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Structural Isolation and the Genesis of Black Nationalism in North America

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IT IS OFTEN asked why Marcus Garvey's greatest black nationalist successes were not in the West Indies and Central America—regions in which he both lived and worked—with their large black populations, but in the United States where there were comparatively few blacks. It is also asked why the United States, where African traditions are less obvious than in the Caribbean and Central America, has become the center of black nationalist thought.

This paper attempts to answer these and related questions by exploring the origins of black nationalism. Or put in a slightly different way, it seeks the reason for the early and continuous development of a black sense of self in North America, and the continuing transformation of this self-consciousness into varied nationalist political strategies. Of course, the full answer to these questions awaits the development of a black political psychology, and a more complete understanding of the relationship between the types of black personalities and the political strategies adopted by Afro-Americans. Despite the recent explosion of knowledge on blacks, comparatively little has been learned concerning black political ideologies and even less data has been accumulated on the black self.

Given the absence of a fully developed black political psychology and of the well understood black intellectual history that is its necessary prerequisite, a paper such as this can be no more than a preliminary exploration. Moreover, since the link between black politics and black psychology is itself an underdeveloped area of inquiry, the paper must of necessity focus on those aspects of black life that have been more completely explored, with the caution that even in this arena there is still much that is not fully understood. The position of black people in the larger social order is crucial, both to the development of their individual personalities and to the political strategies they have organized. To focus then on the peculiar structural isolation of North American blacks is to lay the foundation for the development of a better understand-
ing of the black mind in general, and of the roots of black nationalist thought in particular.  

The reasons for the neglect of black thought are deeply rooted in racism. Although anthropology and sociology legitimated the study of blacks long before psychology and history, all four disciplines now accept the idea that African Americans, as a social group, constitute a legitimate area of inquiry. But it is another matter to accept the black mind as a proper subject of study because to admit that the black mind constitutes a distinctive phenomenon is to reject the last vestiges of racist thought. It has not yet been two generations since many Euro-Americans insisted on the physical superiority of whites over blacks, but this racism has been recently modified to take into account black achievements in athletics. As Cleaver has cleverly demonstrated, whites have conceded black superiority in the physical realm, but they still insist on their own preeminence in matters of the mind. To study the black self, black political theory, and the intellectual history of Afro-Americans is to admit that blacks have minds and that they have been able to use their brains to reflect upon their condition in North America. It is not surprising therefore that black psychology, black political theory, and black intellectual history are greatly underdeveloped disciplines compared to the social study of the black community.

The Structural Isolation of North American Blacks

Blacks, in what was to become the United States, were segregated from non-blacks in a way that was unique in the hemisphere. Their structural isolation in the colonial era was responsible for the growth and strength of black nationalism in the post-1800 period. The roots of black nationalism are not therefore found in the slave systems of the nineteenth century, nor in the ghettos of the twentieth, but in the events of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The actions of nineteenth century slaves and twentieth century ghetto dwellers have not been fully comprehended because the lives of earlier blacks have not been understood. The so-called founding fathers of black nationalism—Delany, Russwurm, Walker—were men whose ideologies had been shaped by the peculiar pattern of race relations that developed on the North American continent.

The peculiar isolation of North American blacks is most clearly seen in the development of what Hoetink has termed a “two-tier socioracial structure,” by which he means that there were but two racial groups in

2. In the early years of the twentieth century, racists were still insisting that whites were physically, as well as mentally, superior to blacks. See Rhett S. Jones, “Proving Blacks Inferior, 1870–1930,” Black World, XX (February 1971), especially 15–16.
3. Eldridge Cleaver, Soul on Ice (New York: Delta, 1968), especially Chapter IV.
British North America, one white and one black. In the rest of the hemisphere gradually three distinct racial groupings developed, one composed of whites, one of mixed bloods, and still another of blacks. The absence of a legally recognized, culturally legitimated mulatto caste meant that blacks and whites in British North America were isolated from one another in a manner different from any other settlement in the colonial Americas. In the rest of the New World the intermediate status of mixed bloods was codified, so that white persons and black folk were forced to acknowledge their kinship to one another. Moreover, the middle position of people of color was such that they served as a cultural bridge over which information concerning whites could be passed on to blacks, and by means of which whites could gain reliable knowledge of the black community.

The social carriers who made such information possible were the mixed bloods who almost everyplace in the colonial Americas drew distinctions among themselves based on their European ancestry. In the Caribbean, for example, the octoroon looked down on the quadroon, who in turn snubbed the mulatto, and all felt superior to blacks. People of color attempted to create distinct social communities based on their admixture of white blood, but although these different groups were sometimes recognized by white settlers and written into the statutes, mixed bloods were seldom successful in creating exclusive social groups. There were two reasons for this. First, people of color almost always lacked political power so that they were unable to punish legally those who sought to force their way into a higher socioracial group. Second, and perhaps of greater importance, mixed bloods frequently tried to pass themselves off at a higher status level than that to which they were entitled. If, for example, a mulatto thought he could successfully misrepresent himself as an octoroon—and given the vagaries of biology he might well be able to do so—then he would attempt to pass. The mid-

4. H. Hoetink, *Slavery and Race Relations in the Americas* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 14-31. For differing explanations as to how this came about, compare H. Hoetink, *The Two Variants in Caribbean Race Relations* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), Marvin Harris, *Patterns of Race in the Americas* (New York: Wiley, 1967), and Pierre van den Berghe, *Race and Racism* (New York: Wiley, 1967), and the long neglected Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Caste, Class and Race* (New York: Doubleday, 1948). When van den Berghe's book was first published, it was widely hailed by the sociological establishment as though it were the first such effort of its kind when, in fact, it is far less sweeping and detailed than Cox's work. Indeed, the general neglect of the black sociologist's book is such that a generation of young sociologists believe van den Berghe had the first word on the subject and *Caste, Class and Race* is virtually ignored by those who work in the field of comparative race studies.

5. This topic is more fully explored in Rhett S. Jones, "Structural Isolation, Race, and Cruelty in the New World," *Third World Review*, IV (Fall 1978), 34-43.

6. Some mixed bloods were more successful than others. The reader may wish to compare the social relations among non-whites in four different greater Caribbean settlements at the end of the eighteenth century by examining Pedro M. Arcaya, *Insurreccion de los Negros de la Serrania de Coro* (Caracas: Instituto Pan Americano, 1949); Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (Charleston, S.C.: E. Merriard, Willington, 1810); Sir William Young, *An Account of the Black Charaibs in the Island of St. Vincents* (London: J. Sewall, Knight and Triphook, 1795); and John G. Stedman, *Narrative of a five years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (London: J. Johnson, 1806). Arcaya is concerned with Venezuela, Edwards largely with Jamaica, Young with St. Vincent's, and Stedman with Surinam.
The middle tier was not composed of fixed, isolated racial communities, but of a number of individuals who were continually climbing into one group, or being discovered and forced down into another. The lines between the various categories of mixed bloods were not stable, so that people of color generally moved in and out of communities that were themselves shifting and changing.

The situation was different in the biracial British North American colonies. Whites and blacks, in what was to become the United States, began to entertain vicious stereotypes of one another. The structural isolation of blacks prohibited day-to-day personal contact between the races, and Euro-Americans found it possible to develop dehumanizing stereotypes of black folk. These were organized into a coherent system of racist thought sometime about the middle of the eighteenth century. Racism requires the creation of stereotypes as Blassingame has demonstrated in his discussion of how Sambo came to be widely accepted by white North Americans. But these stereotypes could not have developed if Euro-Americans had not been isolated from blacks and if they had been able to perceive life in the quarters. Stereotypes of blacks did develop in the Caribbean, and in Central and South America, but they tended to be more complex; Sambo was but one of many black figures in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, St. Croix, and Surinam, but in North America he gradually became the only figure.

This isolation was doubly reinforced because blacks were not only separated from North American whites along racial lines, but as time passed they were also separated from them along occupational lines as well. Certain undesirable jobs were gradually assigned solely to Afro-Americans. The process of walling blacks off into separate work groups continued even beyond the formal end of slavery, so that Booker Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, who agreed on comparatively little, both campaigned against efforts to force blacks from skilled occupations. The depression, which forced many whites to work alongside blacks, and provided a powerful economic reason for the development of unions which did not segregate black and white workers, signalled the end of an evolutionary process of separating black workers from white that began in the colonial period. This process had reached its zenith in the 1920's when the millions of black persons who lived in the growing ghettos of the North found themselves concentrated in a narrow occupational range. Most Northern black workers were unskilled laborers and domestic servants. Garvey's movement drew its strength from this double structural isolation of Afro-American workers.

The structural isolation of blacks so fully realized in the second decade of the twentieth century had its beginnings in British North America, when blacks were carefully separated from whites and prevented from occupying positions to which their knowledge, talents, and expertise entitled them. In addition to being separated from the colonists, blacks were also segregated early in the colonial period from Native Americans. White colonists greatly feared that the two non-white peoples would perceive the settlers as a common enemy and join together to destroy them. Such fears were particularly great in the Carolinas and Georgia, where in contrast to the British settlements further north, there were large numbers of slaves. Colonists in this region had also to deal with the sophisticated Native Americans known as the "Five Civilized Tribes." British settlers adopted a largely successful policy of divide and rule aimed at setting the Native Americans and blacks against one another. Indians were rewarded for tracking down black runaways, for turning back to the colonists slaves who made their way to Indian villages, and for helping to prevent the formation of Maroon societies. Blacks were encouraged to dupe the Indians, to fight alongside whites in the case of Indian raids, and to serve as troops in attacks on Indian villages. The result was a considerable amount of mutual suspicion and the social separation of blacks from Indians as well as from whites. Apparently the only North American tribe not so successfully segregated from the slaves were the Seminole. A more typical relationship between North American Indians and blacks was that between the Cherokee, Africans, and Afro-Americans. Initially, the Cherokee were not very different in their treatment of blacks than were the Seminole, but as persons who hoped to win full acceptance as citizens by slaveholding southerners, they gradually assumed many of the racist attitudes of the whites among whom they lived. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the


Cherokee, who enjoyed a measure of independence from the United States government, first denied all persons of African ancestry the right to hold office or vote, then threatened to punish those who taught blacks to read or write, and finally sought to banish all free blacks from the Cherokee Nation.  

Elsewhere in the hemisphere blacks were not as successfully isolated from Native Americans despite strenuous efforts. Padden has suggested that blacks sometimes sided with the Indians of New Spain, intermarried with them, and used their own knowledge of the Spanish legal system on behalf of the Indians. Arcaya has maintained that Venezuelan blacks, Indians, and Afro-Indians joined together in revolutionary movements inspired by the Enlightenment. Deren insists that Haitian voodoo owes a powerful debt to Arawak and Carib cosmology, and Young describes an Afro-Carib society on St. Vincent.  

As a consequence of structural isolation, blacks were somewhat separated from the Euro-American society, but this did not mean they were necessarily cut off from and ignorant of the emerging American culture. Black folk were exposed to the same ideas and held some of the same beliefs as whites. Any attempt to explore the genesis of black nationalism must begin with the premise that most colonial blacks not only well understood the ideology of the founding fathers, but proved adept at turning against their oppressors. Blacks living in the Revolutionary era were not reluctant to enlist the ringing phrases of the Revolution in the cause of black freedom. In 1774 a number of them insisted: “We have in common with all other men a natural right to our freedoms without being depriv’d of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by any compact or agreement whatever.” In 1777 eight black Bostonians filed a petition to abolish slavery and restore “the nature Right of all men,” while in 1779 a number of New Hampshire black folk urged “the name of slave may not more be heard in a land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom.” Gabriel, after being taken in an 1800 slave rebellion, informed his captors that he “had nothing more to offer than what General Washington would have had to offer had he been taken by the British and put to trial by them. I have adventured my life in endeavoring to obtain the liberty of my countrymen, and am a willing sacrifice to their cause.” And to stress the hypocrisy of white folk who prattled of freedom while holding men in chains, those involved in the Nat Turner rebellion chose July Fourth to strike for freedom.  

13. Ibid., p. 381.  
14. R. C. Padden in a personal communication.  
17. Ibid., p. 23.  
18. Ibid.  
19. Ibid.
This knowledge of white political beliefs was paralleled by a similar sophistication on matters of religion and economics. In the settlements outside British North America, non-whites had a different orientation toward European culture because given the existence of a mulatto caste they (or their children) might well win a middle-rung position if they were qualified and could show they were willing to follow a Euro-American lifestyle. North American blacks, on the other hand, considered European and later Euro-American culture as an object. It was always something they contemplated from the outside because their structural isolation separated them from those who deeply believed in it. This is not to say that colonial blacks remained uninfluenced by European modes of thought—such an argument would be absurd—but that white culture, white society, white folk, were consciously regarded as something different and alien. European culture and its creole variants, therefore, always remained for blacks objects of reflection, and it is their deliberate thought on the nature of white culture that is the root of black nationalism. Elsewhere in the New World the absence of a distinct line between the races delayed such conscious reflection, because non-whites were confronted with a series of overlapping socioracial societies and cultures through which many of them might move. Only in the British North American colonies were they confined to a separate status, and it was there that Afro-Americans early began to reflect on the meaning of blackness.

**Structural Isolation and the Impact of Africa**

The atypical—by New World standards—isolation of black folk in North America had consequences for the transmission of African culture. Unhappily for those interested in the transfer of West African (the vast majority of slaves brought to the Americas were from West Africa) cultural elements to the New World, the entire discussion of this important issue has become mired in politics. On one side we have those such as the sociologist van den Berghe who argue Africans were effectively “deculturated,” and on the other those blacks who insist categorically, “We are an African people.”20 The historical reality was much more complex, and it has become increasingly obvious that the issue is what survived of Africa, where, and under what circumstances, rather than...
simple-minded sweeping statements rooted in often equally simple-minded political polemics.

In British North America the peculiar isolation of blacks caused them to take an emotional and intellectual perspective on their Africanity different from that held by their fellows elsewhere in the hemisphere. The black North American attitude toward Africa tended to be analogous to that taken toward Euro-America; it was careful, cautious, and while not always favorable, always reflective. Black sociologists in the opening years of the twentieth century acknowledged that black folk in the United States were much influenced by Africa. They then proceeded to debate and discuss whether such an influence was good or bad for African Americans. It was not that these scholars were unaware of their African heritage, nor that they were unwilling to acknowledge it, but that they found it possible because of their separation from Africa to make it the object of deliberate study and examination. 21

The curious thing about the enslavement of West Africans was that it brought them a great deal of freedom in the Americas as compared to the white settlers, who remained tied to European political states. Although a New World psychology began to develop early and white Americans became aware of the differences between themselves and Europeans, they remained linked economically and politically to the Old World and continued to think of themselves as Europeans. It took time for the socio-psychological realities of creole identity to be transformed into political strategies which could justify the political independence of the colonies. The experience of Africans in the New World was different because their enslavement immediately cut the tie between them and the states of West Africa. The fact that no West African polity exercised power in the colonial Americas meant that unlike Europeans, Africans could not expect help from Old World governments. The military and political adventures of European states in the New World helped to maintain a link between them and their colonists, but Africans were isolated and cut off from home. The inability of West African states to maintain contact with and protect their citizens in the Americas had an impact on other aspects of slave life, because politics, religion, family structure, and economics were tightly bound together in traditional West African society. 22

This absence of West African polities made it easy for Afro-Americans to transform emergent American psychological realities into political struggles for independence. These struggles generally took the form of Marronnage—the establishment of separate, all-black states, independent of white colonial control. Maroon societies came into existence

throughout the New World and were formally acknowledged by settlers in Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, Santo Domingo, Mexico, Surinam, Jamaica, and St. Croix. In Brazil and Venezuela some historians frankly declare that the Maroon rebellions were the forerunners of their nations' struggles for independence. 23

Although West African states were powerless in the New World and Maroon societies came into existence throughout the hemisphere, the situation of North American blacks was unique because comparatively few Africans arrived there in the nineteenth century. In contrast, large numbers of Africans were transported to Brazil and certain Caribbean colonies such as Cuba and Puerto Rico, until well into the nineteenth century. Even prior to 1800 the number of Africans coming to the islands in the sugar Caribbean tended to exceed in absolute and proportional terms those transported to North America. North American blacks, unlike their brethren elsewhere in the New World, began early to reproduce themselves; this meant that an increasing proportion of North American blacks were born in this hemisphere, while in Brazil, Cuba, Surinam, and Jamaica, a large portion of the black population was African born. In the greater Caribbean, Africa was a place of which the overwhelming majority of black folk had intimate knowledge, either because they had been born there themselves, or because their parents or peers had their origins there. In North America, comparatively few slaves were born in the Old World, so that unfamiliar Africa became an object for reflection and speculation by blacks. The roots of black nationalism are to be found in this Afro-American thought.

Outside of what was to become the United States, black persons did not so much think of themselves as Africans as they considered themselves to be members of a particular West African ethnic group. African identities were encouraged by colonial authorities who believed that by promulgating West African rivalries, they lessened the chances of the slaves joining in revolt. 24 A sense of West African ethnic identity was also encouraged by the selective preferences of the planters who tried to obtain slaves from a particular tribal group, but who would reluctantly accept persons from others. In colonies controlled by a particular European power, slaves from certain West African nations came to predominate, but there were almost always enough persons from other states present to create and maintain a sense of ethnic identity. 25

24. It was not uncommon, for example, for settlers to permit the members of certain West African ethnic groups to elect their own rulers, but while such leaders sometimes were given petty authority, they had no real power in matters of importance. See Hubert Aimes, "African Institutions in America," Journal of American Folklore, XVIII (January–March 1905), 15-22, and Robert A. Warner, New Haven Negroes: A Social History (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1940).
America not only did comparatively few Africans arrive after 1770, but they were dispersed into small groups by Caribbean standards. Whereas a plantation of a hundred-odd slaves was the norm in Jamaica, Haiti, and Brazil, it was the exception in the southern part of the future United States. Whereas in Brazil, Cuba, or in St. Croix a slave might well expect to encounter a number of his fellow tribesmen, in North America this was unlikely from the beginning and became increasingly unlikely as a larger and larger percentage of black folk were born there. As a result, African identities remained strong in the greater Caribbean where blacks continued to think of themselves—even in some places until well into the nineteenth century—as members of particular African ethnic groups.

This African awareness was heightened in certain regions by an exchange of visitors between the Old World and the New. In Brazil, for example, some blacks returned to West Africa to undergo religiopolitical rituals, and the continuation of West African religions in Brazil was a major factor in the slave revolts of the nineteenth century. North American blacks, cut off from Africa, divided into small groups, and after 1800 more likely than not New World born, had little first-hand knowledge of Africa. Where West African languages survived in Brazil, Surinam, French Guiana, Haiti, and other places well into the nineteenth century, they vanished, except for a few isolated pockets, in the United States.

In short, the loyalty of blacks who were isolated from West Africa in North America was not an emotional commitment to a particular West African polity, a commitment underscored by knowledge of the language, shared religious beliefs, or a sense of kinship. It was a loyalty to Africa as a continent, as a motherland, a loyalty produced by isolation from Africa and by the separate sense of racial awareness that was generated as a consequence of the structural isolation of black folk. This is not to say that West African traditions did not continue to be important for North American blacks, but only that they were ideas thought about and not traditions to which they were unthinkingly committed emotionally. Blacks living in North America were aware of their common experiences and, unfettered by continuing contact with Africa, able to perceive what they had in common in a manner not possible for their fellows elsewhere in the hemisphere: “In Newport in 1780 a number of blacks met to establish the African Union Society, which, among other things, was to assist its members in time of distress and help young African-Americans find apprenticeships. In 1787 the Free African Society was founded by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, who thought blacks should have an organization outside the churches that would crosscut doctrinal differences.”

26. The author is indebted to Anani Dzidzienyo for this information.
sons. First it suggests that North American blacks had wandered so far in thought from Africa that they had already begun to divide themselves along the lines of Euro-American theologies to the extent that an extra-religious structure was necessary to unite them. Second, and of greater importance, these blacks thought of themselves as Africans, not as citizens of particular West African states. The peculiar structural isolation of North American blacks resulted in their being the first Afro-Americans to discover what they had in common as Africans.

This early black awareness was primarily the consequence of the double isolation of North American blacks who were separated from the whites who shared the continent with them, and from the Africans who remained in the Old World. In addition, most West Africans transported to the Americas shared a common cultural heritage. Although there were surface linguistic, political, religious, and familial differences in the West African states, a certain underlying cultural unity characterized the region. West Africans at home found their differences more interesting than their similarities and used them as the basis of many a fascinating quarrel, but transported—as slaves—to the Americas they early began to perceive their commonality. North American blacks became aware of this essential unity long before their sisters and brothers in the Caribbean and South America because they were not distracted by transplanted African tribalism, nor were they encouraged to deny their African heritage by whitening their children and their minds in order to improve their socio-racial position. Their formation of African organizations demanded a conscious reflection on what it meant to be an African, in a sense that continuing to think of one’s self as an Ashanti, an Ibo, or a Yoruba did not. North American blacks thought of themselves as a special people—as Africans—but their peculiar status meant they thought about being Africans, not that they thought as Africans.

This awareness of self in North American blacks was the source of black nationalism. The reflective Africanity that characterized North American blacks during the colonial era was nowhere more evident than in the religious sphere. In seeking to understand early American history, it is important to keep in mind that the colonies were established in an age of religious ferment and struggle. Whites who came to the Americas were as much motivated by a desire to serve God as a need to win riches and fame, and they came from an Old World wracked by religious strife. The Europeans who came to the colonial Americas were initially more conscious of religion than race. West Africans were no different. They had long witnessed a struggle between various indigenous faiths,

conflicts which had become increasingly complex with the appearance of first Islam, and later Christianity. The West African religious picture became even more convoluted because neither the Muslims nor the Portuguese Catholics insisted on constructing closed, isolated religious systems. Both had a tradition of teaching "pagan" peoples and both proved willing to make theological compromises. Some, but not all, of the Protestant missionaries who later appeared on the West African coast adopted a similar, tolerant viewpoint.

It was an age of religion, a period in which men gave to God the same kind of loyalty and devotion they now give to state, politics, and work. Within this religious era at least three Afro-American faiths emerged with the one in North America—because of the peculiar isolation of black folk—constituting an example of the deliberate thought that is the source of black nationalism. The first of these faiths was Jamaican obeah, a religion that essentially represents a West African cosmology transferred virtually unchanged to the New World. Throughout much of the eighteenth century Euro-Jamaicans were little interested in the religious beliefs of their slaves, most of whom came from the Gold Coast and shared a common theological world-view. Indeed, the Englishmen who lived on the island—in contrast to other American colonists—were themselves so little interested in religion that the quality of their clergy was held to be among the worst in the English settlements. In the absence of organized Christian opposition, obeah became the dominant Afro-Jamaican religion. But in the nineteenth century when Christian missionaries for the first time made a serious effort to convert the black population of the island, it was Christianized within a generation. Unlike its Gold Coast forerunner, obeah had not developed defenses against outside religious challenges and when one appeared—in the form of Christianity—it collapsed.

A second example, and a very different form of Afro-American religion, was Haitian voodoo. The slaves transported to that island had to confront a proselytizing Christianity from the beginning and had to devise strategies for its accommodation. On one side stood the slaves determined on maintaining the beliefs of Dahomey and of the Yoruba; on the other side stood the clergy supported by the power of the French state. Some sort of compromise was inevitable, particularly as the acceptance of Catholic tenets did not necessarily require that the bondsmen abandon all West African beliefs.


31. The term "voodoo" is introduced here with reluctance as it is one with which numerous scholars quarrel, but most North Americans understand roughly what is meant by the term, so it has been used in preference to another which might prove confusing. It is interesting that no similar knowledge and/or quarrelsomeness exists over "obeah."

32. Deren provides a sprightly account of the compromise in Haiti. For Mexico, see Colin A. Palmer, "Religion and Magic in Mexican Slave Society, 1570-1650," in Engerman and Genovese.
Two other factors contributed to the Haitian synthesis. First it appears that the West African ethnic groups transported to the island were accustomed to accommodating persons of different beliefs. In one of history’s many ironies, French Catholics who had a tradition of making compromises and accommodating themselves to different peoples encountered Dahomeans who had constructed one of the most sophisticated states in West Africa by tolerating persons of different beliefs. On the other hand, the narrow-minded English encountered an equally inflexible, comparatively intolerant people in the Akan-speaking tribes of the Gold Coast. The Haitian neo-African theology was therefore made possible by the fact that the Africans who constructed it were, themselves, for the most part, a tolerant people. But so were their overlords, who as Catholic missionaries had an established tradition of working out mutually agreeable compromises with non-Christian peoples. Protestants, on the other hand, had no such experience and initially gained converts by persuading individuals to leave the Catholic church, persons who were in effect already Christians. It took some time for Protestant missionaries to work out techniques of dealing with non-Christian peoples. The early fumbling efforts of English Protestant missionaries to minister to Native Americans contrasted sharply with the smooth, if bureaucratic, efforts of their Catholic counterparts. In Haiti, the voodoo synthesis was the result of two comparatively tolerant peoples encountering one another, a situation that was different from that of Jamaica.

For all their differences, obeah and voodoo—and the Afro-American religions of which they are but typical examples—were much closer to one another than to the neo-African faith built by blacks in North America. Like their Jamaican brethren, North American blacks lived in a Protestant society that had little experience in converting non-whites. But unlike Afro-Jamaicans, they were confronted with a large white population that believed in the Gospel and preached it to one another. And unlike Afro-Haitians, these same blacks were initially ignored. The priests in the Catholic settlements made vigorous attempts to convert Africans and Afro-Americans but most ministers in Protestant North America ignored them. This initial negligence had profound consequences for North American blacks, since unlike their Jamaican counterparts, they lacked an agreed upon Gold Coast cosmology on which to fall back.

Black North American religions lack spontaneous, vigorous West African emotion. The spirituals, to be sure, move the congregation; there is speaking in tongues, rolling about on the floor, and dynamic

preaching, but it all takes place within a framework purposefully thought out and reflectively created by black North Americans. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, humiliated in a white Protestant church, set about the creation of a Christian, Afro-American congregation. In constructing their church, they consulted regularly with white clergymen and yet remained conscious that it was the isolation of white from black, and the rising tide of racism, that forced them to create a new institution. Since the time of Allen and Jones, a number of blacks in North America have found it necessary to create new churches, but their creations are carefully thought out and justified in a manner white Protestants find comprehensible. Indeed, the oft-noted emotion that characterizes the black Protestant churches in North America is a kind of double denial. First, it seems to offset the fact that the church has been deliberately thought out and organized, and second, it refutes the idea that there is any connection between it and the larger white religious structure. Emotionalism began this way, but it has taken on a life of its own and its exaggerated image in black churches helps to widen the gulf between whites and blacks in the United States.

The Roots of Black Nationalism

The peculiar structural isolation of North American blacks produced, in the colonial era, a perspective on Africanity different from that held by other persons of African descent in the Americas. Black nationalism for Afro-Americans born in North America has not been the perverse kind of escapist racism so many sociologists see, but rather an ideological reflection and justification of black lives on that continent. As such, it has always had an appeal for North American blacks, just as its mirror image—racism—continues to be attractive to North American whites. The recent attempts by white scholars to prove blacks inferior by means of intelligence testing rest squarely on the belief that a firm and fast line can be drawn between persons who are white and those who are black. In the United States, the government, colleges, social scientists, the NAACP, realtors, and the Ku Klux Klan, have little difficulty in drawing and following the color line. Although there are periodic attempts to introduce the concept “mulatto” in the United States they are usually short-lived. While this racial dichotomy has proved psychologically comforting to whites in the United States, it has created problems for blacks who learned no matter how mixed their ancestry they were black. Afro-Americans who live in the United States have, unlike their fellows elsewhere in the hemisphere, not escaped their blackness. Yet, like their fellows, they confront a negative definition of Africanity and systematic continuing attacks on African civilization, culture, and intelligence. Afro-Brazilians, Afro-Jamaicans, and Afro-Haitians have had to endure similar attacks but for them the “mulatto
escape hatch” offered a way out;34 they could become mulattos, or pardos, or octoroons, or quadroons. With the proper ancestors they could be anything other than black.

Small wonder that Marcus Garvey’s black nationalist seed fell on fertile North American ground and grew to heights as yet unmatched in the Caribbean, Central and South America. Forced back on their Africanity, North American blacks have celebrated it. Black nationalist movements will continue to have an appeal for them so long as the culture of the United States insists that to be black is to be ugly, stupid, and inferior. Black North Americans must embrace black nationalism or settle for self-hate.

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34. See, for example, Edward Byron Reuter, The Mulatto in the United States (Boston: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1918), and more recently, Orde Coombs, “Mulatto Pride,” New York, XI (June 26, 1978), 33-37. The “mulatto escape hatch” is a term coined by Carl Degler to reflect the fact that colonial authorities outside North America frequently permitted mulattos to achieve middle rung positions denied blacks. See Carl N. Degler, Neither Black nor White (New York: Macmillan, 1971), especially chapters II and V.