

From the Black Aesthetic to Black Cultural Studies: An Interview with Houston A. Baker, Jr.

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ABSTRACT

In this interview the renowned African American critic Houston A. Baker, Jr. reflects upon his critical enterprise in the last thirty years: how he was trained to be a Victorianist but ended up as a scholar of African American literature and culture. He traces the impact of his bitter childhood experience in segregated Louisville, Kentucky, on his later intellectual development. In his assessment of African American critical industries since the sixties, Baker calls our attention to the contributions of the Black Aesthetic but laments the influence of careerism upon the current status of African American criticism. To clarify his own critical stance, Baker also talks in great detail about some of the major concerns that he has tried to lay out in his various publications. He closes the interview with an exploration of the history and politics of rap as a cultural form for black, urban youth.

KEY WORDS

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LEE: Let us begin with your earlier life, especially your educational background. What impact did those educational experiences have on your career as a critic? If I am not incorrect, you actually started as a Victorian scholar. Why and how did you shift to African American literature more than twenty years ago?

BAKER: My decision to study Victorian literature was conditioned by specific teachers in undergraduate school. I think the two most influential ones were Arthur P. Davis and Charlotte Watkins, both of whom were specialists in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British

literature. Their courses were wonderfully taught. Arthur Davis's were especially intelligent, mixing in a good deal of humor and anecdotal material drawn from Afro-American vernacular traditions, in which he was quite a scholar. Charlotte Watkins was a much more severe and serious scholar who went to the Library of Congress on her off days and did work on *Wuthering Heights* and Anthony Trollope. And one was not surprised to see her name on articles in places like *PMLA*, *Victorian Poetry* and so forth. She was a publishing scholar who worked quite seriously and earnestly. So my interest in Victorian matters began at Howard University. And remember, this was Howard in 1961-65. When I went to graduate school, I was fairly certain that I was going to do nineteenth-century British literature. Again, I found at UCLA teachers who were as encouraging and stimulating as Davis and Watkins had been at Howard. So my decision to be a Victorianist was somewhat overdetermined by my undergraduate experience. And I found at UCLA the objective correlative in terms of teachers.

Having paid tribute to the teachers, I now have to admit that the literature itself, namely romantic and Victorian literature, was some of the most accessible and exciting writing that I had ever read—and I read it in volume. I mean I even read Coventry Patmore [laughter], Ernest Dawson, Arthur Hugh Clough, and so forth. So in some courses, we were reading minor writers and major writers alike. We were reading Mrs. [Elizabeth Cleghorn] Gaskell and Harriet Martineau, in addition to reading Tennyson, Browning, and the Brontës. So my response was not conditioned solely by reading Victorian "classics."

It seemed to me that the nineteenth century marked the period when writers were thinking in engaging ways about the relationship of artists to society and trying to frame rebellious—in the case of romantics—positions in relationship to an emergent industrial middle class. This was very appealing to my young adult sensibility—the idea of being a rebel through writing was pretty good. [Laughter] So it was the social situation of these writers and their relationship to themselves as spokespersons and artists and the way that got played out in their actual creative products that attracted me to romantic and Victo-

rian literature. I was having great fun reading them and researching them. The material in its original form was still there. I went to copies of the *Edinburgh Review* that were on the shelves and pulled them down and read reviews of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. You could get first editions of these books if you traveled in Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh during the 1960s. There were booksellers where you could certainly get full sets of the complete works of authors, if not the first editions, very cheaply. So it was all very, very attractive, and that was what led me to be a Victorianist.

The shift to Afro-American literature was a kind of real-life shift. When I got to Yale, it was the time of the Black Power movement. Yale had just admitted its first group of black students. I was reading in newspapers about the movements in cities, in towns, in black communities throughout the country. In 1965 in the *Washington Post* I witnessed news of the Watts riot coming in on the teletype. A change was in the air. Black people seemed to be at the forefront of that change. When people came to me and said, "You look like the man to us. You speak well. You look like Malcolm X. [Laughter] We need to have somebody on board to deal with the kind of changes that we want to bring about. Come, join us." I said, "I'm your man." Then I started reading Afro-American literature and taught it for the first time in the 1969-1970 academic year at New Haven. And the joy that I felt in Afro-American literature was so immediate. A personal joy seemed to resonate in my life.

LEE: In your college years, didn't you read much of Afro-American literature?

BAKER: No, no. I mean in one sense we can say that there was no access. But it's like people who tell you they never had access to basketball. I mean the hoops are all around, all you have to do is go and play the game. [Laughter] There was, according to Ivan Taylor, the chairman of the English Department, a formal course at Howard University called "Negro Literature," but Taylor said he could never get students to sign up because they didn't want it. That's a fine story, and I don't want to dispute the chairman's word in this. He was my friend.

In an American literature course taught by John Lovell, we read

Booker T. Washington, Phillis Wheatley, and Frederick Douglass. And that was my first contact with all three of those authors. I knew their names, of course, but that's the first time I ever read them. And that was it.

When I got to graduate school at UCLA, Addison Gayle, Jr. was there. And Addison said that he was going to do his master's thesis on J. Saunders Redding. He was personally acquainted with contemporary writers like LeRoi Jones, and contemporary critics like James Emanuel, who had taught Addison at City College. And he knew James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. So it was Addison who prompted me to think more about Afro-American literature. But never in graduate school could I have a serious engagement with Afro-American literature.

The things that I learned at Howard, in fact, were not substantially unlike the things that I had been taught in high school English courses, or that I was to encounter when I got to UCLA. Now there were people who had marvelous experiences at Howard because they got to know Sterling Brown. Brown would take them over to his house. They would go down to his very attractive basement, and he would put on the blues for them and introduce them to the music and the poetry. He would recite his own poetry, would tell them stories about Afro-American expressive culture. But I gather that those so blessed by Brown were a select group. There was nothing in the formal curriculum of Howard University that would have indicated to the average student coming from any place in the country that Howard was interested in black studies. Everything at Howard indicated that the university was interested in your reading the classical, canonical, Eurocentric works. It was in many ways a very white university in black face.

LEE: Black skin, white masks?

BAKER: That's it! That's it! That's right! [Laughter]

LEE: And the impact? What kind of impact did you find these experiences had on your later critical enterprise?

BAKER: Well, the thing that was most challenging about Howard, I think, was a select group of professors who had a standard of excel-

lence that was attractive to me and that I felt I wanted to work up to. I am sure there were many many excellent professors whom I didn't encounter because I decided I was going to become an English major pretty early in my undergraduate life. But within that field itself, there were a number of people like Charles Watkins, Charlotte Watkins, Arthur P. Davis, Ivan Taylor, and Gertrude Rivers, who were important to me. There was a fine teacher as well, with whom I did the European continental novel. That was an extraordinary and incredible course; we read Balzac, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and so forth. This was a course where you felt, "if I make an 'A' in this course and absorb and understand the material at a level that will enable me to engage in conversation with knowledgeable people, friends and colleagues, then that will be quite an achievement." Again, it comes down to a combination of extraordinary material and exceptional instruction. You want to meet that with absolutely the best you have.

In graduate school, apart from the exceptional and extraordinary material and instruction, there was also competition, that means beating one's fellow students at the game [laughter], and being better than they were, and performing at a higher level than they performed. I think I was probably the first person to go through the UCLA program in three years and get a Ph.D. I was certainly the first person out of the English Ph.D. program to go directly to an Ivy League school and have a job. So that was the competitive aspect—and I was supported in that by people like Bradford Booth. He was incredible; I mean he wouldn't let me slow down. Once I had started running fast and felt, "Well, there are markers on the track now, so I guess I can slow down." But he would say, "No, you started out that fast, and I am going to keep you going at that pace." He seriously encouraged me to take all my exams ahead of scheduled times. And he had great faith in me and showed it. So there was a lot of support coming from many people at UCLA, but the competitive aspect was part of it for sure.

LEE: Please go on to reflect on your early life in segregated Louisville, Kentucky. How was that early experience of racism translated into your later black cultural nationalist stance when you began your career as a scholar and critic of Afro-American literature? Or do you

see any connection between your childhood and adolescent experience and your black cultural nationalism?

BAKER: I do see a connection between my early life and the later critical stance. I feel that if I had grown up as the son of the same parents but situated in Philadelphia, life would have been substantially different for me. The experience of racial segregation in Louisville, Kentucky, was a very bitter experience. The nature of Louisville, Kentucky, as a border town between north and south and as a reasonably small town as well, means that life there was fairly circumscribed. The black bourgeoisie in Louisville, Kentucky, was concerned more about imitating middle-class and upper middle-class white people than about a number of other things. That's not to say that there weren't real workers in that black bourgeoisie who helped bring about social change, but generally black middle-class life in Louisville, Kentucky, consisted of dressing flashily, drinking too much liquor, reading too few books, and having too many parties. People were concerned a lot about gossiping, social prestige. The very notion of the life of the mind was one that you didn't find much in young, black Louisville society. With my own family, things of "culture" were very much valued. That's why I say if I had been in Philadelphia, I would have been able to take our family concerns about social service and intellectual development, and I would probably have found objective correlates in the society around me. But in Louisville, segregation and that cramped life of the black bourgeoisie left a pretty bitter taste.

LEE: As is suggested in my previous question, your earlier critical work is very much a project of black cultural nationalism. Even up to these days, your black nationalist position, albeit now a very much revisionary or, shall I say, liberated one, remains unchanged. How did you start out as a black cultural nationalist? Were you personally involved in the Black Arts Movement or the Black Power movement?

BAKER: The black nationalist position was the one to which I had first access at Yale University. The people with whom I made contact in 1969, mainly students, but some black faculty as well, were people who had a black cultural nationalist orientation. The Black Aesthetic movement was really the scholarly access that I had at that time. And

within the Black Aesthetic movement, the people who were most influential were Amiri Baraka (he was still LeRoi Jones at that time), Larry Neal, and Addison Gayle, Jr. The journal that I read with passion and fervor and most aspired to publish in was *Negro Digest*, which later of course became *Black World Magazine*. When Johnson Publications got rid of *Black World Magazine*, a group of us got together and started *First World Magazine*. That journal and its editor Hoyt Fuller were extremely influential with respect to black cultural nationalist positions in literary criticism and in black arts creativity. The greatest achievement, the newest thoughts, and the highest amount of energy seemed to have come under the banners of the Black Aesthetic movement, which was of course an outgrowth of the Black Arts Movement. LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal began the Harlem Black Arts Repertory Theatre School. LeRoi Jones was writing more persuasively than any other critics that I could read about black cultural nationalism, about the power of the image, the necessity to have a kind of actional, verbal, expressive relationship to the dynamic forces of the culture in which the writers were situated and whose interests the writers were supposed to represent. *Black Fire*, the anthology LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal co-edited, seems to me to have been one of the most important monuments of the black cultural nationalist position. I was reading these guys. More importantly, there were conferences like the black writers conferences at Howard University where I actually went and met these guys. There were an extraordinary number of women involved in the Black Arts and the Black Aesthetic movement. They included people like June Jordan, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Carolyn Rodgers, and others. In the midwest, you had the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), and OBAC was the product of the Chicago writers group. There you had people like Don L. Lee, Hoyt Fuller, Gwendolyn Brooks, and the critic George Kent. So you had manifestations of black cultural nationalism in the northeast and strongly in the midwest. And in both instances, you had strong black women writers connected. So it did seem like this was a national movement, full of energy, insight, and rebelliousness.

LEE: Besides the black cultural nationalist ideology, your early critical work was also very much influenced by New Criticism in its emphasis on close textual analysis. The intersection or convergence of these two schools of critical or cultural thoughts strikes me as something contradictory or paradoxical. I mean on the one hand you have black cultural nationalism which is, as you said just now, rebellious, or, shall I say, progressive and revolutionary, and which is by all means a project of social, cultural, and political empowerment. But on the other hand, you have New Critical thinking which stresses so much the autonomy of the text, and which has for so many years been accused of being asocial, ahistorical, and apolitical. How did you arrive at a reconciliation between these two modes of critical thinking?

BAKER: I think the connection between these two modes of thinking is by way of literary technique and convention. Though the poets, novelists, essayists, critics and dramatists of the Black Arts and the Black Aesthetic movement repeatedly claimed that they were creating new forms, what you discovered when you went to an anthology like *Black Fire* were sonnets, ballads, familiar essays, dramas in one act or two acts. That is to say, what you discovered in the Black Arts Movement was the inscription of forms that were often not tremendously different from standard, conventional, Western ones. The artists and the critics alike suggested that such Western forms were transformed by a new black content. I think they wished to claim that if there was "black content" in a sonnet, it might have produced a different effect on a black audience.

Now, if the formal constraints under which these black writers were working were in many instances marked by strictly Western constraints, then a project like the New Criticism would serve one very well.

One can disagree sharply and severely with the New Critics in terms of what they say about the autotelic, autonomous nature of the text and at the same time realize how incredibly subtle their intelligence was with respect to Western formal conventions. Our understanding, particularly of poetry, is I think enormously enhanced formally by the New Critical project. It seems to me that you could carry

the tools of critical response of the New Critics to works that put themselves deliberately under the same formal constraints and prospects with which the New Critics worked.

I think when people in the Black Arts and the Black Aesthetic movements railed against "art for art's sake" and against the autotelic, autonomous nature of the text, what they really wanted was "black content." They talked about three requirements for a new art—that it must be "functional, committed, committing." But when you went to the actual work, you often found (at the level of function) that their works were functioning under the same formal constraints as, let's say, the poems of T. S. Eliot or the sonnets of Shakespeare. And to the extent that the New Critics were astute with respect to those forms, I think the techniques, the tools of reading, not the ideology, of New Criticism served one well. So one can say that the New Critics may have worked better than they thought or than some of us thought for our purposes.

LEE: I think your revised version of black cultural nationalism is to be found in the notion of blues liberation, which you expound so well in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, and which, as I understand it, suggests a kind of liberated black aesthetic, an aesthetic which is not afraid of appropriating things other than those of Afro-American tradition. Blues liberation may then in one sense be regarded as a critique of black nativism or extreme Afrocentrism. I myself tend to take it as a utopian project, utopian in the sense that it calls for change or mutation, but at the same time it never gives up its communal, collective as well as vernacular dimension as an aesthetic thinking.

BAKER: That's right. I think you got it just right, particularly the notion of appropriation in what I call the blues matrix. My call is for a kind of prudent and committed use of whatever we need to get the job done. The black aesthetic gesture has always been toward a synthesizing project. But "utopian" is exactly right as well, because one never thinks one will actually ever achieve a final or definitive synthesis. A definitive synthesis is bad. [Laughter] So it seems to me the notion of "spirit work," the innovative, improvisational modality of

thought and criticism, is a sort of, to coin a phrase, "locomotive critique" of global forces that are working in the world today.

I think for the Afro-Americanist critic as well as the Afro-American creative artist, the necessity has always been to create different cartographies and mappings for what is glibly called "the mainstream." We work to read the world in manifold ways, but never to assume we have achieved the final reading of it, that we have said the final say, sung the last song, got the best possible melody that you can get.

LEE: You talked quite a bit about the Black Aesthetic today and in a number of your works; still I would like you to make a brief assessment of the project of the Black Aesthetic. Do you detect any impact it is having on the new generation of black critics and scholars like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Michael Awkward and black feminists such as Hortense J. Spillers, Valerie Smith, bell hooks, and so forth?

BAKER: I think one of the sad things about the current status of Afro-American criticism and theory is that it seems to have forgotten so much of the Black Aesthetic. I think of the founders, the first movers, the spirit shakers of the Black Aesthetic as ancestral; I also think of them as people who were unequivocal in their assertion that the Afro-American creative artist, like the Afro-Americanist critic, has a distinct responsibility to be ever aware of the majority of Afro-American people and to be aware of the diasporic connection of those Afro-American people to the Caribbean, and to Africa, and to contribute to their liberation. I think much of what transpires under the name of Afro-Americanist criticism today is, first, about careerism, about seeing oneself individually in the academy or in the world of the arts and culture. Second, it's about the same kind of black bourgeoisie mimesis that occurred in Louisville, Kentucky, about people trying to outweigh the white people with whom they come in contact in their day-to-day lives. And third, and maybe this motivates both of those prior shortcomings, I think, is the unbelievably sad furor about making as much money as you can by doing as little work as you can and even by saying the most outrageously treacherous things that you can say—things that are, finally, a real betrayal of the Black Aesthetic. I think

today is a sad moment in many ways.

LEE: So you do see that sad moment in the recent black critical scene.

BAKER: I certainly do. But I remain optimistic. But my optimism comes about as a result of the kind of graduate students and young professionals that I see. It seems to me so ironic that you can have a rich white American young man who is fighting valiantly to bring about the revival of the Black Aesthetic, or that you can have an upper middle-class white young woman who is insisting that one should not forget the legacy of Addison Gayle, Jr. or Larry Neal. I meet such graduate students at my own and at other universities every month. Or you look at a middle-class Asian student who has come from Taipei, for example, and he says we *must* read Sonia Sanchez. I mean it seems to me that the great irony is there, because if you turn to some of the eminent Afro-American critics, theorists, and creative writers, they seem to be fleeing as fast as they can from the Black Aesthetic project, or to have already deserted or abandoned it. But my optimism is in this new, emergent generation. For in the new, emergent generation, black and white American graduate students and post-doctorals and young professionals are also extraordinarily important. But it seems to me paradoxical that often the strongest defendants of 1960s Black Arts are young white people, while well-placed black critics are betraying the mission of the Black Aesthetic every hour.

LEE: Your remarks make me think of Stephen Henderson, who, I think, is perhaps one of the subtlest critics of the Black Aesthetic movement. It seems to me that many of us still owe him a fair recognition of his contributions.

BAKER: Yes, yes. In speaking about the Black Arts Movement, a true watershed work, a monument, is Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. It is indisputably true that Henderson constitutes a national treasure. It's only unfortunate that Henderson's circumstances and personality have kept him from bringing forward more work because his work on Afro-American expressive cultural traditions is certainly the most historically deep, the most intriguingly archived work that we have. The subtlety of Henderson's intelligence

with respect to Afro-American culture is a thing of genius and beauty. His work is extremely important for all of us, and his personal presence is firm, gentle, earnest, and extraordinarily well-informed.

LEE: You mentioned in passing just now the notion of spirit work, which you referred to as “an autobiographical sounding of Afro-American expressive culture” in the “Introduction” to *Workings of the Spirit*. It is an important notion which obviously calls for further elaboration.

BAKER: What I intend by spirit work is those liberational impulses of African Americans and Afro-American culture that went beyond the material enslavement. If you look at the material conditions of African Americans, you’ll find them in a situation that you and I saw this morning with Toni Morrison. I mean African Americans have been imprisoned not only by an economic system, but also by the specific material instruments and implements of slavery, such as the iron mask, the iron muzzle, the bit, the yoke, the collar, and so on and so forth. Materially, then, the Africans brought to the United States, or to the New World, were oppressed and enslaved by an economic system. In a very physical and material way they lived in one-room slave huts that contained no possibility of privacy. Every material sign that was visible to the naked eye of the Africans says that you are chattel, you are not human. And yet within that community of brilliantly amazing people, two things happen. First, they constitute themselves—by will and volition and voluntarism—as a *community* through the spirit. And this community is furthered through the telling of stories, the singing of songs, the dancing of dances, the preaching of sermons, so that the people’s work transmits a different kind of spirituality and sense of who they are. Spirit work then for me would be a spiritual empowerment through ritual, gesture, dance, and words; it would also be the spiritual enhancement of the very semantics of the definition of community. As a corollary, it means the survival energies to get up the next morning and to endure those physical signs and at least, it seems to me, to coexist side by side with, if not to transcend, one’s dreaded enslavers.

LEE: In what sense do the three books, namely *Afro-American Poet-*

ics, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, and *Workings of the Spirit*, form what you call a trilogy?

BAKER: I think they form a trilogy in the first instance by the entry of the autobiographical, and their founding claim that the autobiographical is indispensable to the critical or theoretical act. They begin and move in terms of the concept of family, and family in one sense means my own father, my own mother, and my own siblings. In another sense, it means the fathers, the mothers, and all of the children of the Afro-American experience as it has moved and transmitted itself on the soil of the United States. Looking at the subject position of black mothers, the subject position of black fathers in this culture would mean looking at the subject position, of course, of the children or progeny of those mothers and fathers. This family romance then plays itself out in terms of the specific kinds of credibility allotted to black spokespersons and to certain strategies of adjustment or adaptation in expressive cultural criticism.

The guiding term in all of this is the one you asked me about earlier—"spirit work."

Even though you might not see a material institutionalization of a critical practice or of an expressive cultural practice, if you look in another space as an informed, autobiographically self-empowering critic, you might find the substitute for that particular temporal moment or practice you were looking for. There is a shiftiness about this, but the "shiftiness" is what is called, at a very positive level, improvisation in the face of adversity, being able to play the song out. So I think I've described the things that operate this construct, this family, this autobiographical, this spirit work that brings the three books together from a perspective of subject position.

LEE: Yes, all critical or theoretical works are by nature autobiographical, and yours strikes me all the more so. So in that sense the first two books would be concerned, could I say, with the works of the fathers and of the children, and the last one is about the works of the mothers. . . .

BAKER: I think that's right. I mean I would say that probably *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* is my father's book, *Afro-*

American Poetics is me, and *Workings of the Spirit* is the mother's book.

LEE: You remember Elaine Showalter's critique of your concept of generational shifts in Afro-American literary criticism. She argues, for example, for the inadequacy of this concept when used to describe the life-long career of a critic. But the more interesting aspect of her critique actually falls on your negligence of the accomplishment of black feminism. Tell me something about your reaction to this.

BAKER Well, I'll give you a very autobiographical reaction to her critique. I remember the telephone call from Elaine Showalter when she discovered "generational shifts." And what she said to me was, "This is brilliant! This is magnificent! It shows me exactly what's happened with feminist criticism." And indeed, Elaine Showalter goes on to use the concept of generational shifts in her anthology of feminist criticism without a single footnote to my work. So I think Elaine Showalter was profoundly influenced by "generational shifts."

All critical constructs have their shortcomings. But the joy of any intellectual worker is when his primary material and originating concept is taken up by someone else, in what might be called a non-specific transfer. When the borrower enriches the concept by showing its shortcomings, I think there are very few of us who would claim to be crushed because we had not arrived at a definitive, comprehensive construct on our first try.

So I think Showalter is right about the absence of Afro-American women's literary-critical contributions in my notion of the generational shifts. And that is being rectified by a number of Afro-American women literary critics now.

The other point—that is, the life-long career of a critic—is I think something we all run up against. Because we are enmeshed in a temporal order, any formulation is always subject to being undone by the continuation of time. I am reminded of what the black popular singer James Brown once said, "Money won't change you, but time will take you on." [Laughter] And time takes on all of our critical constructs and says, "Well, it's now broke and needs a new fix." How would one, for example, characterize W. E. B. DuBois? He was at

times a race man, at times a heavy cultural nationalist, at times a communist, at times a sociologist. How do you categorize DuBois's life? What I think you do, heuristically, is to bring your best wisdom to bear, take your best shot, see your construct as usable for getting on to a more comprehensive plane of understanding without any notion that you have defined things forever. There's always a Showalter waiting just behind the temporal bushes.

LEE: That's right. But let's go back to what Showalter says about black feminism. I may be wrong, but I tend to look at the first part of *Workings of the Spirit* as your response to her criticism.

BAKER: Well, to tell you the truth, it is not so much a response to Elaine Showalter as it is a response to the people presumably whom she might be ventriloquizing, that is, the Afro-American women critics and scholars themselves. And one of the guiding claims of that situationality, that position, was that black women writers had a privileged access to the dynamics of Afro-American women's expressivity. The claim was for a kind of privileged osmosis—an osmotic access to Afro-American expressive cultural creativity that black women enjoyed simply because they were women and black. This was essentialism par excellence. And it was exclusive of male critics. And it didn't make any sense to me. It seemed to me that the insights and results of recent theoretical work in expressive cultural studies had done tremendous things for white feminist expressive cultural and critical practice. So I didn't see, on the strength of that example, how black women scholars and critics could wish to go back to more primitive modes of thinking about literature and art. Why, for example, let a white woman anthropologist such as Showalter patronize and condescend to you and your culture? I believe black women writers need to get out of "Miss Ann's Kitchen" and get seriously theoretical on their own.

LEE: You talked about essentialist premises, and that reminds me of the conversation Manthia Diawara and I had the other day concerning Afrocentrism. It seems to me that quite a few black intellectuals find it important and, in fact, necessary to decode black cultural texts in terms of Afrocentricity. I can understand that position. But the thing is,

how can we read afrocentrically in the age of poststructuralism or postmodernism when we no longer see cultural identity as something fixed, something transcendental, or as what Stuart Hall calls a closure? What, if you don't mind, is your own position?

BAKER: My position is open-minded. I say this because the reading that I have done in the corpus of the Afrocentrists is not very encouraging. The Afrocentric school makes grand sweeping claims, but you don't see a lot of detailed, critical, explanatory work. My own notion is that a kind of idealizing ideology has been the primary impulse in Afrocentricity. But I am conversant enough with what I myself in one place call "conative utterances" to realize that though you don't find substance today, you might clear a space for substance to emerge tomorrow.

It may well be that what we are seeing of Afrocentricity now constitutes the first idealizing, ideological grand sweeping moment of a project that will produce a great deal of substance from young scholars who are being produced by folks like Molefi Kete Asante of Temple University.

So on the one hand you have a poststructuralist age where you have serious questions about essence, the self, history, God, all of these things that grow out of the white mythology, out of the metaphysics of presence.

On the other hand, it seems to me that you have a breaking-apart, a little dismembering of geographies and demographics right now that suggests the human spirit craves a protecting specificity of locale, of identity, and of territory. If we think about the condition that, as Toni Morrison says, we all take pleasure in forgetting, and that we are animals [laughter] whose biology in relationship to its cognition and the brain is still far far away from being even fractionally understood, then there could be indeed—contrary to what Robert Frost says—something in human beings that does very much love a wall. This is to suggest that people need a certain territorial specificity and identity politics despite the declarations of deconstruction and poststructuralism. At the bottom line level, if you look at the United States, you'll realize that the majority of black people in this country are in desperate straits. Afrocentrism is a return to a kind of idealizing, essential-

izing solace for malign social neglect of the poor by the rich. What is discouraging about such a response is that it has a white counterpart. Because most white people in this country are in a desperate plight, and their idealizing, essential, nationalist solace often takes the form of David Duke and Neo-Nazi hate-groups. Therefore, here in the United States you see manifestations of some of the same impulses that you see in Eastern Europe. That's the down side of Afrocentricity—balkanization. And the up side—if you look at the future of Afrocentricity, the possible positive outcomes and consequences of this moment are that the generalizing, idealizing, essentializing aspects of Afrocentricity may be clearing a space for a group of creative scholars who think in ways that may be commensurate with the times described as “poststructuralist.”

LEE: You have shifted your concern quite a bit in recent years to black popular expressive culture, notably rap music and to some extent black film. What motivated this shift?

BAKER: One of the reasons that I was so interested in rap is because of my son who, as I tell the story on many occasions, at the age of seventeen or eighteen or maybe even earlier, was like most teenagers and was very difficult to communicate with. We didn't have a lot of topics in common, but one topic that we have had in common for a long time is black popular music. So we listened to the radio and we could talk about these things. But as he reached that point of oedipal rebellion, it became really important for us to have a common topic that was “neutral”—and it was rap. I've always liked black, or American, popular music from the time I was a teenager. And I have followed its developments. I'd been an avid listener to late-night top 40 shows and had even had some aspirations at one time in my life to be a disc jockey of a late night popular music show. So I've always been interested in black popular music. Rap actually came along at a time when I had already done the book on blues and when I was concerned about, if you will, the updates and current forms of black popular musical expressivity that might have some of the same characteristics and inflections in terms of a mass black audience as the blues. So, first, you have the family connection; and then the connection to a kind of schol-

arly positionality with respect to black popular music I've arrived at. And then I just became interested in the form itself which is always changing.

LEE: What are the roots of rap music? How do you relate rap music to black musical tradition, a tradition which was so much shaped by the historical experiences and the struggles of black America?

BAKER: Well, my story of origins is a story that I think many of the rappers themselves tell about rap as a form. It started in the mid-1960s, and in its earliest form combined the technology of West Indian sound systems, the DJ, as they call it, or the toasting style of West Indian popular music. Grandmaster Flash, who is a West Indian, and Kool DJ Herc, who is a Caribbean or West Indian as well, are two of the earliest influential figures of the form, both of whom in the 1960s used the two-turntable style and the giant speakers and amplification and deep bass sonics that have become so important to rap music. And these Caribbean sounds are in black American urban neighborhoods so that black American urban youth, particularly men, pick up on those sounds. But they also bring to the sounds the Rhythm and Blues and soul, along with the tradition of the dozens and signifying of Afro-American culture.

Much of the early work of rap involves the whole body because when rap was born, it was born as hip-hop culture. It included break dancing, graffiti, modes of dress, walking and talking. So now from the West Indian form, you move to Afro-American urban youth culture. The whole lifestyle of black urban youth culture receives the early Caribbean manifestations, but then, complicates them in order to be regionally "fresher." And suddenly you have an incredibly hybrid, mixed sound. In the latest manifestations of rap you find a group like A Tribe Called Quest who try to get distinctive Jazz rhythms into their raps, and a new group called Arrested Development are trying to bring to bear certain messages of black nationalism and black redemption to their raps.

LEE: Please sum up, the cultural, political, and economic significance of rap. I guess what I am trying to ask is: how do we read or interpret rap as a response to the life of African Americans at this particular

moment of American history? I mean you look at the underclass black life in the inner cities, the social crises manifested in genocides, drug problems, unemployment, homelessness, dropouts, and so on and so forth. It seems to me the future is miserably bleak for many black urban youth.

BAKER: I think there are only complex ways to talk about the relationship of rap to the world that you just described. The most romantic way of talking about it is to say that art provides opportunities for the expression of the soul force of a people, and if that soul force is expressed, it can be massively redeemed. But I think that's very romantic. I don't think it works. Right now it seems to me that rap is in some ways the opiate of the people. The kind of retaliation with guns and weapons and the project of a black nation state of "Original Gangsters" with the redistribution of American wealth is not unlike what happens in comic books. Rap is the cowboy story of a younger generation. Again, it seems to me it's a version of the romance.

To the extent that you have that kind of "gangsta" rap, it's a diversion. Listening to it and knowing all of the lyrics and playing it in your jeep when you ride along in a summer night in the city without a job, under the surveillance of the police, is not going to make an empowering difference.

I think what you do have, however, within the economy of rap is an opportunity for talented creative black urban youth to capture their situation in an expressive cultural form and to interpret it in that form. And if they are very very savvy and entrepreneurially sharp, there's a chance to make money and to get out of a desperate economic situation.

And if the luckiest rappers, apart from being savvy and entrepreneurially sagacious, are also community-spirited, they may give back to the black community money for programs to educate the young people of that community.

I still believe in the notion of role models, though some people say that we don't need them today. I think the more savvy and entrepreneurial of these rap artists are able to do quite creative things as role models. Which means, of course, they themselves are financially

independent and communally-committed enough to be righteous *black* influences. So you have a rap artist like Kool Moe Dee or KRS-1 dedicated to what they call a "Stop the Violence" movement. Their idea is to stop youth homicide and intraracial violence in the black community. And there is another coalition of rap artists called HEAL (Human Education Against Lies), who are dedicated to positive education of black youth. You also have BDP (Boogie Down Productions) who are dedicated to educating black youth about their history, about what's desirable and what's not, and they also rap against child abuse, against date rape, and so forth. So there are a number of what we called in the sixties "positive educational sites" of rap. It's really complex. Then there are, finally, those raps that are designed strictly to have a danceable beat, to contain no message and to make huge amounts of money by simply being video-produced and reproduced and sold in the global marketplace to whoever will listen. So you have a real diversity. And it's almost impossible sometimes to see where one thing begins and another leaves off. A group like Naughty By Nature, whose big hit was "OPP," which is really about taking somebody else's girlfriend and somebody else's boyfriend and sleeping around. It was a huge hit last summer (1991) and everybody wanted to know something about "OPP." But after this group became popular and made a lot of money from "OPP," they now have a rap called "Everything Is Gonna Be All Right," which talks about absentee fatherhood and what it means to grow up in a black ghetto. They are an incredible, captivating forceful group. So they make money and then they are sort of empowered to speak as they will, and when they speak, they speak in a positive educational way, which makes them more popular. But the next thing they produce may be totally danceable with no positive educational effect to it. So it's hard to tell where things start and leave off. But rap is—and has been for almost three decades—the most popular expressive cultural form for black urban youth in this country.

LEE: How then do you relate your study of rap to your profession as a literary critic and historian?

BAKER: I consider my study of rap a continuation of the energies that converged in the 1960s to put me in a position to talk to brilliant

people like you today. [Laughter] A lot of black people from inner cities came to college and university campuses and raised a lot of hell in the 1960s. They also showed that they were extraordinarily bright and capable of doing college degrees if they were just given the opportunity. They made demands for black studies and for black scholars. And I just happened to be at the right place at the right time with a degree in hand. So I was very much empowered by those black urban youth who came to college campuses in the 1960s. And once I began working on Afro-American literature and culture as an area of scholarship and study, it became apparent that there was an inextricable relationship between that area of study and black inner cities all over the United States of America. This is why at this stage of my career it seems altogether natural to take up a black urban cultural form like rap. It seems to be part of the scholarly mission of black studies. If we think of our job in terms of cultural studies, it means that we don't have a boundary between inside and outside, and any boundary of inside and outside is strictly an arbitrary construction. And so I think we are obligated to look at the expressive cultural forms of black urban America if we are intelligently to speak about black culture at all.

LEE: There is an obvious influence of the blues on your poetry, but do you see the influence rap music has on your more recent creative writing?

BAKER: No. [Laughter] No. One assumption of many people about rap is that rap is simple and that anybody can be a rapper because the style is easily accessible for reproduction. Having studied the form and having tried, and failed, to emulate the form and to capture the stylistics of the form in my own poetry, I will say to those people now who believe rap is "simple": if it's so simple, how come everybody is not as rich and famous as a rapper. [Laughter] It's a very complex form.

However, I don't think in writing it's impossible to emulate rap style. Some people can do it. I think someone like Greg Tate who writes for the *Village Voice* is able at a certain point to get the intonations and rhythms of the best rap in his writing. But I haven't seen many people who are able to bring it off. So, no. It hasn't been influ-

ential in the way that the blues was for my poetry in particular. I suppose one of the things that has happened is that the multiple facets of rap, the movement from one subject area to another area, from talking about, say, commercials on TV to talking about Malcolm X, a kind of bricolage, an admixture has been interesting to me in ways that have taken some of the constraints off my prose. That sentence may be an example. [Laughter] I mean I guess in writing about rap I tend to use ellipsis more and to put more things in parentheses. That kind of thing. I tend to be more playful in my prose now as I write about rap in particular.

LEE: In one of your talks which I attended a couple of months ago, when you referred to rap you said something to the effect that this black urban form of what you called expressive culture was in fact a form of contemporary black poetry. I was hoping that you could say more on this.

BAKER: I am still following some of the impulses of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s which insisted that to be a black poet was to be in connection with the sources, the influences, the rhythms, the intonations and the cadences that made up black American speech and music. And if you could self-consciously say, "I'm a poet who is using those sources as my reference," you met Black Aesthetic criteria. Today, whether rap expressivity is a lyric intense with love or an expletive full of repudiation of the police, rap artists are sampling the sounds of their community and bringing rap expressivity forward in a form that is performative. It has dance elements in it, and it has the diasporic base that comes down through the Caribbean heritage and lineage. It's extraordinarily visual if you look at MTV and watch the rappers on MTV. What the poetry of the 1960s was trying to do was to sound like black preachers, musicians, and performers. There was an incredible mixture of the oral, the musical, and the educational. There was complication of expressivity. I think the rappers are doing the same kind of thing that marked the sixties, and they are doing it with a process of digitalization and high-tech that is unbelievably capable of capturing any sound in the world simply by tuning it into a synthesizer.

LEE: Could you say something about your recent and future projects?

BAKER: Well, my next two projects will include, first, an essay on black conservatism. I think the framing of it will be selectively historical. I mean I will look at somebody like Martin Delany of the nineteenth century, for example, who advocated at first that we leave the country and then, finding this to be impractical, became a physician and surgeon, and finally decided to join the establishment and fight the battle from within. I'll also look at someone like Booker T. Washington and the complexities of Booker T. Washington in relationship to W. E. B. DuBois. Was Washington a conservative? And if so, how can you think of "conserving" when you don't really have any genuine material interest in the society? What are you conserving? I mean the idea of conserving includes a whole set of class privileges, including land, money, rents, hierarchies. So what does it mean to be a "black conservative"? And then the other area that I am interested in is trying to read "multiculturalism" in American society right now. It is a really attractive term that seems to carry nothing but a positive force. But that's the way all signs are. They are completely arbitrary and they can mean anything you want them to mean. The debates that are circulating around multiculturalism as a sign are quite arbitrary signs. Now, I find this interesting at a moment of economic recession, unemployment, and real national anxiety as we move toward the *fin de siècle* in the United States.

LEE: The way you talk about Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois, the way you try to relate one to the other, is really very interesting. You will recall that you have actually talked about them quite a bit in your *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Well, I used to look at them as embodiments of two different ideologies, representing two radically different values which were always conflicting with each other within the black community at the turn of the century. But your reading of these two important black figures somehow helps revise my own perception. I think one possible way to understand them is to look into the complementarity of their conflicts. I mean that the two men were actually complementing each other and that their social and political stances were to be seen as complementary to each

other. But now what I have in mind is another person, that is, Frederick Douglass. How are we going to position Frederick Douglass in this relation?

BAKER: That's an awfully good triangle, and it does seem to me that the whole question of labeling black people as progressives, conservatives, or radicals, actually hinges around the relationship to white power in American society. W. E. B. DuBois was oriented to the West, and had to work his way out of that kind of Western orientation and his relationship to post-enlightenment discourse. DuBois worked according to a very Western model with his sociology, producing an early work like *The Philadelphia Negro*. By the time he was seventy years old, he realized that there were a couple of things missing, namely Marx and Freud. He then said that these white people were never going to change! [Laughter] And he also said that it was only rational to move to a more nationalist agenda. Frederick Douglass advocated, through his journalism and his political career, a black good life. I think Booker T. Washington came to this from the bottom—that is to say “up from slavery” as a kind of entrepreneurial allegory. It's the notion of manual labor, the gospel of a Horatio Alger, industrialist tradition. Booker T. Washington is not an intellectual in the sense that DuBois is. Frederick Douglass is an organic intellectual. Booker T. Washington is far more a kind of pedagogical, technologically-oriented spokesperson who is extraordinarily politically canny. He is very much a subtle politician of the scene. But as I said, all of these guys are constructing themselves in relationship to white power, and they are also thinking about what they can get with their particular agendas in relationship to black power.

