



Caliban in the Classroom

by Thomas Fleming

What do black Americans think of whites? What do they want from them? The questions are almost as baffling as “What do women want?”—the question we raised a few months ago. After years of living with the men and women we used to call colored people, working with them and calling some of them friends, I got my first real clue in the late 1970’s, when I was teaching a Western Civ class at a black college. The syllabus required me to spend several weeks on *The Tempest*, and I was understandably nervous in discussing a play in which a young black male is condemned to slavery for trying to rape the daughter of his white benefactor. (I argued, without convincing anyone, that Caliban was supposed to be an Indian.)

As a Luddite I was inclined to make light of Prospero’s magical gifts, and trying to ingratiate myself with students whom I genuinely liked, I pointed out that scientific progress was not everything, that Western man might use technology to gain the whole world but only at the risk of losing his immortal soul. Ringing the changes on the leftist cliché that “They can put a man on the moon, but they can’t . . .,” I noticed some of the students getting agitated. When I asked what the trouble was, a nice young man erupted: “Man, you don’t believe that s--t about the moon landing, do you?” He went on to explain that the whole space program was done with trick photography, “to make us feel small ’cause we ain’t never put nobody on the moon.” Unable to grasp his point, I hastened to explain that I opposed the moon landing, thought of it as a desecration, when others in the class joined in and declared that most technology was a hoax or had really been invented by blacks and then stolen by whites. Incredulously, I asked the students, some of whom were bright and hardworking, how many of them believed that the moon landing was just a trick. All hands went up. For just a moment I felt like the young professor at the end of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: “I think I’m beginning to understand this now,” he says, realizing that everything he thought he had learned of George and Martha’s life story is almost entirely false.

It is only one little experience, admittedly, at an undistinguished black school, where the students were mostly part-time. Even kids who might not swallow the conspiracy theory were under a social pressure to side with their group against an alien. But in the years since, hearing “Dr.” Bill Cosby (a bogus doctorate from an infamous program that gives credit for life experience) and other successful blacks expressing similar sentiments, I have come to believe that Afrocentrism, so far from being an eccentricity, virtually defines the perspective of black Americans at every level in society. Not long after my first exposure to (literally) this lunacy, I was teaching a Latin class at a formerly all-white college (desegregated less than 20 years earlier). Several of my black middle-class students informed me that Hannibal was “a brother,” although the only evidence they could cite was a Budweiser poster in a series called “Black Princes of Africa.” Cleopatra and St. Augustine were also black, and nothing I said could change their minds. The really stunning part was the insistence that all Western culture came from Babylon, the first great black civilization. I got so sick of hearing about the black Babylon—and where they got this from I shall never know—that I told one student either to shut up or leave the class. He left.

None of this should have come as a surprise. Pan-Africanists and black nationalists had been talking about the black origins of civilization throughout the century. In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Zora Neale Hurston recounts the standard “great speech” she had been hearing all her life:

Negroes were the bravest men on earth, facing every danger like lions, and fighting with demons. We must remember with pride that the first blood spilled for American Independence was that of the daring Crispus Attucks, a Negro who had bared his black breast to the bullets of the British tyrants at Boston. . . . It was a Negro named Simon who had been the only one with enough pity and compassion in his heart to help the Savior bear

His cross upon Calvary. It was the Negro troops under Teddy Roosevelt who won the battle of San Juan Hill. . . . It was the genius of the Negro which had invented the steam engine, the cotton gin, the air brake, and numerous other things—but conniving white men had seen the Negro's inventions and run off and put them into practice before the Negro had a chance to do anything about it. Thus the white man got credit for what the genius of the Negro brain had produced. Were it not for the envy and greed of the white man, the Negro would hold his rightful place—the noblest and greatest man on earth.

Hurston's lifetime spanned the years from Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement to W.E.B. Du Bois's support for Pan African Congresses, but the Afrocentrist myths are at least several generations older. As Hurston recognized, "I did not know the word for it at the time, but it did not take me long to know the material was traditional." Some of the themes—including Egypt as a black civilization—are found in early 19th-century pamphlets, such as David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829).

How are European Americans to respond, either as individuals or as the still-dominant ethnic majority, to Afrocentrism? For scholars, the duty is clear. A fanatical regard for the truth, even at the expense of other virtues, is the defining quality of the true scholar. Not all historians, of course, are scholars; many of the best historians have been storytellers who shape their information into the myths and legends that define their people as a nation. (I would argue, if pressed, that this is the primary function of the historian.) But the scholar, including the scholar-historian, must say ultimately, "Let my nation be damned: I stand by the truth."

The refutation of Afrocentric mythology, especially in the superficially academic form in which it has been presented by Martin Bernal, has come not from political conservatives—how many conservative scholars are competent to discuss the question?—but from responsible liberals such as Emily Vermeule and Mary Lefkowitz. On the level of intellectual discourse, the scholars should have the last word, although I doubt that will happen. But, as I have already hinted, history serves more than one legitimate purpose. I have never particularly liked the kind of debunking scholarship that seeks to delegitimize the cherished myths and legends on which a social order rests. In general I prefer to leave such hooliganism to the rock-throwing Jacobins who deface public monuments and to the Muslims who burn books, decapitate statues, and gouge out the eyes of icons. Of course, where an iconography has been imposed by main force by an ideological tyranny, every sensible person wants to take a hand in tearing down the colossal images of Stalin or repealing the MLK holiday, but no sane man would attack his own nation's monuments, and no honorable enemy would refuse to respect another people's symbols. If black people by themselves wanted to honor Mr. King, or if Lincoln were worshipped only in the North, their white and Southern critics would do well to leave other people's national heroes alone. German criticism of the statue put up in London in honor of "Boniber Harris" is one of the fruits of European union. Such a protest is inconceivable in a Europe made up of independent nation-states.

This *laissez-faire* attitude is harder to sustain toward people who belong, in principle, to the same society and the same commonwealth. But this is exactly the point at issue: Do peo-

ple who call themselves African-Americans really regard themselves as Americans at all? Increasingly one hears middle-class blacks saying, "I don't call myself African-American anymore, because I don't want anything to do with this country." But such an attitude is latent in the very terms Afro-American and African-American. Back in the 60's, when Stokely Carmichael was promoting "Afro-American," he was also making trips to Africa and reviving the nationalist imagery of Garvey and Du Bois, and Jesse Jackson, who has bullied the American press into treating him as a liberal Democrat, came up with "African-American" obviously by analogy with Jewish-American or Greek-American. American Zionists have been very successful in two ways that must have caught his attention: they have succeeded in influencing, even determining, American policy in the Middle East, while at the same time using Israel as a symbol around which to rally many Jewish-Americans. Jackson seems to have concluded that if Africa as a whole could be made to function as Israel, then he could be a sort of Norman Podhoretz or Meir Kahane, making state visits back to the "homeland" and crying bigotry every time an American majority does not cave into demands. As African-American leader, Jackson functions not just as a shadow senator for the District of Columbia but as shadow president of Africans in the United States.

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It is easy to ridicule Jackson's pretensions: his insistence on being given diplomatic status, when he visits Japan or South Africa, his presumption in entering into negotiations with nation-states and nationalist groups as if he were either a head of state or, at least, the leader of a national liberation front. Rush Limbaugh mocks him as a clown who cannot speak English—a strange charge coming from a man whose solecisms might have been scripted by George "Kingfish" Stevens. To underrate Mister Jackson is, as Clyde Wilson has pointed out in these pages, a grave mistake. For all the obvious flaws in his character—Chicago liberals still speak with genuine awe of the scope of his flim-flams—Jackson has a coherent and consistent vision of black nationalism. His apparent mistakes and gaffes are all necessary steps in a difficult two-track strategy to position himself, simultaneously, as an ethnic ward-healer who can deliver (or refuse to deliver) the black vote to the Democratic Party,

and as a black Moses who will deliver his people from national bondage. His anti-Semitic outbursts, for example, warm the hearts of black nationalists who demonize Jews as the quintessential white oppressor, and his apologies and explanations—ignored by his followers—reassure liberals that he either knows his place or is only jiving. “Why doesn’t he repudiate Louis Farrakhan?” ask his critics. Because Farrakhan is the most dynamic black leader in America, and even blacks who do not follow him into Islam respect him for his courage and for the terror he inspires in white America (according to a study by Michael Dawson, 62 percent of black Americans describe Farrakhan as a positive influence).

Recently I have had the misfortune of trying to get journalists and publishers to take separatist movements seriously. Whatever the subject—Southern secessionists, Latino or African nationalism—I am always told the same thing: these are small fringe groups that have little or no influence on most members of the minority. In some cases this may be true, but where there is a general ideology subscribed to by a majority of blacks or Southerners or Evangelical right-to-lifers, and where extremists are justified or defended by ordinary people, as Louis Farrakhan and Leonard Jeffries are, then you have the ingredients necessary for a nationalist revolt. Talk show hosts have spent the past six or eight months kicking around statistics that show that most American blacks think O.J. is innocent. “How can anybody be that stupid?” shrieks Roe Conn on Chicago’s WLS. But it’s not a question of intelligence. Blacks have been taught all their lives that whites have robbed them of their birthright. These arguments used to be confined to churches and political rallies, but now they are part of the school curriculum, and there are whole departments of Black Studies that teach nothing but the historical struggle between white demons and black angels. It doesn’t matter if O.J. murdered two white people, because a) a black man cannot get justice in this country, and b) the “victims,” as white people, probably had it coming.

Obviously, not all black Americans feel this way, but increasingly it seems that skin color is the only quality that matters in politics (where blacks vote solidly, 90 percent or better, for black candidates), in law (for example in the Reginald Denny case), and in education (desegregation suits have everything to do with color and nothing to do with educating children). How are European-Americans to respond? Most liberals are offended by any nationalism, including black nationalism: How dare they—Serbs, Southerners, Quebeckers, Christians, WASPs, blacks—cling to their particularity, their provincialism, their sense of who they are? “If they think they are different from me, that means they think they are better than me in some respect. Haven’t they heard that all men are created equal, which means all men, women, and in-betweens are exactly the same regardless of race, color, or creed?”

Anyone who regards himself, however vaguely, as on the right will have the opposite instinctive reaction. He will exult in difference, will love women as women, honor men for being manly, and politely ignore the sports and freaks of nature and society that divide the hoof but do not chew the cud. He will inevitably think his own nation, however lowly and downtrodden, the greatest in the world, but if he is a man, he will respect, perhaps admire other nations, even his enemies, for their peculiarities. I have heard, time after time, from Serb and Italian soldiers—people who hated the Germans for what they did to

their countries—that the soldiers of the *Wehrmacht* were the finest fighting men in the world, maybe in the history of the world. It is only Americans, uncertain of their nationality, who say otherwise.

Let us agree, then, my readers, that you and I shall respect the efforts of American blacks, including Mr. Jackson and Mr. Farrakhan, to redefine themselves as a nation. But let us also be clear what this would mean. On a trivial level, it would mean that Afrocentrism should be banned from schools and universities that are funded by a white majority. With a clear conscience we can say to black Americans: we are free to respect your identity and even your hatred of ourselves without being under any obligation to subsidize it. What are Afrocentric blacks doing in white institutions, in the first place?

But the same argument applies to affirmative action, welfare policies, and indeed, to all civil rights legislation. It is one thing to ask me to help my fellow citizens, no matter how fantastic or how remote the basis of their claims might be. The argument for national socialism—our present form of government—has always been that we as a people owe certain things to ourselves, such as a decent minimum standard of living, a public education that will enable every child to grow up into a productive citizen. But if American blacks are willing to divest themselves, even in principle, of their American identity, then they have no better claim on me than Mongolians or Somalis.

Let us put the argument in the form of a simple proposition: any claim on my pocketbook or on my sympathy advanced in the name of Afrocentrism or Afro-Americanism is self-refuting, and it will not be very long before black Americans who engage in this rhetoric will discover, to their sorrow, what self-reliance is all about.

I admire Mr. Jackson as the leader of his people, and I respect the desire of African-Americans for independence and self-determination. I only wish they would return the compliment. As Jesse Jackson so memorably remarked in reference to the Jewish Holocaust, “Other people have suffered, too.” My father’s family were Scots, from a nation that has suffered from the imperial and occasionally genocidal attentions of the English for over 500 years. If I have any time or resources to squander on ethnic liberations or social justice, I shall send my money to the Scots National Party and demand reparations for the “Tory” Scots whose property was seized by American rebels in the 1770’s. Some of my people had to flee to Canada to escape persecution, and I cannot begin to describe the sufferings of the Irish, the Poles, the Armenians, the Greeks, and—most recently—the Bosnian Serbs.

All of these groups have suffered. None of these groups has its hand perpetually stuck out in expectation of a tip; none of them demands a special status because of its sufferings. Irish terrorists might blow up buildings and kill innocent people, but they do not wallow in self-pity or sue for the privilege of associating with the English. At the root of so much Afrocentric posturing is not the defiance of a proud people, but the kind of self-pity that invites contempt. In 1955 Zora Neale Hurston criticized the ruling in *Brown v. The Board of Education* with characteristic bluntness: “The American Indian has never been spoken of as a minority and chiefly because there is no whine in the Indian.” Apart from a few “Red Power” leaders, there is still no whine in the Indian, and when there is no whine in African-Americans, perhaps they will be mature enough either to secure their independence or to live with us on terms of equality.

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When West Meets East

by Jonathan Chaves



When Virginia Governor George Allen recently attempted to return the curriculum of his state's public school system to a solid grounding in Western and American history, his plan, greeted with howls of indignation from the National Educational Association and their minions in the state legislature, was soundly defeated. "It would set us back to the 1950's! It would ignore all we have discovered about how children learn in the last few decades! It would bring us back to Eurocentrism!" And so a popular governor recently elected with a solid mandate proved powerless to overcome the entrenched forces of "educators" and "liberal" legislators to restore the European and American tradition to center stage in Virginia's schools.

Those in professional educational circles who argue for doing away with "Eurocentrism" often point to the undeniable demographic increase in certain classrooms, including those in northern Virginia, of children from widely different ethnic backgrounds. On the level of higher education as well, many of our universities have experienced a dramatic rise in the percentage of foreign (the p.c. term is "international") students. However, it is not the students' background that determines curriculum but the categories of knowledge and the cultural expectations of the nation in which they are studying. As for

the college and graduate students who flock to the United States from all over the world, they overwhelmingly opt to study various sciences, math, and engineering. If they wished to study Hinduism or Islamic civilization or Confucianism, they could obviously do so far more readily in their home countries. (One exception would be Chinese students from mainland China, where the presentation of classical Chinese civilization remains distorted by Marxist ideology.) American schools must teach, along with the basics, what it means to be an American citizen.

A more intellectually serious argument against Governor Allen's plan was the familiar cry of "multiculturalism." Underlying the call for a "multicultural" (as opposed to "Eurocentric") emphasis in education are two dubious claims, which ironically contradict each other: one, that because we in the West have ignored the great achievements of Asia (and other parts of the world as well, but here I am concerned only with the question of Asia), we need to redress this wrong by removing our blinders and fully integrating the history and civilization of Asia into our curricula at all levels; and, two, that whenever we did pay attention to Asia in the past, the West either denigrated or romanticized it. Both "strategies" of the latter were calculated to sanction or perhaps sugarcoat Western domination and even colonization of Asia, the "white man's burden" of Kipling. This is Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism," dramatically argued in his 1978 book of that name.

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