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**Kevin Michael Foster**

# GODS OR VERMIN: ALTERNATIVE READINGS OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE AMONG AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

*This article draws upon Black intellectual history and upon my experiences with Black students on a predominantly White university campus to show how, within the context of a specific community, African-descended students seize upon different ideas about the African American experience in order to promote their academic strivings. I focus on two divergent readings of African Americans' past that are rhetorically deployed by different groups of academically successful students. The first reading of the African American past is prevalent among those whom I refer to as race-conscious high achievers—African American students who embody and discursively reproduce a historically rooted ideology of Black uplift that motivates them in their quest for high grades. The second reading of the African American past is prevalent among those whom I refer to as ethnic-conscious high achievers—African students who draw an ethnic distinction between African Americans and themselves and who use stereotypes about African Americans as the foil against which they construct themselves as academic strivers. The fact that both of these idealized groups locate themselves within the Black student community even as they hold disparate views of African Americans' intellectual legacy points to the community's complexity as well as to its malleability as a conceptual tool in the hands of those who consider themselves members.*

*KEYWORDS: higher education, racial uplift, student achievement, college ethnography, African students, African American students*

> Whether deliberately or not, individual or group memory selects certain landmarks of the past—places, artworks, dates; persons, public or private, well known or obscure, real or imagined—and invests them with symbolic and political significance.
>
> —*History and Memory in African American Culture* (Fabre and O'Meally 1994:7)

> What persuades men and women to mistake each other for gods or vermin is ideology.
>
> —Ideology (Eagleton 1991:xiii)

Self-identified Black student communities exist on predominantly White university campuses across the United States (Feagin et al. 1996). Popular writings about such groups of Black students often consider them as a monolithic mass, whereby they are reduced to a few convenient descriptors (such as separatist or anti-intellectual) or discussed in terms of specific controversial policies (such as affirmative action admissions or admissions according to high school class rank). Less often acknowledged is the diversity of perspectives and experiences among Black students on any given campus.

This essay draws upon Black intellectual history and upon my experiences with Black students on a predominantly White university campus to contribute to a more diverse portrait of Black student communities. I describe two divergent readings of African Americans' past that coexist among high-achieving Black students in the Black student community on my subject campus. While both readings are rooted in the experiences of Black people, and both provide intellectual and moral support for students' academic striving, they nonetheless diverge in important ways. By identifying and discussing these coexistent readings of African Americans' cultural and intellectual legacy, I undermine simplistic analyses of student life that reduce complex communities to undifferentiated pools of mediocrity. In the conclusion to this article, I address the policy implications of this work and call for more pointed research into the ideological transmission of academic values among students.

For analytical purposes, but also as a reflection of several students' self-identification, I describe two ideal type groups of high-achieving students, both of which are participants in a Black student community on my subject campus.[1] One group is composed of ethnic-conscious high achievers, the second of race-conscious high achievers. In both cases, high-achieving Black students ignore some similarities and differences among Black students while embracing others in order to priv-

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ilege self-conceptions that promote their academic strivings.

Of course, not all high-achieving Black students fall into these convenient groups; nor do these groups represent discrete units with rigid boundaries and rules for inclusion. Rather, I put forth race-conscious high achievers and ethnic-conscious high achievers as ideal types in the classic Weberian sense; they are conceptual tools that reflect, but can never fully capture, specific realities.[2] They are "useful for the analysis of collective meanings, ideas and values, which can be related to socio-structural conditions in general terms in a way which [sic] retains elements of both the objective and subjective meaning of the cognitive elements studied, but which in no way assume that knowledge (for actors) can be defined in purely logical terms" (Hamilton 1974:95). As such, ideal types constitute a useful way to make sense of some of the range of similarities and differences that are present in the thinking and actions of high-achieving students within the specific Black student community that I studied.

The first group of academic high achievers I describe is composed of race-conscious high achievers. These African American students participate in the Black student community and, as an important component of that participation, maintain, embody, and discursively reproduce a historically rooted ideology of Black racial uplift and an accompanying characterization of African Americans as a people who strive and thrive against all odds. This ideology and this characterization, which are traced to the writings and practices of a long line of post–Civil War Black thinkers, are motivating factors in the students' quest for high grades.

The second group I describe is composed of ethnic-conscious high achievers. These are first- or second-generation African immigrants who also consider themselves members of the Black student community, but who view U.S.-born African Americans as a distinct ethnic group with an identifiable set of cultural norms and values. As they operate within the Black student community context, ethnic-conscious high achievers maintain, embody, and discursively reproduce distinctions that they use to differentiate themselves from African Americans. These students also draw upon historically rooted characterizations and a well-developed ideology—in this case characterizing U.S.-born African Americans as underperforming in academic arenas, and constructing themselves in opposition to that ascribed identity. Their characterizations of underperforming African Americans are resonant with a pejorative tradition (Valentine 1968) that makes significant use of damage imagery (Scott 1997) to describe the plight and cultural norms of African Americans. This pejorative tradition has been codified in the work of a range of scholars, including the late sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, who characterized African Americans as pathological and disorganized (1939, 1949, 1957), and more recently, the linguist John McWhorter, who has characterized African American students in general as anti-intellectual, self-defeating, and obsessed with maintaining victim status in society (2000a, 2000b). Other scholars, most notably the late educational anthropologist John Ogbu (1974, 1987, 1990, 1994), have made more subtle use of damage imagery, arguing that African Americans, as a cultural group, are unprepared to take advantage of educational opportunities afforded them because their experience as an involuntary minority has resulted in the adaptation of norms, attitudes, and behaviors that are maladaptive to the educational setting. For African students who accept and discursively reproduce such ideas, African Americans are the foil against which they construct themselves as academic strivers.

Both the race-conscious and the ethnic-conscious high achievers operate within the context of the Black student community, and both use information available therein to negotiate and reinforce norms and values that support their academic strivings. As each group adheres to different readings of the African American past and present, the extent to which the readings are true or not according to others' judgments is not as important as their resonance within the group. As these mutually exclusive narratives hold sway among different members of the Black student community, they point simultaneously to the complexity of that community and to its malleability as a motivational tool in the academic lives of those who consider themselves members.

The basis for the argument presented in this article is my experience with Black students on the campus of Midwestern University (a pseudonym), a large, predominantly White university with roughly 1,200 Black students in a student body of over 35,000. Over the course of nine years at Midwestern, I functioned at different times as a peer, tutor, mentor, instructor, and friend to members of a self-identified Black student community. During my last year on campus, I conducted ethnographic research on the norms and values that exist within that community, especially as those norms and values relate to academic achievement.

My research included open-ended interviews with students who considered themselves members of the Black student community, as well as attendance at meetings and events sponsored by predominantly Black student organizations. On some occasions, I received permission from the leadership of Black student organizations to conduct group discussions during their regularly scheduled meetings. During such discussions, I would try to learn the members' thoughts about academics as well as how they acted upon those thoughts.



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In addition to the time with groups of students, time spent talking with and observing individual high-achieving students was crucial to my work. I identified such students in a variety of ways. One way was to ask other professors on campus if they had any strong Black students in their classes and, if so, if they would introduce me to them. Another way I identified students was to go to areas where students often sat and studied on campus—common areas in libraries, courtyards, dorm lounges, and elsewhere—and initiate conversations with Black students who were studying there. When I met such students, I would ask such questions as whether they spent time with other Black students, and if there was a Black student community and, if so, whether they considered themselves members. Preliminary questions helped established the extent to which students participated in a community of Black students.

Another way in which I identified academic high achievers was to attend predominantly Black events on campus, initiate conversations there, and simply ask attendees who they thought some of the strongest Black students were. Within the context of a relatively small Black student population, such conversations helped me learn of consensus high achievers—that is, students who were widely regarded among other Black students as academically strong. From these conversations, I was able to locate many students who expected and were experiencing what could reasonably be considered academic success.

As a final introductory note, it is worth noting that by academically successful students I refer to those whose cumulative grade point averages were 3.0 or better as documented by honor rolls provided by the Dean of Students Office, the Athletic Department, or other curricular or extracurricular programs on campus. This use of a GPA measure of academic achievement is convenient, but not wholly satisfactory. It does not take into account the experience of students with exceptional demands upon their time, such as student-athletes, students who work in paid employment, or students who arrive on campus with poor academic training from secondary schools. For such students, academic success might reasonably be argued to include never having been on scholastic probation, maintaining a 2.5 GPA while working, or making steady progress toward graduation. Nonetheless, for present purposes, the 3.0 GPA cutoff serves well as a widely accepted measure of academic distinction.

## PART I. GODS (THE RACIAL UPLIFT DISCOURSE)

> [T]he intellectuals were the "social guides," morally upright and informed citizens, the best! Racial oppression had fostered a strong sense of community among the various social strata in black America, and talented blacks unquestioningly accepted a responsibility to aid or speak on behalf of unlettered blacks.
>
> —*Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in American Life* (Banks 1996:47)

Midwestern University's race-conscious high achievers continue an uplift tradition that was expressed through the writings of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Black intellectuals such as Booker T. Washington, in his autobiography, *Up from Slavery* (Meier 1969, Washington 1995[1901]), but that can be traced back to enslaved Africans' secret societies (DiSilva 2002). This tradition includes (1) connecting education with racial uplift, (2) conceptualizing educational attainment as a responsibility of those Blacks for whom that is a possibility, and (3) a commitment to socially conservative habits and high standards of personal comportment (Foster 1997, Banks 1996, Brown 1995[1941], Giddings 1984). African Americans who promulgated this tradition, and who subsequently came to be known as race men or race women, include many teachers and academics whose journeys through the American educational system included first taking on and then passing on messages of racial responsibility and of racial uplift through education (Devitis and Rich 1996, Lewis 1993, Washington 1995[1901]). For many, including Mary McLeod Bethune, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Anna Julia Cooper, St. Claire Drake, W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Carter G. Woodson, the commitment to racial uplift included a practice of founding schools or building centers that promoted Black advancement through research and practical intervention. What one scholar referred to as the "twin pillars of individual mobility and service to the group" (Banks 1996:64) and what another referred to as "the upwardly mobile achievement ethic" (Giddings 1984:243) characterized their lives.

But even as I describe those aspects of the uplift philosophy that would cast race men and women as wholly altruistic, it is important to temper the discussion by pointing out some specific complexities of the tradition and philosophy—complexities that give rise to the important notion that for elite African Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to adhere to a philosophy of uplift was also to serve oneself in important ways. In his analysis of the uplift tradition among African Americans, historian Kevin Gaines (1996) argues that by affirming a mission to uplift not only oneself but also lower classes of African Americans, many elite African Americans affirmed for themselves not only a sense of purpose but also a sense



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of (relatively) high status in a society that would otherwise deny them recognition. This sense of purpose, for many of the race men and women, was unfortunately and unavoidably bound to prevailing American sentiments about civilizing primitive peoples. The emergent idea was not simply that more fortunate Blacks would be helping out the less fortunate, but rather that civilized Blacks would be bringing the rest of the race out of moral depravity. The affirmation of status, for these same race men and women, was subsequently built upon the distinction drawn between the civilized elite (themselves) and the ignorant masses.

## THE RACIAL UPLIFT DISCOURSE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS AT MIDWESTERN

Among the Black students at Midwestern, some traditional features of the racial uplift ideology, such as the drive to maintain Black schools and institutions, receive less emphasis. Other ideas, such as that of personal and group empowerment through education, remain evident in Black students' actions, as does their commitment to, in students' vernacular, "represent" the race and themselves through exemplary academic performance. Some are taught this legacy through their participation in local chapters of Black fraternities or sororities, which in this regard serve as transmitters of Black cultural memory. At Midwestern, these include sororities Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, and Zeta Phi Beta, and fraternities Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, and Phi Beta Sigma. As they memorize the names and deeds of founders and other notable members of their respective groups, they insert themselves into a line of "great men" and "great women," with the expectation that they will carry on that legacy of accomplishment and distinction. Other Black students are connected to an uplift ideology through their participation in predominantly Black professional organizations. These include chapters of NSBL (the National Student Business League, which was started by Booker T. Washington), NABJ (the National Association of Black Journalists), and NSBE (the National Society of Black Engineers). Additional organizations, whose histories do not extend as far back in time but are also critical in passing on a racial uplift ideology, include the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) and the Black Student Alliance (BSA). Finally, many Black students are taught the racial uplift ideology through course offerings of the Midwestern University Center for African and African American Studies. The Black Power Movement, Introduction to African American Culture, African American History, and The Literature of the Color Line are among the courses that explore different facets of the racial uplift tradition.

Even as it exists amidst a chorus of pejorative allegations, disparagement, and calumny about African Americans (Drake 1980, Long 1988), the Black intellectual tradition that looks to examples from the past to promote African American hard work and educational attainment today is not simply feel-good talk, as some argue (McWhorter 2000a), although it can promote a sense of racial pride (Schomburg 1992[1925]). The tradition also incorporates self-criticism (DuBois 1978). Carter G. Woodson's hard-hitting criticisms in *Mis-education of the Negro* (1990[1933]) and Malcolm X's famous question "Who taught you to hate yourself?" (1992[1972]) were aimed squarely at Black people, but offered in the context of affective and empowering messages of uplift in response to trials.

Nonetheless, at Midwestern, behaviors that threaten to undermine academics are present within the Black student community—a reality that is acknowledged by many Black students in conversation. Soul Night (a weekly campus party sponsored by the African American Culture Committee [AACC]), pledging Black fraternities or sororities, and participation in intercollegiate sporting events are activities that both characterize segments of the Black student community and often derail academics. But simply attending parties, joining organizations, or attending sporting events does not automatically bespeak a collective disparagement of academics. With the exception of those Black male athletes who report that they attend college solely for the opportunity to compete in elite athletics (Foster 2001), the self-selection process involved in choosing to go to college indicates a positive academic inclination to a much greater degree than it is evidence of anti-intellectualism.

Concerning the diversity of perspective that is present within Midwestern's Black student community, one registered student organization in particular undermines stereotypes about community-wide Black pathology and provides an example of the connection that positive, race-conscious African American students draw between racial responsibility and academic achievement. According to annual polling by the AACC, SAAB is the most highly esteemed organization within the Black student community. It is organized around the academic achievement and proactive community involvement of its members. Members wear professional attire to meetings, coordinate study halls to support one another's academic aspirations, tutor local high school students, and are expected to maintain a high GPA, both for themselves and as examples to other Black students. An important ideal the group embodies is that of self-critical reflection as integral to improving oneself and one's community.



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A program SAAB organized in the wake of a recent campus controversy is typical of their work, and of their embodiment of the ideas of earlier Black thinkers. When a Midwestern professor publicly pronounced that Black and Hispanic students were systematic underachievers whose cultures did not value academics, SAAB responded by organizing a forum titled "Was Professor ____ Right? Are We Achieving or Falling Short?: A Forum Discussing the Issues Underlying ____'s Comments."

No predominantly White organization was prepared to ask such questions head-on. Nor would it have been within the range of competence of a non–predominantly Black organization to do so. Rather, since the professor's remarks challenged their values and their presence on campus, Black students were required to either work through this issue for themselves or ignore it. However, the comments were difficult to ignore because they were a popular topic of discussion and coverage in the school and city newspapers, on the evening news, and in other local and national media outlets. To the extent that Black students were compelled to deal with the implications of the professor's comments, the Black student community was an appropriate arena for discussion.

Led by SAAB, several members of the Black student community participated in an evening discussion that, according to the coordinators, focused on "introspection and analysis."

> It is the intention of SAAB to convert the progressive energy that surrounded the anti-____ rally into a proactive response that focuses on meaningful dialogue. There is little doubt that ____ is ignorant and/or racist, BUT is there any truth to his comments? The Black community has responded with indignation and outrage, but maybe we need to channel some of our energy and efforts into introspection and analysis.

SAAB's program operated in subtle contrast to a larger event that was staged by a group of students that included few Black undergraduates. Outsiders to the undergraduate Black student community staged a protest and rally against campus racism that included national speakers who had flown in for the occasion, along with several local speakers. SAAB responded differently. They briefly acknowledged the "ignorance of others" as no more than a segue to self-directed questions about academic performance in the Black student community and how, as a community, to work toward the success of Midwestern's Black students.

The words of Franz Fanon echo in their activities, especially where, in *The Wretched of the Earth,* he states,

> Self-criticism has been much talked about of late, but few people realize that it is an African institution. Whether in the [village assemblies] of northern Africa, or in the meetings of western Africa, tradition demands that the quarrels which [sic] occur in a village should be settled in public. It is communal self-criticism of course, and with a note of humor, because everybody is relaxed, and because in the last resort we all want the same things. But the more the intellectual imbibes the atmospheres of the people, the more he abandons the habits of calculation, of unwonted silence, of mental reservations, and shakes off the spirit of concealment. And it is true that already at that level we can say that the community triumphs, and that it spreads its own light and its own reason. (1963:47–48)

In addition to SAAB's members, other participants in the Black student community conceive of race consciousness in what I am calling a positive sense—viewing the larger Black community as a source of inspiration and motivation, and their academic success as a personal responsibility. Such students cite a sense of responsibility to family, to those who came before them (elders and ancestors), to Black fraternities or sororities, to Black teammates, or to the Black community broadly conceived, as sources of academic motivation. For example, Renee, an honors business student who delivered the 2000 commencement address for the College of Business, was an exemplary student whose attitude was typical of positive, race-conscious achievers. According to Renee, "It might sound conceited, but people on campus know me—Black people [students] and White administrators; I have to represent, because I am a role model." Renee's sense of responsibility was also a source of motivation. It compelled her to look beyond herself and to see her efforts in terms of their potential impact upon the Black student community as a whole. Renee's sense of responsibility was manifest in at least two ways. One was in providing an example to other Black students—being, as she put it, a role model. The second was in demonstrating to White administration the Black capacity for achievement. Finally, for students like Renee, academic achievement functions as a sign of dedication to the Black community.

As they connect academic achievement to community commitment, students who might otherwise be labeled as "nerds," à la the Urkel character from the television sitcom *Family Matters* or Carlton from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (Ladson-Billings 2001), earn respect and status in the Black student community. This respect is further assured if the students associate with Black student organizations that are known for the academic focus of their members. Consistent with findings



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from other studies, the extent to which high achievers also enjoy high status in the community is often connected to the extent and breadth of their extracurricular involvement (Flores-Gonzalez 1999).

Among the groups that operate within the context of Midwestern's Black student community, the concept of being a race person corresponds with the ideals of a number of groups, but with none more than the stated ideals of SAAB and of Midwestern's Black fraternities and sororities. The language of the historically Black fraternities, for instance, is rife with references to racial responsibility and leadership, even as it is less often reflected in their actions. The rhetoric is powerful and readily available to those who choose to embody its language. Language associated with Alpha Phi Alpha is typical of the organizations generally:

> Achievement is one of the hallmarks of being an Alpha brother. From the beginnings of this organization, Alpha Phi Alpha has stressed that Alpha men were to strive to be the cream of American society, while making efforts to improve the lots of African Americans. (Ross 2000:9)

Indeed, most of the high achievers who were upperclassmen and women were also members of historically Black fraternities or sororities (Foster 2001).

Yet while some members of the Black fraternities and sororities embody a lived commitment to racial responsibility and high academic standards, others embody traits that mirror stereotypes of White fraternities—priding themselves in the parties they throw and the men or women they seduce. Some personally embody high academic standards but draw no connections to the larger community. For instance, in discussing the relationship between academics and fraternity life, one Kappa explained,

> We expect you to be academically strong before we take you in. If somebody is borderline, what are they going to bring to the organization? Keeping up your grades is an expectation. Either you are material or you are not. How do we say it? Be on the hoes, be on the books and come with your gear. That is how to put it.

When asked, "Do Greeks send messages to other Black students?" this Kappa went on to say, "Greeks influence, but at the same time, when you are in college you should be at a higher level of thinking. As far as academics, we don't send that. We send messages about how to dress, how to get on girls."

So within the groups that proclaim a strong sense of racial history, there are multiple ideas about the quest for community status—for instance, striving to "be on the books," "be on the hoes," or be on both simultaneously.

At Midwestern, a group of Black students who more consistently adhere to a positive, race-conscious ideology and perform accordingly are Black female athletes (Foster 2003b). Because of their demanding training and competition schedules, as well as the designs of the athletic department, Black female athletes do not as often interact directly with other members of the Black student community, but are nonetheless visible to the community and generally held in high esteem. As they perform in classrooms, on fields of competition, and in athletic department–mandated community service projects, they are taught and operate with tenets that are consistent with and grounded in race consciousness. Finally, to a large extent their race consciousness is further grounded in a racialized gender consciousness. The traditional myth of the superwoman—where the Black woman can, and is indeed expected to, be the savior of and example to the race—supports academic motivation and success (Foster 2003b, Wallace 1979).

Through interaction with Black peers, counselors, and coaches, Black female athletes are taught to (1) connect education to personal empowerment; (2) expect to be successful in a wide range of endeavors, including sports and academics; and (3) embody high standards of personal comportment. The combination of a sport-derived work ethic and an uplift ideology has led Black female athletes to become among the most successful groups of students on campus—with numerous sports-related accolades as well as a graduation rate that routinely exceeds that of the student body as a whole (NCAA 2001).

As a final note about the positive race-conscious achievement ethic that resonates among many members of Midwestern's Black student community, it is important to point out that even as several Black students rhetorically support an ideology of race-conscious high achievement, this is not to say that all of them adhere to high academic standards themselves. As Ogbu points out, even students who grant esteem to others based on their academic achievement may fail to behave in ways that result in their own academic success (1994). So the point here is not that all students adhere to a specific set of norms in their own lives, but that when high achievement is connected to an ideology of positive racial consciousness, community participation is conducive to academic success.

## PART II. VERMIN (THE USE OF DAMAGE IMAGERY TO IMAGINE THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PAST)

> Black America today is analogous to a wonderful person prevented by insecurities from seeing the good in themselves. Insecurity has sad masochistic effects—the talented actor who abuses drugs and dies early; the bright beautiful woman who finds



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> herself only able to develop romantic attraction to heartless men . . . the race driven by self-hate and fear to spend more time inventing reasons to cry "racism" than working to be the best it can be. Victimology, in a word, is a disease. . . . Victimology is today nothing less than a keystone of cultural blackness.
>
> —*Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (McWhorter 2000b:29, 36)

Along with a historically rooted uplift ideology that motivates several Black students, a competing tradition proves motivational to another group of students who locate themselves within the Black student community. This tradition is built upon notions of U.S.-born African Americans as unprepared or unwilling to take advantage of educational opportunities afforded them. At Midwestern, this tradition is most prominently reflected in the attitudes of many African students but is present among a range of Black students, including West Indians and U.S.-born African Americans.

While stereotypes of Blacks' laziness and intellectual failings are connected to a legacy of White supremacy that lies at the core of this nation's development, similar themes have been continually reproduced and modified by Blacks themselves. In making sense of this legacy and using it to their own ends, Midwestern's African students participate in a pejorative tradition that has been codified by succeeding generations of Black scholars. A widely read academic rendering of the commonsense argument about African Americans' academic deficiencies comes from the late educational anthropologist John Ogbu (Foster 2004). Similar arguments written for a popular audience come from linguist John McWhorter. The most influential rendering comes from the late sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, whom anthropologist Charles Valentine credited as establishing a pejorative tradition in race and class analyses that, via Daniel Moynihan and others, has carried enormous influence in the formation of U.S. domestic policy (Valentine 1968, Moynihan 1965).

While Frazier's ideas are well known among anthropologists, sociologists, and Black studies scholars, they are seldom cited by recent thinkers whose ideas so clearly resonate with his analyses. According to Frazier, the legacy of the masses of African Americans can be understood only in relation to the daunting task of adapting to one set of tragic circumstances after another. As a result of (1) the transatlantic slave trade, which caused a break from Africans' past and their cultures, (2) North American slavery, during which time the masses of African Americans developed a sustainable if primitive folk culture, and (3) the Great Migration, after which African Americans' folk culture disintegrated in the face of life in urban slums, the masses of African Americans were now (circa 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s) living in a deplorable state of health, material status, and moral decay (Baker 1998; Frazier 1939, 1949, 1957). Behind Frazier's scholarly production was the idea that as the material and moral condition of African Americans was growing progressively worse, it was the duty of African American intellectuals to face this fact head-on in their analyses and discussions (Foster 1997, Scott 1997). Even though the impulse that drove Frazier's work is laudable, the language of his works was sensational and value laden, and to many ears insulted African Americans (Valentine 1968). Owing more to his hyperbole than his content, Frazier's work has influenced generations of policymakers whose proposals have been based on the assessment of African Americans as deeply, if not hopelessly, pathological (Dillard 2001).

Several decades after Frazier, John Ogbu introduced a caste theory to describe what he saw as minorities' anemic academic and professional attainment and to describe the "negative psychological adaptation of involuntary minorities" (in this case, African Americans whose ancestors were brought to North America as slaves) (Foley 1991, Ogbu 1974). Since then, a significant literature has developed that echoes his idea (cogently expressed in Ogbu 1990) that United States–born Blacks share a different, less effective, and less adaptive attitude toward academics than do more recent Black immigrants (voluntary minorities). As pointed out elsewhere in separate articles about John Ogbu by educational anthropologists Doug Foley (2004) and Edmund Hamann (2004), though it does not seem to have been his intention, Ogbu's ideas have subsequently fed into a larger literature of Black pathology, where African Americans are characterized as participants in a dysfunctional culture of resistance that hinders their academic development and precludes their taking advantage of educational opportunities that have opened up since the Civil Rights Movement (see, for example, Steele 1990 and 1998). Connecting to broader discussions of Black pathology, similar analyses have been produced to describe African Americans' performance in economic and political realms as well (Harrison 1992, Kotkin 1993, Sowell 1994).

Another recent set of writings about maladaptive behavior among African American comes from linguist John McWhorter. In an article for *The Wilson Quarterly* (2000a) and in his book, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (2000b), he writes about the deep roots of Black anti-intellectualism stemming from slavery, and about a cult of victimology that is an unintended product of the Civil Rights Movement. McWhorter describes these as defining traits of Black



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culture. Rephrasing Shelby Steele, he argues that in the post–civil rights era, Blacks are their own worst enemy in the quest for a quality education, and that opportunities abound for those Blacks who are willing to disown the various pathologies that define Black culture. According to McWhorter,

> As a direct result of the abrupt unshackling of a crippled race, Victimology, Separatism, and Anti-intellectualism are a person with his eyes sealed shut still pawing frantically at the air long after his attacker has laid off, driven to a frenzy by massive assault. . . . [T]o continue swiping madly at the air and indignantly insisting that this is one's right in view of an attack that recedes increasingly into the past makes one look not fearsome, but pathetic. (2000b:213)

## THE USE OF DAMAGE IMAGERY AMONG AFRICAN STUDENTS AT MIDWESTERN

Among Black students at Midwestern University, the status group that best exemplifies the different but related ideas captured in the writings of Frazier, Ogbu, and McWhorter is made up of first- and second-generation Africans. Many use what they see as the underachievement and pathology of African Americans as a counterexample against which they establish their own study habits and academic expectations. Among such Africans, ethnic consciousness is a critical tool for academic success, albeit a tool that requires the belittling of other Blacks.

Among the African students who consider themselves members of the Black student community, the idea that they embody different, and more practical, attitudes toward academics than do U.S.-born Blacks is commonplace. As they are people of African descent who measure themselves against other people of African descent, their ideas about academics are based in a racial consciousness. Within that frame, however, they draw an ethnic distinction between themselves and African Americans, and hence can most precisely be described as ethnic-conscious within a race-conscious frame.

The attitude that many of Midwestern's ethnic-conscious high-achieving students hold toward African American students is consistent with the pejorative tradition that was discussed earlier. Unlike positive, race-conscious students, however, these students are less apt to name a genealogy in terms of the origins of their disparaging thoughts. Rather, they are more apt to speak in general terms of what African Americans are like, the behaviors they have witnessed among African Americans, or what their parents have taught them about race and class differences in the United States.

Steven, a Kenyan by birth and citizenship who was finishing his final year at Midwestern when we last spoke, was especially eloquent in explaining what he saw as the difference between Africans and African Americans. According to Steven,

> Jomo Kenyatta said "Seek ye first the Kingdom of Education and everything shall come to you." That is why we [African students] came 10,000 miles to seek an education. But that is the difference. African Americans were brought 10,000 miles into servitude. So while one is a plus, the other is a negative. I believe strongly that I am a free man. I know I am free. There are people who laid down their lives for me. But [when it comes to] the African American, people laid down their lives for his freedom yet he is not free. Every African American has to struggle to prove [his or her] self-worth. Each of them individually, they are going against the system, whereas we feel our freedom and our whole system supports that. I feel that sense of self-worth is the difference between the African African and the African American. That is why we can come here and take advantage of the system—because the system never oppressed us. My feeling is this: I feel that we settled the score because we kicked them [whites] out of Africa. So now we are on a mutually beneficial path. But I still am here to take knowledge back to my clan and my country.

But even as Steven and other African students offer pointed critiques of African American students, most still consider themselves part of the Black student community. Their sense of belonging is delicate and tenuous, however, and has an element of self-imposed marginality. Rhoda, a self-identified African student, provides an apt example.

Rhoda is a first-generation U.S. citizen of African descent who nonetheless considers herself not African American, but African. When we first met, I asked her if there was a Black student community at Midwestern and, if so, whether she was in it. She responded with an unhesitant "yes" on both counts and went on to explain that the community serves as her primary social outlet. Her friends include other Africans and some African Americans, and when she wants to dance, have fun, or go out on the weekend, she usually goes to events organized by and for other Black students. During the week, she attends some of the other extracurricular events put on by Black students, but in general she spends her weekdays and nights either lifting weights (which, though it involves a social dimension, she generally does alone), participating in study groups, or hanging out with her African friends.



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While the Black student community provides an important social outlet for Rhoda, her contact with the community is conditional, limited, and viewed as a break from her other activities. Further, when it comes to discussions of academics, she draws a line of distinction between her African friends and most other African Americans. But while Steven is always ready to share his analysis of African Americans with others, Rhoda is more hesitant, although no less opinionated. Like Steven, she places herself and other Africans apart from African Americans. But instead of straightforward descriptions and comments, much of her communication with me, for instance, consisted of shrugs, glances, and facial expressions that communicated criticism, although the words were not always spoken.

In the following recounting of one of our conversations, several important ideas emerge. Because Rhoda was not initially clear about my views or my claimed racial/ethnic heritage, she was hesitant to verbally express her (nonetheless apparent) negative views of African Americans' academic focus.[3] In addition, Rhoda's conceptualization of an African identity is malleable enough for her to configure herself within this category, although she was born in the United States and is an American citizen. She also does not seem to perceive any contradictions in her category definitions, even though one of the friends she studies with is an African American. Finally, Rhoda's responses begin to answer questions of source and process with regard to the transmission of academic values among African students. However, these questions beg further research before definitive statements can be offered.

> Rhoda: When it comes to studying, I can't speak for African Americans (shrug). I don't know. Are you African American? They do things their way. They have (pause) a different way of looking at things.
>
> Interviewer: You are African?
>
> Rhoda: My parents are.
>
> Interviewer: What is your nationality?
>
> Rhoda: I guess I am a U.S. citizen. I was born in Ohio.
>
> Interviewer: Hmmm. OK. But you consider yourself African?
>
> Rhoda: Yes, because I was brought up by African parents and have that way of looking at things.
>
> Interviewer: Who do you study with?
>
> Rhoda: I study with Bella [an African American student], some other African Americans, but mainly people in my major.
>
> Interviewer: Who are your friends?
>
> Rhoda: Some African Americans, and . . . but . . . mainly Africans.
>
> Interviewer: And your friends have a different way of looking at academics?
>
> Rhoda: We just take it more seriously or something. We see opportunity where they just . . . I don't know. I think it has to do with history. And why we came here versus why they did.

While my ambiguous racial status may have hindered my efforts to get past Rhoda's guard, it nonetheless became clear from my conversations with her and others that there is a group of African students in the Black student community who rely upon the community for social outlets and a sense of a community, but simultaneously construct their academic identity in opposition to what they perceive to be the norms and values of U.S.-born Blacks. The oppositional identity, captured here in the words of Rhoda and Steven, promotes their academic success, even as it leads to claims among non-African Blacks that Africans are "stuck up" or that they "don't think they are Black." Still, by their willing participation in the community, and by the acknowledgment of their member status by themselves and others, it is clear that they are community members.

While ethnic-conscious high achievers have constructed an oppositional identity for themselves, their position is one of opposition from within. They go to parties, attend functions, and experience a sense of community with other Blacks; in other words, they enjoy benefits of membership in the Black student community. But at the same time, since the great majority of participants in this community are African Americans, as self-described Africans, the ethnic-conscious high achievers enjoy the benefits of membership in a community predominantly composed of people upon whom they look down, and even pity. This points not only to the complexity of their position in the community, but also to the wide range of attitudes and norms operating within the context of the Black student community as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

Even as this article has focused upon those attitudes among academically successful Black students that complement their academic strivings, I have kept in mind the cautions of Arthur Schomburg. While he wholeheartedly embraced scholarship about Black life, history, and culture, the famous bibliophile was critical of those studies that were "on the whole pathetically over-corrective [and] ridiculously over-laudatory" (1992[1925]:231). Accordingly, I have avoided a laudatory approach to my analysis and writing. And even as



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I have focused on academic high achievers, educational researchers across disciplines must continue to study the all-too-frequent instances where entire communities of Black children are plagued by academic underachievement. In either case, as we conduct our studies we must also move into action, acting upon the ways in which our knowledge can be applied to improving students' educational outcomes.

In the preceding pages, I attended to the narrow task of identifying and discussing two historically rooted ideologies that exist among academic high achievers in a specific Black student community. An underlying purpose was to show one example of the diversity of perspectives and values that exist within Black student communities on North American college campuses. Implicit to this entire discussion are the ideas that individuals configure race, define themselves, and align themselves in ways that are at once highly variable but also potentially useful to their declared or implicit purposes. Thus, in the educational arena, even the narrow task of documenting and tracing perspectives has policy implications (Foster 2003a, 2003b).

Among positive, race-conscious achievers at Midwestern University, their achievement ideology is likely to have a multiplier effect if acknowledged, articulated, and systematically reinforced through student life programming. Student organizations that consciously adopt and teach a positive, race-conscious achievement ideology already exist. The Student African American Brotherhood on my subject campus provides an example of an organization that was started by Black students, staff, and faculty who saw pedagogical and hortatory value in connecting current Black students with a well-developed tradition of racial uplift. In his study of Black students in an affluent suburb in Ohio, John Ogbu noted the presence and potential effectiveness of similar organizations on the secondary-school level (2003). There is no reason why these efforts cannot be further duplicated, whether by student affairs offices, by Dean of Students offices, or by those of us who, as individual faculty members, advise student organizations.

At the same time that the positive, race-conscious ideology has so powerfully impacted individuals at Midwestern and elsewhere, another conception—whereby some Black students consider other Black students to be maladjusted underperformers, and construct themselves in opposition to that ascription—has also proven effective for many high achievers. Of course, their practice of ascribing pathology or maladjustment to others and viewing themselves in contrast is not novel. Many nineteenth-century race men and women, including such notables as Alexander Crummell and W.E.B. Du Bois, did exactly that as they cast themselves as worthy elites who would reach down to help the masses. Nor does the present example of one group of Blacks looking unfavorably upon another carry the viciousness and opportunism of Booker T. Washington, who put disparaging images of fellow Blacks to powerful and public use in his ongoing work to raise funds and support for his activities (Washington frequently told jokes—about chicken-stealing Blacks, ignorant Black politicians, and over-educated Blacks who lacked common sense—as a way to set his White donors at ease).[4]

Clearly, the long-standing pejorative tradition in Black thought in America has been put to and has served a wide variety of ends. That of the ethnic-conscious high achievers on my subject campus is notable in that it is an inwardly directed and apparently effective source of academic motivation for a number of Black students. In terms of teaching and seeking the broader application of this particular achievement ethic, however, problems immediately arise. First, the effectiveness of the negative, ethnic-conscious achievement ideology is based upon the construction of an inferior other and thus necessarily facilitates disharmony and ill will among groups of students. Second, approaches that rely upon the stigmatization of others are also bound to fuel sexism, racism, classism, or any of an infinite number of other supremacist expressions. Thus, although the negative, ethnic-conscious achievement ethos is interesting and important to observe and understand, it should not be intentionally reproduced.

## UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Finally, beyond the identification of two of the achievement ideologies that exist among Black students, and beyond the call for programs to promote and expand the reach of positively oriented uplift ideologies, there is a clear need for additional research. The unanswered question of cultural transmission is especially important. For instance, during the course of my fieldwork, after noticing similarities between what an African student shared about African American student achievement and what African scholar John Ogbu has written, I asked the student if she had ever heard of Dr. Ogbu or his concept of the involuntary minority. She said that she had not. As to the source of her beliefs about African American students, she pointed to the way her parents raised her and to her observations of African American students who sat in the back of classrooms and didn't seem to pay attention to academics. Are the similarities between her perspectives and those of Ogbu coincidence? Or are some of her ideas rooted in perceptions and teachings that are shared among African immigrants in the United States?[5] Ethnographic research that goes beyond the school community and into



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students' homes (and homelands) will be needed to address these questions.

As we strive to create programs and policies that teach effective strategies for academic success and that are organic to and resonant with students' experiences and backgrounds, questions regarding how students come to believe what they believe and how they act upon those beliefs will have to be answered. Addressing these questions is a task especially suited to anthropologists, so while this article advances conversations about Black academic motivation, for best effect, it must only be a step in a larger project to continue ethnographic research in the area of academic motivation and to formulate polices and programs that are increasingly effective at enhancing educational attainment among Blacks and others alike.

## NOTES

1. For a discussion of the formation and maintenance of Black student communities as subcommunities on predominantly White campuses, see Foster (2003a).

2. For concise discussions of the use of ideal types as a conceptual tool, see Coser (1977:223–224) and Hamilton (1974:93–102).

3. I am racially mixed and am sufficiently "light skinned" to have, in different times and places, been mistaken for Hispanic, Central American Indian, Moroccan, and Italian (Italian actually is a part of my ancestry). In fieldwork circumstances, informants are often unsure of my racial affiliation (a fact that complicates my work but often yields unexpected and valuable insights).

4. Historian Louis Harlan (1982) argues that Washington's comedic disparagements assured White audiences that he did not envision Blacks as civic equals to Whites and subsequently, that his efforts to use industrial education as a way to bring basic civilization and morality to a pathetic people was worthy of support and encouragement. His racist jokes also set him up as a person who, to the racist White mind, understood Blacks well and knew how to train them in ways that would counter their innate depravity and position them to be participants in a new—albeit still segregated and unequal—South.

5. A similar question, and one that I will address in future work, can be asked of Ogbu's work. Were his analyses inevitable and accurate given the data he collected in his many studies, or did his perspective as an African immigrant who achieved success in a foreign country shape or otherwise influence the paradigm he developed?

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Lee D. Baker

# FROM THE EDITOR

As the new editor of *Transforming Anthropology*, I am committed to establishing an even stronger foundation while moving the journal in new directions. To that end, I wanted to keep the venerable editorial board in place to ensure continuity. However, I also wanted to try something new. Therefore, I assembled a collective of several established scholars who are dedicated to the advancement of the journal while inviting some recently established scholars who represent the most novel and the very best of the current generation of anthropologists. Special thanks also need to go out to both Deborah A. Thomas and John L. Jackson, Jr. who have agreed to serve as associate editors. We are also forever grateful to Irma McClaurin for her editorial leadership; she set a high standard for us to meet. As always, Drexel G. Woodson has diligently served as our book review editor, and his institutional memory, sage advice, and steady leadership have provided *TA* much needed continuity over the years and simply outstanding book reviews.

With financial and material support from the African and African American Studies Program, the John Hope Franklin Center, and the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Duke University, and continued support from the University of Arizona, we hope that this transition goes smoothly and that *Transforming Anthropology* can move forward in new directions and uphold its tradition as a cutting-edge, provocative, and indeed transformative vehicle of academic discourse. Please join me in welcoming the new collective of contributing editors to the leadership of our journal.

## TRANSFORMING ANTHROPOLOGY CONTRIBUTING EDITORS 2005

**Robert Adams, Jr.** is the Associate Director of the Institute of African American Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His research interests are the African Diaspora, Afro-Caribbean religions, education, immigration, public policy, and social theory.

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