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Guerrilla Exegesis:  
A Post-Modern Proposal For Insurgent  
African American Biblical Interpretation

In dedication to Amiri Baraka,  
who practices guerrilla exegesis in  
other venues, for his sixtieth birthday

in the  
tradition...  
of Douglass  
of David Walker  
Garnett  
Turner  
Tubman  
of ragers yeh  
ragers<sup>1</sup>

*Guerrilla exegesis.* *Guerrilla*, the diminutive of the Spanish term for war, meaning "little war" or "little warrior." Has marked affinities with Redfield's notion of "little tradition," the stream(s) of discourse from beneath the heel of the "great tradition" of hegemonic discourse.<sup>2</sup> From above, Webster defines a guerrilla as "one who engages in irregular warfare, especially as a member of

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<sup>1</sup>From the poem "In the Tradition (For Black Arthur Blythe)" by A. Baraka (no publisher: n.d.).

<sup>2</sup>R. Redfield, *The Little Community Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University 1960), 40-59.

an independent unit carrying out harassment and sabotage." From below, s/he is simply "somebody trying to make a dollar out of fifty cents."

*Exegesis*, from the Greek term signifying a narrative, a description, an explanation, an interpretation; a process of bringing out/leading out/teasing out meanings and significances heretofore obscured or hidden from view. *Guerrilla exegesis*, then, is the bringing or leading out of oppressed/suppressed/ don't-get-no-press meanings by sabotage, subversion or other non-traditional appropriations of hegemonic renderings, by independent non-conventional means of struggle and attack. Not playing by or audaciously re-writing hegemonic rules or both.<sup>3</sup>

*Guerrilla exegesis* is making new things, *hip* new things, out of old things, corny old things. It is a Jazz thing. Infusing a Duke Ellingtonian sort of melanin flavor, if you will. The song, "My Favorite Things," didn't do a thing for blk folks,<sup>4</sup> except maybe pay the small stipend of some big shot's Rochester chauffeur or Beulah maid. But then John Coltrane got hold of the tune and gave it

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<sup>3</sup>I use the terms "hegemony" and "hegemonic" as they are used by the Marxist political theorist A. Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, Q. Hoare and J. Nowell Smith, trans. (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 5-23. J. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 44-45, offers a succinct summary of Gramsci's view that victims of hegemonic domination

... are confined within the boundaries of the dominant world-view ... which, despite its heterogeneity, unambiguously serves the interests of the powerful, by mystifying power relations, by justifying various forms of sacrifice and deprivation, by including fatalism and passivity, and by narrowing mental horizons.

The early twentieth-century giant of African-American letters, Carter G. Woodson, as cited in *Famous Black Quotations* J. Cheatham, ed., (FBQ: Chicago, 1986), 32, provides a practical description of the pernicious effects of white supremacist hegemony:

When you control a man's [sic] thinking you do not have to worry about his actions . . .

You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told.

<sup>4</sup>The descriptive term "blk" is used in an abbreviated lower case form to signify my recognition of it as a self-determined ideological identity rather than an ethnicity. "African-American," signifying the hybrid cultural identity of Africans in America, is used in this essay in hyphenated form to signify this hybridity.

wings — *blk* wings. A Jazz thing. Worked *widit* (not “with it”) — worked *widit* walked all around on top of it like a good guerrilla should, and we had a new thing, a hip thing, a Jazz thing, a guerrilla thing, an inspiring thing, an empowering thing, a beautiful thing: an apple-pie lady song from a musical/movie with no *blk* folks in sight or in mind and yet the Coltrane guerrilla-thing still speaks to *blk*/ *cullet*/ African-American (yes, even knee-grow) sensibilities a generation later, a secondary use of a primary genre that refused to give us voice, a soprano sax that sang “I am somebody, we are somebody,” and suddenly nappy-headed girls and boys are scatting “Mo-mo-mo Mommy, I want to play a inscrement!”

*Guerrilla exegesis* is a hip thing, a Jazz thing replete with even jazzier sensibilities. It is Charlie Parker telling the technicians of Europe, “No longer is the sax the instrument of aristocrats, it’s now the scat-axe of cool cats.” It is the Temptations, in a mellow mood, redefining the uses of a tuxedo. It is David Walker’s *Appeal* causing Thomas Jefferson to roll over in his grave. It is Muhammad Ali turning fluidity of motion and quickness of hand into a referendum on white supremacy. It is Cornel West making the thoughts of dead Europeans live like never before.

It is Toni Morrison, taking the stories of outside *blk* folks, no- ‘count-unaccounted-for-cast-off-cross-eyed-only-spoken-of-by- maiden-aunts folks, the-preacher-say-they-betta-off-forgotten-and-not-talked-about-at-all-because-they-mess-is-sinful folks. And finding new truths there. New readings of reality. New histories. Colored commentaries. DuBoisian “double-consciousness” commentaries. “Little folk” as subjects, not objects. Taking the left turn stories that the High Yellow Negro Ladies Guild and the Clarence Thomas Hot Shot Colored Men’s “Sho’ Wish I Was White” Club wd rather see left untold. That those poised to attack the guerrilla exegete for refusing to toe the sacrosanct white line wd rather see

left untold. The, "How Dare You Question These White Folks About Biblical Exegesis?" colored SBL<sup>5</sup> contingent who, even as we speak, ask with unfeigned horror and embarrassment, "why he airing all this coon laundry in public? And just when we were beginning to fit in. Gosh golly."

*Guerrilla exegesis* is a Jazz thing, a guerrilla thing, a bricolage<sup>6</sup> thing. Mikhail Bakhtin has posited the notion of "double voiced" discourse in which "the word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his [sic] own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention."<sup>7</sup>

And so the guerrilla exegete, aware of methodological seams but not unduly wary of them, willing to risk them, unsheathes Bakhtin, unclips the safety from Bakhtin, slips Bakhtin from his holster, loads Bakhtin, and with Bakhtin in hand combines the corny categories of systematic theology with the ideo-aesthetics of Funk to evolve a theology for homeboy on the corner, for Aunt Jane on the front stoop and Uncle Mose at the barber shop, for dancing negroes and prancing negroes, for sitting and standing negroes, for Holy Ghost negroes and hustler negroes, a theology of new categories and old (and emergent) structures of feeling: a double-voiced theology, a theology of greasy blk sensibilities — a theology of James Brown, if you will.

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<sup>5</sup>The Society of Biblical Literature, the largest and most prestigious professional organization of Bible-related disciplines, including biblical scholars, systematic theologians, ethicists, church historians, etc.

<sup>6</sup>This French term was introduced into social-scientific discourse to describe the workings of the "mythical thought" of the "savage" [read "pre-industrial non-European"] by the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University 1966), 16-33. It signifies discarding externally approved notions of order and propriety in order to use whatever cultural and intellectual resources that are at hand, in whatever ways one finds necessary to make one's point. Appropriation of this term from a work such as that of Levi-Strauss is itself a guerrilla exegetical act.

<sup>7</sup>M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 352.

In James Brown double-voiced theological discourse, Jesus' cleansing of the Temple becomes "Papa Come Here Quick and Bring Me that Lickin' Stick." His recounting of Peter's rebuke to Jesus' prediction of his own crucifixion was J.B.'s first big hit: "Please, Please, Please (Don't Go — I Love You So.)" In James' double-voiced discourse he sang of the New Covenant and grooved us at the same time with "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag." Of course, Gethsemane's anguish in J.B. deuce-discourse can be none other than "I Break Out (In a Cold Sweat)." And "It's Too Funky in Here (Open up the Windows)" most certainly is about Lazarus locked up in the tomb for four long days.

*Guerrilla exegesis* is transgressive. Eclectic. Irreverent when it need be, devotional when it can be. For bricoleurs. For folk unashamed of popular culture. For folk who can appreciate the unalloyed magnificence of everyday genius. For folks unashamed to read the marginalization of Jesus and his Galilean compatriots through the timeless analytical prism of the Whispers' first hit recording, "Seems Like I Gotta Do Wrong (Before They Notice Me)."

*Guerrilla exegesis* is transgressive. Irreverent. Asks questions. Silly Wabbit, how can the possessive demonic presence called "Legion" in Mark 5, the occupying presence that wrought the bitter pathology of oppression in Mark's community and sought to remain in possession of the *country*, not the *man* (v.10), be anything *but* the Roman military?

Transgressive. Irreverent. Asks questions. Sister Liberation Theologian, how can Luke be the model liberation evangelist if he never critiques the oppressive social order that produced the poverty, misery, classism and marginalization that he highlights? If he exculpates the Romans from their bloodlust? If in 23:8 he says that Herod was happy to see Jesus without explaining that Herod was happy for the opportunity to lynch yet another country boy?

Transgressive. Irreverent. Asks questions. Herr Doktor, if the Gospel of Mark's primary intended audience is little people,<sup>8</sup> why are its 41 occurrences of the Greek phrase *kai euthus* variously translated as "Forthwith, Immediately, Thereupon, Straightaway", etc., rather than the consistent common narratorial segue of little folks: "and then... and den... and den..."? Would it sound too much like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, like Toni Morrison, like Langston Hughes, and not enough like William Shakespeare?

Transgressive. Asks questions. Professor Very Pius, if Jesus' paradigmatic prayer (called the Lord's Prayer) has as its paramount concerns bread for subsistence in a time of hunger, relief from debt when an unjust debt structure crushed the people underfoot, and the establishment of God's sole sovereignty when the peoples' misery was largely the by-product of Caesar's authority, then why is the Lord's Prayer not also called the Lord's Paradigmatic Critique of Political Economy? The Lord's Model of Social Analysis? And this *guerrilla exegesis*. What is it? It is transgressive, a transgressive stance. Sometimes smooth quick deceptive with pin-point accuracy like Sugar Ray Robinson, sometimes bullish blunt straight-ahead like Joe Frazier. Eclectic. Sometimes float like a butterfly, toe-to-toe in the center of the ring and rope-a-dope-ing all in the same round.

A bricolage thing. Using whatever means you have to free the meanings struggling to be freed, even if those means reside outside the bounds of methodological conventionality, outside the bounds of the hegemonic OK. Not a methodology, *guerrilla exegesis* is a way of using methodologies. Not a methodology, but a consciousness. A consciousness that all methodologies are expressions of and in service to some ideology. That to be wed to any one

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<sup>8</sup>For a brief but illuminating discussion of the lower-class sociopolitical location of Mark and his intended readers see H. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 1-26.

methodological constellation is to swear allegiance to the interests and world views of their formulators as well. That there is no objective methodology just as there is no objective military. For example, Bronislaw Malinowski, a leading light of the structural-functional social anthropology that still underpins most mainstream biblical studies, extolled its practical value for "those who economically have to exploit savage trade and savage labor."<sup>9</sup> Not just non-objective methodology, but pernicious ideology, truly savage in its intent.

And so *guerrilla exegesis* is also a purposeful consciousness of analytical methods. Not only knowing why your finger is on the trigger, but also which particular finger is on which particular trigger. Also if you aim to maim kill or miss. A consciousness: do you lust to be lauded as a "good boy" or a "good gal," as the first negro on your block to master (and be mastered by) the fragmentation and blinding minutiae of the form-critical heart of the historical-critical tradition that is itself a methodological vestige of the Golden Age of European Imperialism? Or is your nose stuck in the evacuatory canal of the newest methodological fad? Are you now proudly a "lit crit" drawing your full analytical sustenance from the cavernous well-spring of postmodern doublespeak? Is Foucault your newest icon, as in "I disagree, sir, because that simply is not consistent with the Foucauldian notion of regimes of truth?" (say this proudly and pompously). Does Derridian deconstruction make *your* mouth water? Or are you still riding the old horse given you by the guardians of the academic status quo, refusing to get a new horse or even a dog that's housebroken?

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<sup>9</sup>As cited by R. Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 38. Horsley here offers an excellent study of the ideological underpinnings and the pitfalls of the use of structural-functionalism in biblical studies. This study is indispensable reading for the guerrilla exegete. See especially pp. 65-170.

In an earlier American revolution, the British dominationists fought with predictable conventionality to maintain their right to do wrong, to maintain their right to set the rules, erect the standards and evolve institutions in a way that served their interests. But the coarse quick American guerrillas, fighting for their own interests, fighting for their own thing, not being confused, knowing full well where their own interests lay, busted a quick clean buckskin move, a little awkward but very very effective. Red-faced redcoats running everywhere, caught completely unaware. Their heavy heel removed from the buckskin folk's collective neck, the bigshots just didn't know that the little people could strategize for themselves.

Likewise, the guerrilla exegete, not being confused, not having a plantation mentality, knowing that it is not about the British but about the buckskin, not being confused, not choosing to swim in streams of discourse flowing against her own interests, not being confused, not opting for a redder coat, not being confused, not being confused, not being confused, swift hardstraight attacks the stiff redcoat formation that wreaks havoc among his people. Her muskets and his cannon are the dominant formation denizens' own analytical tools and instruments turned against them, *their* explosives, *their* bludgeons, *their* cutting and slashing implements of ideology, along with the well-crafted weapons of the guerrilla's own community.

*Guerrilla exegesis* is eclectic. And the guerrilla's arsenal likewise is eclectic. It has knives, bullets bombs bludgeons, and razors of various types. The guerrilla uses them all. Karl Marx *and* Malcolm X. Jurgen Habermas *and* Zora Neale Hurston. Bultmann, Barth *and* Baldwin *and* Bebop. Antonio Gramsci *and* Marcus Garvey. Michel Foucault *and* Itumeleng Mosala. Norman Gottwald *and* Marvin Gaye. (A representative guerrilla strategy is the gospel music of Professors Thomas Dorsey and James Cleveland, the social psychology of Frantz Fanon, the peasant studies of James C.

Scott, and Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On", all brought to bear on the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Mark). Again. (A representative guerrilla strategy is using Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, James Weldon Johnson's classic *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and the German biblical scholar Martin Hengel's *Judaism and Hellenism*<sup>10</sup> to understand Michael Jackson's tragic self-mutilating wannabee response to hegemonic aesthetic notions by viewing it against the backdrop of the wannabee Jews in 1 Maccabees who removed their marks of circumcision — without anesthesia! — in order to look like uncut Greeks in the open nakedness of the Greek gymnasium).

The guerrilla exegete is a guerrilla. Flailing at this, uncovering that, contradicting the other, deconstructing, lifting up, putting down. Now using the whole ring, now lying on the ropes. Now disarming whole libraries, now extolling the genius of a solitary paragraph. Now interrogating some ancient Greek writer, now revelling in the inarticulate genius of Fannie Lou Hamer.

And s/he, the guerrilla exegete, s/he the freedom fighter, s/he the counter-hegemonic karate wo/man, is not a prize fighter sweating in her/his drawers for the hegemonic pat on the head. No, s/he struggles because her/his people are bibliocentric, their lives devotedly focused on a Bible whose liberatory power has been defused and confused by dominationist interpreters. S/he struggles for the lives of those lovingly dedicated to a Bible whose strategically imposed hegemonic readings militate against their own fragile well-being. S/he struggles because the Bible continues to stand as the foremost tool of oppression and hegemonic domination in

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<sup>10</sup>M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981). Hengel is an important biblical scholar possessed of great breadth and erudition. Several of his works have been rightly hailed as milestones of biblical scholarship. However, because of the deeply Eurocentric proclivities evinced in his writings (see note 12 below), they must be used with the proverbial "grain of salt", i.e., very carefully and consciously, so as not to unwittingly serve his apparent ideological interests. Such vigilance of discernment is a primary on going task of the guerrilla exegete.

human history, surpassing even the Communist Manifesto for the mayhem committed in its name. Used to justify slavery. Lynching. Segregation. Genocide. Rampant militarism. Gender oppression. Myriad exclusions. A whole calendar of hurts. Flawless flesh declared leprous. Beautiful hearts declared impure. A gospel of liberation debauched to a rationale for oppression. A proclamation of freedom perverted to promulgation of dominationist rhetorics. A chill-pill for the outraged. The balm in Gilead become social novocaine and priestly poison.

And what of the struggle of the guerrilla exegete? Unlike an earlier revolution, it is not against taxation without representation that s/he fights, but interpretation without representation. Interpretation from above. Interpretation from Rome rather than Galilee. Interpretation by elite urbanites who refuse to acknowledge the dignity of rural sensibilities and their centrality to the Gospel. Interpretations by raging Hellenomaniacs<sup>11</sup> who write of the "superiority of the Greek spirit"<sup>12</sup> and then cast the Greeks as

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<sup>11</sup>M. Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University 1987), 281-316, identifies the turn of the nineteenth century as the period in which the racist and Eurocentric dominationist notions that permeate contemporary notion of Hellenism were introduced into the study of Greek history. He terms this historiographic development "Hellenomania" as an attempt to express the absurdity and extremity of its views. To evoke its tone, Bernal, 287, quotes Wilhelm von Humboldt, an architect of the modern research university whose work he offers as central to the development of Hellenomania:

"For us the Greeks step out of the circle of history. . . We fail entirely to recognize our relationship to them if we dare to apply the standards to them which we apply to the rest of world history . . . If every part of history enriched us with its human wisdom and human experience, then from the Greeks we take something more than earthly -- almost Godlike" [my emphasis].

<sup>12</sup> Hengel, *Judaism*, 13 writes,

"the Greek spirit first revealed its superiority to the people of the East . . . in a perfected, superior technique of war . . . and in a no less perfect and inexorable state administration, whose aim was the optimal exploitation of its subject territories."

Abandoning even the pretext of objectivity, Hengel is not content to posit sociopolitical ascendancy for the Greeks, but actually casts Greek "superiority" into the realm of metaphysics! Interestingly, for Hengel this "superiority" was initially expressed in efficiency of violent subjugation and exploitation of human labor. One can only wonder what sort of ideological affinities underpin such a perspective.

their own progenitors. Interpretation by scholars so uncomfortable with the implications of the Afro-Asiatic cultural nexus in which the Jesus movement began that they repatriated him to a culturally neutered figment of the geo-political imagination called the "Middle East".

*Guerrilla exegesis* is bold, not fearful. Not afraid to use what it has to divert the glazed eyes of hegemony's confused casualties from the hypnotic hegemonic gaze. The stare-down. The critical disapproving white of the eye. The oppressive ocular proclamation.

Bold, not fearful. Not afraid to say big ugly words like "white supremacy" and "Eurocentric." Not afraid to demystify "whiteness" as an identity of unjust color privilege rather than an ethnicity.<sup>13</sup> Not afraid to call white supremacy demonic. Evil. Godless. Demonic. So demonic that perfectly good ethnicities are cast aside to bear its cloak. To become "white" first, then Franco-American. "White" first, then German. "White" first, then British Irish Polish Swedish Portuguese Italian. Not German man, not Irish

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<sup>13</sup>See D. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), for a penetrating study of the development and apotheosis of "whiteness" as a racist ideological identity.

boy, not Polish-American woman, but "white" man first, "white" woman first: I'm white so I must be right.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, *guerrilla exegesis* is not afraid to call Eurocentrism demonic. Not banal Europe-centered ethnocentrism, but a white supremacist historiographic distortion casting Europeans as subjects and the rest of the world as objects, mere dark props on a white stage. The European as the chosen, the non-European "other" as the wretched. The European as civilized, the dark "other" as savage.<sup>15</sup> Neither is *guerrilla exegesis* afraid to name white supremacy and its historiographic expression, Eurocentrism, as those it seeks not to disable, but to destroy. For it is precisely these demonic supremacist notions, inscribed in the discourse of Euro-Western biblical scholarship, that destroyed the guerrilla's scholarly slumber and forced him/her to raise the buckskin banner, forced him/her to write with the two-edged sword.

*Guerrilla exegesis* is bold. Asks questions. Seeks crisp formulations, clearly enunciated notions. Precise notions. Cutting conceptualizations and slashing articulations. Sheep-from-goats articulations. Wheat-from-chaff articulations. As in 'Afrocentricity

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<sup>14</sup>It is important to note that because "white" is an ideological rather than an ethnic identity, European parentage and "whiteness" are not to be automatically equated, i.e., not all members of the various European ethnicities necessarily actively subscribe to the ideology of skin color privilege and domination that is "whiteness." However, because by virtue of birth all those of European descent are to some degree beneficiaries of this ideology, unless they openly challenge and disavow the unjust skin color perquisites of "whiteness", they are, at best, in tacit complicity with its injustice. Fortunately, there is a small, slowly growing number of Euro-Western biblical scholars who in their works openly acknowledge and challenge the distortions and exclusions wrought by ideological "whiteness" in the biblical academy. Notable among these are C. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988) R. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) and Tina Pippin *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992). All three scholars acknowledge and decry the skin color privilege and ideological baggage that accrue to them as Euro-Western individuals under white supremacist sociopolitical structures. Most importantly for the purposes of the guerrilla exegete, these scholars attempt to deconstruct those structures in their exegetical work, often by highlighting the similarities of those structures with structures of domination in the social world of Jesus.

<sup>15</sup>For a useful study of Eurocentric ideology see S. Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review, 1989).

is a response to the horror of Eurocentricity.' Not something that jes' grewed like Topsy. Not an ontological reality permeating every culture on the African continent like air. Not a Diopsian cultural unity. Not a conjure of the shaman or a trick of the thaumaturge. Neither the smooth street song of the mack nor the mystery of the metaphysician. No, it is a self-determining stance, a deep-throated loud shouted fist balled up kiss-my-wrist response to Eurocentric negation of dark humanity, a sin "we somebody, too, sucker," in all its profundity. A response to negation. A response to horror. A response to hegemonic aesthetic notions, to "good hair" and "bad hair." A response to the myths of blk inferiority, attenuated intellectuality, out-of-control sexuality, and innate basketballity. A response to every history textbook ever used in every primary and secondary educational institution in America. Every college and university. A response to the notion of European cultural articulations as the classical cultural expression of all of humanity. A response to Alan Bloom and Arthur Schlesinger, to Pats Moynihan Buchanan and Robertson, to vile racist politicians, to Woodrow Wilson and Ronald Reagan, to the cowardly all-Amerikkkan tormentors of the throbbing bodies of blk folk, to racist biblical interpretations and racist exegesises purveyed by racist preachers and racist scholars. A response to the white-Jesus-Nordic-Jesus-Germanic-Jesus-it-doesn't-matter-what-color-Jesus-is racist discourse (if it don't matter, Boss, den why you keep on making him look European?).

Yes, Afrocentricity is a response. To the ugliness and evil of white supremacist Eurocentricity. A response. No Eurocentric articulations, no need for Afrocentric articulations. And if Eurocentricity is an ideology of domination, then Afrocentricity, its symbiotic signified, must also be an ideology — of liberation. And ideology is about interests. Afrocentricity, then, is not a purloined pastiche of cultural artifacts and articulations. It is about the liberative interests of African-Americans, the counter-

hegemonic concerns of blk folks. If, like some recent Supreme Court appointees, it does not serve the anti-dominationist interests of our people, it is not Afrocentric. Call yourself whatever you will, mouth whatever rhetorics of revolution, wear whatever footwear, whatever headwear, however you wear your hair (dreadlocks chillin', braided styles of untold permutations or a close svelte 'fro), whatever *bubas*, whatever *dashikis*, whatever jewelry beads earrings noserings. However often you might sing "Kemet on my mind" trying to sound like Ray Charles, however often you might quote Asante, quote Diop, quote ben Jochannan, quote anybody who says anything that somebody might someday claim to be "African". If your project doesn't serve the liberative interests of people of African descent in the teeth of white supremacy, it is not Afrocentric.

Moise Tsonbe of the old Belgian Congo. Born there. Bred there. Spoke the indigenous language. Walked the walk. Talked the talk. But as president, kissed much Euro-hiney. Robbed the people, raped their interests, dissed dissent with deadly determination. This "Uncle Tombe", as Malcolm X called him. This hand-picked boy skinning grinning killing his own people to support European imperialistic rapaciousness. Tombe fulfilled criteria of "culture"-based Afrocentricity, but not of Afrocentricity as liberative ideology. A born and bred product of "African culture," but not Afrocentric. Not about liberating anybody.

Same with Mobutu Sese Seko, the new president. Changed his name from Joseph Mobutu. Changed insulting imperialist "Belgian Congo" to self-determining "Zaire." Names with indigenous names. Wears tuff leopardskin headgear. Good cultural moves. Occasionally mouthing anti-Western rhetorics. But still cheating folks, still killing folks. Still cutting the fool, still cutting deadly monkey shines, still grinning "Feets, don't fail me now" as he hounds his people to their undeserved deaths.

But then W.E.B. DuBois. Pronounced European cultural sensibilities. Fluent German. British walking stick. Three-piece suit. Spats. Talented-tenth. Harvard Ph.D. University of Berlin. No *kente*, no *dashiki*. But a founder of Pan-Africanism. A fervent life-long enemy of US apartheid. A ninety-year freedom fighter. Bearing no constructed vestiges of "African" culture, yet a paragon of Afrocentricity.

Ideology, counter-hegemonic interventions, a pronounced liberation tip. This, not *kente* cloth Swahili song Maulana monicker, this is the defining Afrocentric factor. Ideology. Not simply proclaiming that Pharaoh was "African" is Afrocentric, but also that he was an oppressor. That the pyramids are products of slave labor. Paeans to the God-complex of a brutal hereditary class. Not grandeur, but decadence. Not grandeur, but degradation. More in common with Jim Crow than with Jimmy Baldwin, with Fascist repression than with Aretha's expression. The focus on models and issues of liberation and domination in the Bible for the express purpose of raising an oppressed peoples' bibliocentric consciousness — this is Afrocentric biblical interpretation. Not just who's dark and who ain't, but on what side of the power equation they stand.

But even this definition of Afrocentricity is too slippery for the guerrilla exegete, for it is based on a mythical monolithic cultural construct called "Africa," a term we parrot incessantly, denying many peoples the grandeur of their own specificity, the wonder of their own sojourn, the rooty of they own tooty, and so on. *Guerrilla exegesis* asks "how can a white supremacist construct that disses and dismisses the political social economic ideological cultural meteorological topographical geographical particularity of diverse peoples of diverse circumstances, a rainbow of folk in a land mass three times the size of Europe, how can this historiographic equivalent of the insulting supremacist mode of address "you people' serve our needs?"

For the *guerrilla exegete*, it is not in the constructed identity of "African" that s/he operates, but in the existential identity of "African-American." Not in the construct, the unreality, but in the "been-struck", the tortured reality. The complexity of hybrid, hyphenated identity. Born in America. Forged in America. Aesthetic notions. Cultural expressions. Gospel, Blues, Jazz, Soul, R&B, Rap. W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells, Ella Baker, Alexander Crummell, you name them. Jazz, Howard Thurman, Malcolm X, Mary Church Terrell, Ella Fitzgerald, Thelonius Monk, Amiri Baraka. Richard Allen, Mahalia Jackson, Maulana Karenga, Molefi Asante, B.B. King, Alice Walker, Eddie Kendricks, Sun Ra, Jazz, Gwendolyn Brooks, Richard Wright, Sojourner Truth, John Henrik Clark, Angela Davis. From Stepin Fetchit to Paul Robeson. From conk-head mentalities to nappy-headed minds. All of us. Forged in the peculiar ugliness and beauty of America. Epistemology(s). Ethical constellations. Religions. Language(s). Names. Remade in America. A Jazz-thing. African *hyphen* American.

So when the *guerrilla exegete* turns to hermeneutics, s/he speaks not only of Afrocentricity, but also of Negro-centricity. Negro-ology. The collective everyday genius of our people. The formative cultural formulations and articulations from the time when calling "blk" and "African" wd get yr mouth mashed. The informal colored explications of sociopolitical realities that still today underpin African-American intellectual endeavor and liberationist struggle. Reading the Bible thru the colored lenses of *Mules and Men*, thru *Beloved*, thru *Sounder*, thru cullet stories of cullet peepus, thru needgro narratives of needing to outgrow oppression garments.

But not only Afrocentricity, not only Negrocentricity, not only Negrological hermeneutics, but also *Ghettocentricity*. The naked narrow prism of the ghetto. Where the effects of white supremacy are most acute, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The boiling cauldron of peculiarly African-American sensibilities. The

most intense interplay of culture and domination. Rural genius and gentility come north to bleed in concrete boxes. Urban lives lived by a fast clock. Brutality without measure. Strengths without names. Dignities without notice. Softnesses unsung. Desperate dreamers of tender mercies. Galilee in asphalt, every brilliance discounted by the nihilistic Nazarean query: can anything good come out of it? Truly marginalized existence. At the hands of white folk and post-ghetto blk folk alike. By cruel Romans and high-minded Jerusalemites alike. The ghetto. Hybrid identity. Hyphenated identity. Ghetto centrality, not just Afrocentricity. Place the locus of the struggle and the focus of the hermeneutic where they belong. Demon possession: the ghetto. Lame folks and beggars: the ghetto. Blind men and bleeding women: the ghetto. 5000 hungry and just two fried catfish sammiches on white bread (with hot sauce, of course) to feed them: the ghetto. Tithes in the storehouse, tithers still in the poorhouse: the ghetto. Ghetto centrality. Marginalization, alienation, exploitation. The hard hermeneutical lense of most Africans in America. Galilean *hyphen* Judean. Galilean *hyphen* Israelite. African *hyphen* American.

White supremacy in its various guises continues to inject the lives of African-American people with casual horror, everyday horror. The dread demonic legacies of Simon Legree, Jim Crow, Bull Connor, and Ronald Reagan continue to infect and infest the land. Those who would deny our humanity seem to gain a new momentum. Dominationist appeals to biblical legitimation operate openly, with major communications media fully at their disposal. And our children can expect to die, on average, almost a decade younger than their Euro-American counterparts. It is for these reasons that African-American biblical scholars must become guerrillas. Because the Bible and its interpreters remain central to the lives of this beleaguered people, because white supremacist readings of the Bible continue to tie our people's hands, blind their eyes and cloud their minds, we must explicate biblical mod

els of domination and liberation, hegemony and counter-hegemony. Deconstruct and demystify dominationist overlay and obfuscation from Grandma Minnie's Bible. Lay bare the whitewashing, the weakening and the watering-down. Interrogate the analogue of Pax Romana and Pax Americana. Parallel the horrific treacheries of King Herod and J. Edgar Hoover, the prophetic pronouncements of Amos and the later Martin Luther King. We must claim the Bible as our site of struggle and our field of contestation. As guerrillas. As freedom fighters. As solid but subversive scholars. As reappropriators of the biblical logic of justice.

And our names shall be written in soft sands of freedom.  
And our names shall be written in our own books of life.  
And our names shall be whispered in the soft laughter of our children.  
And our names shall be as those who shrank not from strife.  
And our names shall have meaning.