentic blackness.

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ACP and Democratic Schooling

Our second question is, does ACP prepare Black children to participate in a democratic—and, importantly, deeply pluralist—society? Democratic schools are those that impart knowledge about the political institutions and processes that make liberal democratic institutions possible. Democratic schools will also cultivate the dispositions necessary for constructing, maintaining, participating in, and critiquing those institutions. The relevant dispositions include a capacity for understanding, respecting, and evaluating differing views in a pluralist environment in which there are multiple, often conflicting, conceptions of the good, described in cultural, philosophical, or political terms. (Importantly, most liberals assume that the capacities for democratic citizenship are best served through integrated schooling.) To answer the question before us, it is necessary that we first understand the central purposes that African-centered tenets serve. It then remains for us to decide whether the cultural and political aims of ACP are compatible with those of democratic citizenship.

We have argued above that the purpose of African-centered schooling is not to encourage students to separate themselves from the multicultural American world in which they live or to disparage members of other cultural groups. Indeed, defenders of ACP repudiate the suggestion that African-centered schools represent just another kind of ethnocentrism that valorizes its own accomplishments at the expense of others. Defenders of ACP insist that African-centered schools simply provide essential learning opportunities to students that are missing from mainstream public schools. Ronald Takaki (1993) maintains that there can be nothing so dispiriting as to read the history of one's nation and find oneself and one's family missing or misrepresented. We have also suggested that attending most public schools, saturated with the symbolic capital of Whiteness—institutionalized both in the formal and hidden curriculum, inconsistent cultural messages, expectations, and communication styles between home and school—produces in black students a kind of psychic dissonance that interferes with learning and psychological well-being (Mandara 2006). Psychic dissonance may be exacerbated by a weak or absent self-concept or identity. The combination is, for ACP, legitimate cause not for zero tolerance but rather for a different kind of schooling that promotes the healthy development of black youth.

The developmental purposes of ACP accord with Phinney's notions of healthy ethnic identity development. Phinney (2003) suggests that a person cannot hope to participate fully in an American society in which identity and self, particularly those of minority citizens, are under constant scrutiny, if not the subject of active discrimination, without having integrated a positive cultural/ethnic identity with a coherent sense of belonging in the broader world with "others." Kal Alston conceptualizes this stage of racial identity development—a goal of ACP—in

terms of achieving increased visibility, but visibility that counters the historical visibility of Black abjection: “To remain visible, in the face of erasure, is to act against the juridical comforts of color blindness or the aesthetic comfort of assimilated familiarity [both of which Phinney (2003) identifies as eventually unsatisfying identities]. Visibility on this account is not simply a matter of allowing oneself to be an object of perception for others, but of shaping a visible subject . . . The responsibility for visibility rests with those who can work from the visible subject position, turning racial knowing and being into value and valuing anew Blackness—known, experienced, undergone, transcended, released, and celebrated” (Alston 2005, 206–7).

The ability to “work from the visible subject position” is one of the primary aims of ACP, and this gives hope for fuller participation by Black subjects in American society generally. But, first, more needs to be said about racial identity development, or the importance of constructing a positive Black identity.

When we speak of identity *construction*, we are referring to the formation of a coherent sense of self within a particular cultural matrix. Identity development may be delayed, disrupted, and derailed by many things, all of them involving complex relations between environmental factors, including family and school, and constitutional proclivities that may also have environmental correlates, for example, the cognitive and behavioral effects of malnutrition. This set of external factors includes a cultural context into which all persons are born and, in some perhaps imperceptible way, remain attached to for most of their lives. It includes intimate features, such as the character and number of one’s siblings, as well as more distal ingredients, such as geography or political conditions. The cultural context has a unique function in identity development insofar as it provides a set of relatively consistent norms and goods, deprived of which young children become vulnerable to an impoverished sense of self, including a stunted self-confidence and abiding insecurity. In the absence of a clearly circumscribed cultural set of values and practices, children become socially detached, lacking emotional stability as well as any conviction or commitment to ideals requisite to a vigorous, coherent self. Following the psychoanalytic maxim that the earlier the insult, the greater the eventual damage to the personality, it is clear that children growing up from an early age in environments lacking cultural coherence are at great risk for psychic dissonance and worse (Merry 2007). And this includes growing up in environments in which a child’s family culture, and by extension his or her mother, father, and other relations, are visibly devalued by a dominant culture. Countless Black writers have chronicled the tragedies of psychic dissonance—Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* immediately come to mind—and, in fact, some argue that this is the main subject of Black American writing (West 1996).

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African-centered pedagogy takes up these notions of cultural coherence by placing the history, culture, and identity of Black persons at the center of learning in order to engage in positive identity construction and also to address the unique challenges that African Americans face. “Cultural coherence,” as a philosophy of pedagogy, is concerned preeminently with the shaping of one’s identity by a coherent set of beliefs, practices, and values. These beliefs, practices, and values normally derive from one’s family and surrounding community, and they will aid in constituting one’s identity. Therefore, cultural coherence speaks to an alignment of an individual to the collective. Once aligned, individuals possess the capacity to construct meanings, interact with others, and make evaluative judgments. Particularly in its early stages, cultural coherence requires a restriction of information and choices, whether in the home or the school, in order not to overwhelm or disorient the agent in search of a foundation on which to construct a positive self-image but also to compare, critique, and question. Cultural coherence suggests a stable context from which to weigh alternatives as one evolves into an agent capable of making one’s own decisions in the marketplace of ideas. Stability wards off feelings of being unanchored and disoriented. Cultural coherence does not require that one have a single set of commitments, merely that a child’s emotional health be enhanced to the extent that his or her context for choice coheres with his or her family and/or community (Merry 2007).

When children, but perhaps especially cultural or ethnic minority students, begin to explore questions of identity in early adolescence, a culturally coherent framework will require that they are provided with identity-affirming experiences, positive expressions of racial identity, and information about their cultural group—which is precisely one of the core aims of African-centered schools. There one typically finds a caring community deeply committed to the nurturing, development, and academic success of Black children. Indeed, far from being a merely intellectual exercise, African-centered symbols, rituals, role modeling, and instruction have the explicit intention of centering the Black self both psychologically and spiritually (Akoto 1992; Diop 1981). By providing African American students with a safe cultural space within which they are able to express their racial identity, a separate space where they can unlearn internalized stereotypes and feel culturally anchored, African-centered schools not only hope to facilitate an important coping strategy in a racist society but also aim to improve the academic performance and social relationships of students.

Even though African-centered schools are, in practice, primarily peopled by Black people and undeniably preoccupied with “Blackness,” there is nothing in the curriculum or the underlying philosophy to suggest that separatism *per se*, or segregation outside the school, is its aim. Proponents of ACP do not reject all knowledge offered from non-African-centered perspectives. Rather,

the purview of ACP is inclusive; it accepts the best of what mainstream culture has to offer (Asante 1991; Dei 1994). Although evidence for the time being is anecdotal, African-centered teachers routinely report that they are far more inclusive of diverse cultural, historical, and literary traditions than their public or private school counterparts. Such an expansive approach suggests that ACP is entirely compatible with an education that prepares one for flourishing in a democratic society.

Yet, while ACP recognizes the need to prepare Black students with the skills and dispositions necessary for thriving in a democratic society, its more immediate aims are to “eliminate those bureaucratic and classroom practices that prevent African-American children from competing on an equal footing with their non-minority counterparts” (Leake and Leake 1992b). African-centered schools accomplish this, like other community-based schools, by supplying students with strong role models and mentors, a more culturally intimate and caring school ethos, more culturally relevant curricula, and high expectations. Further, like all-girls schools, all-women’s colleges, and most religious schools, the purpose of African-centered schools is the protection of a “vulnerable group” from violence of all sorts during essential stages of development during which students have few resources with which to combat this violence on their own. Thus, Indian children are placed at the center of instruction in Native American schools, and girls are placed at the center of instruction in all-girls schools. Provided that critical thinking and the freedom to dissent exist, pedagogical aims that entail faith claims are not necessarily cause for worry with respect to developing the capacity for democratic citizenship. Motivational descriptors such as “enlightenment,” “empowerment,” and “authentic selves” are, as we previously suggested, worthy guiding principles that inform the practices of many schools. (For example, Jewish, Islamic and Catholic schools operate according to faith claims—e.g., “God-consciousness”—that defy verification or demonstration to the uninitiated.)

Although many essentialist difficulties surround African-centered notions of culture—a point we will return to in the next section—the cultural coherence that African-centered schools endeavor to supply is not intended to be restrictive or confining; it merely provides the original context from which others are seen, understood, and appreciated. Hence, three points emerge here to underscore the importance of cultural coherence: (1) children need to identify with a particular notion of the good and possess the attendant capacity to pursue it; (2) unless choices are kept to a manageable level, there will be insufficient psychological coherence, which is necessary in shaping identity and fueling agency; (3) without an adequate level of coherence, no clear standard emerges by which one’s decisions may be evaluated. On this view, the road to “democratic citizenship” must first be paved with its psychological precursors. Consequently, schools that voluntarily separate according to gen-

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der, religion, or culture normally have as their aim to prepare students for life outside of the school. Provided that ACP entails the essential democratic features—nonrepression of reason (including the freedom to dissent), nondiscrimination, and reasonable engagement with different views in a pluralist society (see Gutmann 1999)—children in African-centered schools will have been prepared for life in a democratic society. Indeed, unlike many public and private schools in the United States that fail to do this, ACP, properly implemented, actually moves civic praxis beyond what many American children currently experience.

African-centered pedagogy already calls for higher-order thinking skills that should enable one to question even African-centered cultural bearings. That is not to say that all schools succeed in inculcating the necessary democratic dispositions, including the capacity for dissent, or the freedom to abrogate one's beliefs or identity in exchange for another. Ultimately this is an empirical question for which presently there is insufficient evidence. Consequently, on this question African-centered schools—and their students—must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Interrogating Essentialism

Finally we come to our third question, namely, does construction of an essentialist racial culture and identity in ACP compromise its mission and success? Many critics argue that ACP (and Black nationalism generally) essentializes 'Blackness'/'Africanness', romanticizes African and African American history, and elevates heterosexist, patriarchal norms to privileged heights at the expense of women,⁷ sexual minorities, and persons of mixed race (Gates 1996; hooks 1995; Irvine 2000; Ransby and Matthews 1993; West 1993). Further, ACP also stands accused of glossing over important social class distinctions among persons of African descent, lending itself to the construction and maintenance of "African tradition" as the property of the ruling classes but something that may not necessarily function to protect and recover an authentic ethnic identity (Chowdhury 1997). In other words, ACP stands accused of failing to recognize or respect the diversity of Black American experience or identity and of seeking to impose a system of "foreign" values on children, some of which (e.g., patriarchal sexism euphemistically dressed up as "gender complementarity") might be just as damaging as White racism. This habit is addressed with characteristic sharpness by bell hooks: "Many African-centered critiques trash Eurocentrism for its unitary representations of culture, the universalizing of white experience, its erasure of African ways of knowing, while constructing within these same narratives a unitary utopian representation of Africa as paradise, a motherland where all was perfect before

white imperialism brought evil and corruption. Utopian Afrocentric [*sic*] evocations of an ancient high culture of black kings and queens erase the experiences of servants and slaves in the interest of presenting contemporary black folks with superheroic models of black subjectivity” (hooks 1995, 243–44).

Undoubtedly one finds unsettling aspects in certain interpretations of ACP, including a carefully circumscribed role for women, a denigration of homosexuality and gay people, and a propensity to sponsor a very limited and noninclusive canon of “Black heroes,” that does not necessarily contribute to, and may even undermine, cultural coherence. Given the historical record of that mode of thinking generally, and for Blacks specifically, it is indeed odd that African-centrists appeal to an underlying philosophy grounded in racial and sexual essentialism. Indeed, the reenculturation process opens up a plethora of questions concerning who one is when the sanctioned definitions and ascriptions are predetermined.

Some contend that patriarchal orientations are not dictated by the underlying canon of ACP, within which a prominent place is given to historical figures like Queen Hatshepsut and to the central place of the woman—as the symbol of good character—in Yoruba cosmology. Molefi Asante writes that “the liberation of women is not an act of charity but a fundamental part of Afrocentric project. . . . It is impossible for a scholar to deal effectively with either the cultural/aesthetic or the social/behavioral concentrations without attention to the historic impact and achievement of women within the African community” (Asante and Abarry 1996, 257). Yet high principles are no guarantee against sexism, overt and covert, and some practitioners of ACP, like some practitioners of liberal arts education, are guilty of denigrating women even as they idealize all things feminine.

The very real result of an essentialized past may be the denigration of “real” Black culture. That is, the peril of championing a fictional Black culture is that only those who conform to the prescribed roles and typologies of Blackness can pass muster with those who police the boundaries of authenticity. Critics of ACP in this regard are fueled by statements such as that by one of its leading lights, Molefi Asante, who declares: “When I say that Clarence Thomas is not black I am not saying anything about his complexion or his ancestry; I am rather speaking about virtue” (2005, 215). Yet, if the logic of the African-centered story is essentially “racial” or “ethnic/cultural,” it risks being interpreted as no more than the opposite side of the coin of Whiteness, for its guiding principles will have been “formed largely within the domain assumptions of a science it opposes” (Collins 2006, 118). That is, gatekeeping the boundaries of authentic Blackness is susceptible to the same structural domination to which ACP is unconditionally opposed. The result is not only an inversion of the binaries of discourses that legitimize domination but also those who affirm Black identities that do not conform to the figured world

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of ACP risk being condemned as “selling out” or aping White norms. Guided by cultural notions reconstructed from ancient and misty origins, ACP may be a parochial instance of “structural nostalgia,” which creates a mythical past to avoid constructive dialogue with the real past, present, and future (Herzfeld 2005). Defenders of ACP, however, would doubtless point out that mainstream education is also based on various historical myths—such as equal opportunity—that do violence to Black children.

Essentialism . . . Provisionally

As we have seen, there is much in ACP, including some of its questionable historical revisionism, that is vulnerable to criticism. Even so, we do not join those who rush to caricature ACP, dismissing it as “gallant but misguided” (West 1993) while misperceiving the important aims of African-centered theory and practice. Patricia Hill Collins observes: “The deep-seated belief in the promise of Afrocentrism [*sic*] by many everyday African Americans cannot be analyzed away as false consciousness. This would only aggravate existing divisions both between Black academics and African Americans outside the academy and among Black intellectuals within higher education. Much more is at stake than questions of the logical consistency or empirical merit of Afrocentrism” (Collins 2006, 97).

On this view, ACP is a completely understandable response to “epistemic imperialist violence” and may be desirable so long as racism continues to inform many of the schooling practices available to Black children (Chowdhury 1997). Therefore, in the final analysis, even essentialism in ACP may be both unavoidable but also a needed—albeit provisional—pedagogical tactic. It is unavoidable because all identities, including White ones, possess essentialist trappings. No identities are unimagined or absent of biased historical interpretation. Indeed, whether from a socioethnic or developmental psychological perspective, the very idea of identity is essentialist by nature. Historical accuracy is important, to be sure, but equally important is the quality of the imagination in delineating personal and collective identity worth embracing. Given the smorgasbord of ephemeral identities served up by popular culture, those offered by ACP are a desirable alternative. (The same may be said of religious identities.) Essentialism may also be a needed pedagogical tactic, because its idealized cultural construction provides (in ways that public education cannot) the cultural coherence that has proven affective for emotional healing and the social-political empowerment of Black youth.⁸ A healthy Black identity development (Hall et al. 1972; Jackson 1976; Sherif and Sherif 1970; Tatum 1997) requires that one come to terms with one’s own identity status and content before attempting integration with a broader social identity.⁹

African-centered pedagogy provides an institutional structure in which this development can take place.

But the essentialism of ACP must be provisional, and this is for two reasons. First, the cultural coherence that ACP provides is not able (nor is it meant) to shelter Black children from other cultural expressions or identities, including the many ways of being Black in America and in the world. Indeed, all persons possess culturally hybrid identities, and the blending of those (hybrid) cultures leads to continual adaptation and change. Importantly, the overwhelming majority of children who graduate from African-centered primary schools move on to non-African-centered school environments, and many also do not have parents who sustain African-centered practices in the home. Indeed, one of the biggest challenges that teachers in African-centered schools face, particularly in poor neighborhoods, is the general lack of correspondence between the culture of the home/neighborhood and that of the school. In other words, cultural coherence may only exist within the walls of the school and not beyond. Consequently, teachers and staff struggle to maintain a notion of Black identity and culture that may not correspond well with the notions of identity and culture that children and their parents confront on a daily basis.

As we stated earlier, the development of the psychological resources important to healthy identity can be liberating, but these resources might also turn out to be ineffective for facing unforeseen challenges. The worth of an African-centered education, then, will be measured in how well it prepares its students to leave the sheltered environment in which they have been educated. This necessarily includes a cultural anchoring for vigorous and healthy identity development but also for critical thinking skills that should be at the heart of any liberal democratic education worth its name. These skills are vital for developing in children the capacities to examine the uses of the mass media to depict the plight of the dispossessed in Darfur (and numerous other places throughout Africa) but also in the United States (witness Katrina-devastated New Orleans), as well as the machinations of the global economy that threaten to destabilize African cultures more than colonialism ever did. Finally, these critical thinking capacities must also enable students to question the core beliefs and habits inculcated in an African-centered school. In other words, if ACP is true to its own objectives in fostering higher- and lower-order thinking skills, there will be no indoctrination.

The second reason why essentialism must be provisional is this. The Black identities ACP fosters may minimize the fact that many Black youth have sufficient agency to create their own viable and valuable identities and communities. Ironically, then, African-centered schools provide a haven within which Black youth can create themselves, though perhaps not in the image imagined in ACP, which, after all, may not be “culturally relevant” to the experience of Black youth. Rather than seeking in every instance to replace

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the cultural contributions that Black youth have to offer, proponents of ACP would do well to consider the alternate cultural experiences that Black youth express and have reason to value (Gingwright 2004; Ladson-Billings 1994, 1995). Doing so will help proponents of ACP avoid the trappings of identity politics, that is, collective agendas swallowing up individual expression but also the habit of downplaying important social class and sexual differences that agitate against uniform cultural identities.

There is no point in denying that certain personalities and trends within African American culture risk reproducing the kind of misrecognition upon which relations of dominance rest, that is, through an essentialized and exclusionary Black identity. Yet, given the strength of institutional racism and the way that it perniciously structures residential patterns, hiring decisions, and educational opportunity, we must again stress that an essentialized—albeit provisional—discourse that valorizes Black culture and identity as a means of providing empowerment and hope for the future may not be as ill advised as many think. Again, Collins notes (2006, 119–20): “Despite its problematic treatment of gender, economic class, and sexuality, Afrocentrism [*sic*] remains important to both Black men and women. In a climate of institutionalized racism that valorizes Whiteness, Afrocentrism offers an affirmation of Blackness, a love ethic directed toward Black people. In this sense, it reaches out to everyday African American women and men in ways lost to even the best academic antiracist, feminist, Marxist, or postmodern social theories. While sociology provides knowledge and postmodernism stresses tools of critique, Afrocentrism offers hope.”

Critics who charge that ACP is merely another foolhardy attempt to unite a disparate people may have a short-term view of things. The hope that ACP offers is as much a political project as an intellectual one. Yet, as African-centered schools continue to grow, they will have little choice but to engage with alternate readings of the past and present. Doing so will not only determine their contemporary viability but also chart their future.

Conclusion

In this essay we have seen that African-centered proponents reject both the suggestion that Blacks need Whites in order to have a quality education and the counsel of educated Black elite who beckon others to emulate their “miseducated ways” (Carruthers 1994; Woodson 1933/1998). Rather, African centrists champion a different vision, one of cultural congruity and holistic learning, where schools promote processes of self-rediscovery and reintegration into a community whence the understanding of that self derives. The goal that drives ACP is not only a more integrated, centered self but also more successful

academic outcomes—and thus more life chances and opportunities—for Black children. Consequently, while African-centered schools are not the only means of combating psychic dissonance in the Black community, they are rightly perceived by many to be a radical departure from the conventional approaches used to address Black underachievement, in more ways than simply denying as necessary the presence of White students or personnel.

In the main, there is already much that African-centered schools do well. These include building character, pride, and self-respect; facilitating meaningful and purposeful activities; and fostering personal and collective responsibility and solidarity. Many African-centered schools appear to be building coalitions with community leaders, church groups, and businesses, though certainly more work is needed to bring the aims of ACP into the community and families of some children. It is worth noting that most of these innovations, such as small class sizes, strong teacher-student relationships, and active parental support, have well-documented positive effects on student learning, and most are extremely lacking in the “integrated” public schools that most Black children attend. Perhaps most important in the era of *No Child Left Behind*, there is some evidence to suggest that a number of African-centered schools are raising not only Black self-awareness and determination but also Black academic achievement to impressive levels (Binder 2000; Kifano 1996; Pollard and Ajirofutu 2000; Span 2002; Teicher 2006). This is highly relevant given the decreasing number of African Americans entering the teaching profession generally¹⁰ and the chronic dearth of adequate preservice training that equips teachers with the pedagogical skills to effectively educate Black youth (Irvine 2000; Kunjufu 2004; Lee 1992; Lynn 2006).¹¹

Still, unitary tropes that underlie some conceptions of ACP, particularly those which “reinscribe patterns of domination rather than disrupt or alter them” (hooks 1995, 244) need to be interrogated. So must undifferentiated notions of culture. This goes to the heart of power and control, namely, who has the ability to authenticate expressions of Blackness. Although no doubt a painful business for some, the liberating effects for others are immeasurable. African-centered pedagogy’s mission must not lose sight of “[revolutionizing] the system toward the promise of democracy” if it is to avoid lapsing into a quaint form of tribalism, one modeled on patriarchal ideas and behavioral norms. As such, its organizing principles must not harden into dogma but must remain fluid and multifaceted, rather like the “multiple subjectivities” of Black people. Such openness will better facilitate dialogue as well as solidarity with others in common cause against oppression wherever it manifests itself, including within the Black community. Finally, ACP must not fail to acknowledge that the problems facing African Americans are not merely cultural, behavioral, and psychological (Ransby and Matthews 1993).

Continually reexamining how best to conceptualize ACP need not threaten

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its core principles; many of these, including *ma'at*, will remain, though they will be interpreted anew. (So, e.g., sexism within certain conceptions of ACP will likely fall away as more and more women play important leadership roles in African-centered schools.) As a result, ACP may evolve into a more expansive understanding of African and African American culture, one that is inclusive of many ways of cultivating and experiencing Blackness. Such expansiveness is consistent with the core aims of ACP but also with a more comprehensive embrace of humanity. That is, ACP, and the practices that flow from this story, are not destined to employ the same essentialist racial logic that guarantees the existing relations of domination. Yet the meaning of Blackness—including, as hip-hop artists come under greater scrutiny, what Black people themselves are permitted to say—continues to be hotly contested terrain, as Michael Dyson (2006, 37) reminds us:

There is a larger question at stake for the advocates of complex black identity: Does this notion of blackness honor the variability and multiplicity of black identity, and does it account for the contradictions and conflicts, and the good and bad, that characterize black life? Black folk have often avoided such complexity because destructive white stereotypes of black identity have been so widely disseminated. We are loath to expose ugly dimensions of black life to a white public that is often hungry for confirmation of black pathology while failing to see the same problems in its own backyard. Black culture has, therefore, become fixed with defining black identity; only the positive, redeeming and virtuous will do. That's understandable, but still shortsighted and, on occasion, needlessly defensive.

Defensiveness is certainly one way of reading ACP, particularly when blind faith in the powers of integration continues to hold such rhetorical sway. But suppose that we could imagine a different world, one in which institutional racism—and responses to it, such as ACP—diminishes over time? In this imaginary future, the system has indeed been revolutionized and Black Americans, irrespective of social class, are constructing, maintaining, and effectively participating in democratic schools. They are no longer disaffected by, or socially excluded from, an educational system that fails to promote their interests. In such a future, constructed essentialist Black identities would not disappear but would likely become ancillary to the aims of African-centered schools, perhaps even making them obsolete. They would become obsolete because all African Americans would attend schools that deliver on the “promise of democracy.” In other words, the noted benefits that African-centered schools supply—which, again, they share in common with other successful community-based schools—will not require an essentialist justification for their *raison d'être* will have transcended race.

Notes

1. A comment about our choice of vocabulary. For this study, we will use “African American” and “Black” interchangeably, and we do so for the following reasons. First, while “African American” has more prominently described Black Americans of African ancestry in the past 20 years, the historical significance of African-centered education clearly implies a Black-White binary, notwithstanding the fact that “Black” admits of multiple culturally, ethnically, and/or politically constructed definitions and ascriptions. Second, while African-centered pedagogy makes an important contribution to the meanings of Whiteness and may even transform the consciousness of White people and other individuals of color, the *raison d’être* of African-centered schools is to promote positive culturally based identities, strong self-image, self-respect, and self-empowerment, and academic achievement and social responsibility toward the African American community, particularly in Black children.

2. See “Reality Check 2006: How Black and Hispanic Families Rate Their Schools,” http://www.publicagenda.org/research/research_reports_details.cfm?list=98.

3. By *culture*, we mean the collective interaction of behavioral patterns, habits, attitudes, beliefs, and modes of interaction, all of which intermingle and inform a person’s outlook. Culture informs how we experience the world and respond to phenomena. Culture provides us with systems of meaning whence we derive some normative guidance concerning what we ought to believe and how we ought to behave and interact with others. Culture consciously or unconsciously structures our experiences and perception and is highly relevant to how we learn and understand and to how we relate to others and feel ourselves to be a member of a single group or a variety of groups.

4. Peter Murrell defines pedagogy as “a system of practices that includes systematic, culturally-situated, historically grounded reflection and action of the teacher regarding the lives, experiences, intellectual heritage, and cultural legacy of children, their families, and the communities from which they come” (2002, xxii).

5. Parents select African-centered schools today for many of the same reasons that others choose different types of community-based schools. Chiefly, they desire a strong culturally-based education, one centered on the values and principles of ACP. Yet they also care about (1) academic excellence, (2) safety, (3) discipline, (4) a perceived lack of values or sense of community in their neighborhood public schools, and (5) a desire to see a greater correspondence between the values of the home and those of the school (Pollard and Ajitutu 2000; Ratteray and Shujaa 1987).

6. There is, in fact, an important literature that contends that Black children in general do not suffer from low self-esteem (Fine 1991; Irvine 1990, 2000; Mickelson 1990); others argue that self-esteem derives from academic success and not the other way around (Kohn 1994).

7. Although in reference to her experience with the Black Panther Political Party and not African-centered schools, the words of Angela Davis poignantly capture the sexism within her own Black Nationalist movement. She writes: “I became acquainted very early with the widespread presence of an unfortunate syndrome among some Black male activists—namely to confuse their political activity with an assertion of their maleness. They saw—and some continue to see—Black manhood as something separate from Black womanhood. These men view Black women as a threat to their attainment of manhood—especially those Black women who take initiative and work to become leaders in their own right. The constant harangue [I received] was that I needed to redirect my energies and use them to give my man strength and inspiration so that he might more effectively contribute his talents to the struggle for Black lib-

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eration" (1974, 161). Elsewhere she writes: "I [grew] tired of men who measured their sexual height by women's intellectual genuflection" (ibid., 187). For another feminist critique of the Black Panther experience, also see Brown (1992).

8. Ladson-Billings notes of a visit to an African-centered school on the East Coast: "I was amazed at the sheer number of students in attendance who had previously been identified by traditional public schools as mentally, emotionally, or learning disabled. Of course, in this setting it was virtually impossible to distinguish the formerly "labeled" children because they were performing on par with the other students" (2000, 193).

9. Jackson referred to four distinct stages: (1) passive acceptance, in which Blacks unwittingly accept White norms, including assumptions about Black people; (2) active resistance, which normally entails a complete rejection of all things White; (3) redirection, in which it is recognized that energy spent reacting to White racism is energy wasted; rather, a person's energies are reoriented to focus on positive goals, values, traditions, and behaviors; (4) internalization, in which Black individuals integrate their sense of Blackness with other aspects of themselves, including sexuality, role identities, and spirituality. Stage 4 represents a deeper understanding of self that requires no validation from others for one's feelings, thoughts, or actions. Internalization also entails a move toward coalition building with others committed to fighting oppression in all of its forms. See Jackson (1976), 28–45.

10. We do not wish to enter into the dispute over whether Black teachers are uniquely qualified to teach Black children. Opinions vary on this, even within African-centered schools. However, we believe that Jacqueline Jordan Irvine's research on cultural compatibility/synchronization speaks well to this. Without comment, we quote her thus: "African American teachers have often served as role models and parents surrogates for African American students. [Also], they often bring to their classrooms beliefs in the efficacy of African American children, an ability to communicate with them, and the use of culturally relevant pedagogical strategies" (2000, 22). And elsewhere: "African American teachers demonstrate unique African American teaching styles that appear to be related to African American students' culture; hence, they facilitate their achievement and school success" (ibid., 207).

11. While some internal improvements have been made (particularly through Sankofa Institute), Carol Lee's description from more than 15 years ago remains largely true today: "Mainstream university teacher training programs, on the whole, do not prepare teachers to be responsive to diverse cultural concerns in their instruction" (1992, 164).

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