

## ***A Riff on the Concept of the (Critical Ethnic Studies) Intellectual***

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*A professional education has become a critical education.  
But one should not applaud this fact.*

- FRED MOTEN AND STEFANO HARNEY,  
“THE UNIVERSITY AND THE UNDERCOMMONS” (2013, 32)

*Of all the problems weighing on cultural theory today,  
the most troubling (because most rife with self-  
reflection) is that of the intellectual at work.*

- TIMOTHY BRENNAN,  
“THE EMPIRE’S NEW CLOTHES” (2006, 170).

To frontload the term “Ethnic Studies” with the term “Critical” is to suggest a renovated capacity for the Ethnic Studies intellectual. For it is this intellectual who will habituate critique into institutionalized practice, and it is this intellectual who will valorize a critical practice that, in (a decidedly circular) turn, also valorizes the intellectual. What holds this valorizing process in place is the disciplinary function of critique in the institutional context of the neoliberal university: here, critique marks the site of convergence between, on one hand, the field imaginary (Pease 1990; Wiegman 2012) of an Ethnic Studies intent on re-radicalizing its political commitments and, on the other, an academic mode of (re)production in which the value of Ethnic Studies is bound to the university’s instrumentalizing calculus of “diversification.” Critique, in this latter instance, is less of a field-defining practice than a placeholder for the open-endedness of the university’s autocritical desire to optimize its image as an ideal, ethically committed social body—that is, as an optimally governed community.

As Ethnic Studies endeavors to remake itself through the sign of critique, in other words, it is able to do so because “critique” is already a mark of its relation to the university, a relation defined by Ethnic Studies’ openness to—and its dependence upon—institutional forces that exist in excess of (and frequently in opposition to)

everything the field's practitioners might want from the political. The Ethnic Studies intellectual is the outcome of—and not simply opposition to—the machinations of this dialectical force-field in which critique, detached from its referent, designates not only the political desires of the field's practitioners but also the goods that academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades 2009) demands of or extracts from the field itself. Here, then, is where we begin: where critique, race, and the institutions of knowledge elaborate each other as objects of profound left political investment, objects that find their most ironic doubles in and as sites of capital production (Spillers 2003). It is common sense among Ethnic Studies practitioners that the much of the past and present truth of race can be seen in the socially structured theft of lands and lives. But what do we make of the fact that in teaching the knowledge that is the foundation of this sense, it is now possible both to claim territory and to make a living?

By opening with this schematic description of the relation between the critical Ethnic Studies intellectual, critique, and the university, I mean to suggest that attending to the intellectual as a specific social formation offers an occasion for reflection on the less-acknowledged political trajectories that make possible the work that we do. That “the intellectual at work” (Brennan 2006, 170) remains an undertheorized problem in Ethnic Studies may be surprising, given the field's own complicated affinities with Marxist thought (see, *inter alia*, Marx 1998; Gramsci 1971; C.L.R. James 1993, and Bauman 1989) and Black Studies (see, *inter alia*, Cruse 2005, Robinson 2000, West 1985, Joy James 1996 and Reed 1999b), fields in which the question of the intellectual has been of key prescriptive and analytical importance for the analysis of the fault lines of the social and for the assessment of revolutionary possibility. But even in these fields the problem of the intellectual has also been freighted with considerable anxiety, because to engage it fully entails calling into question the social predication of the one who does

the assessing and the analyzing by bringing into view the asymmetrical relations of power and privilege that distinguish the knowing (subject) from the known (object). Once it becomes apparent that Ethnic Studies intellectuals have interests *as intellectuals* that can and do diverge from the peoples for whom they want justice, the intellectual becomes a touchy subject, the domain of a knowledge that we may not want to know.

In this context, Black Studies offers an instructive example for Ethnic Studies more broadly, because the pressures that have borne on the former's post-segregation era institutionalization meant that the intellectual, interpellated at once as a representative of the university and a representative of organized resistance to it, could not *not* emerge as a paradoxical figure. Through this paradoxical positioning, the intellectual was situated at the heart of a division internal to the institutional project of Black Studies in which the latter has functioned both to bring the university to crisis and to supply the university with an instrument of crisis management. So while it is necessary and important to acknowledge and to honor the centrality of student activism in creating the language and the organizational capacities that made Black and Ethnic Studies possible, to narrate the origins of these fields in left activism alone is to risk confusing family romance for history. Or rather, it may be to avoid the risk of organizing our political aspirations for these fields in terms other than the pure oppositionality too often ascribed to activism. The risk, that is to say, of considering the consequences of the insertion of Black and Ethnic Studies, along with their intellectual practitioners, into the larger economy of practices, institutions, interests, and relations in which our practice unfolds, and into which our work, if it is to make an appreciable difference, will have to intervene.

While the intellectual is not necessarily an academic (nor, as we are naggingly reminded by the administrative-managerial bloat characteristic of contemporary universities, is the academic necessarily an intellectual, strictly speaking), my focus on

the critical Ethnic Studies intellectual as an effect of an academic institutionality is offered in order to draw attention to a specific conjuncture. The contemporary U.S. university has distinguished itself as a crucial site for the production, training, integration, and mobilization of intellectuals as knowledge workers for the portion of the global division of labor that prefers to euphemize itself as a “knowledge economy.” The recent history of the official establishment of the fields of Black and Ethnic Studies marks the university’s efforts to take responsibility for, and to locate an interest in, racial difference as a site of production. Production, that is, not only of critical knowledges on race and ethnicity, and not only of the practitioners of such knowledges, but also of the material, discursive, and psychic forms that undergird a certain confidence that it is through knowledge that racial justice—in one or another measure—can be done.

In considering the work of confidence and belief in the production of the critical Ethnic Studies intellectual, we are moving not only toward the “objective” conditions that stage intellectual work in the university but also toward the particularity of the intellectual’s relation to the scene of work itself. Not only, that is, toward the substance of intellectual labor but also toward the immateriality of all that the professionalized pursuit of knowledge appears to promise. The modern formation of intellectual work is powerfully rooted in the idea that what makes the intellectual an intellectual can be recognized in her capacity for or training in enacting a mode of speech purported to transcend the particularity of her individual interests. The formation of the intellectual therefore frequently involves the cultivation and collectivization of fantasies that foster a deep identification of intellectual work with the striving for a greater good, with a more just world, with the realization of immanent human possibility, with a truth that the political ordering of the world is arranged to obscure. Such fantasies have regularly served at once to express, to protect, and to consolidate the intellectual’s position in real

social division, where the very credibility of the intellectual's claim to speak beyond individual interest has relied on her ability to represent herself as uninterested in the pursuit of wealth and/or political power.

The symbolic capital expressed in the authority of the intellectual's speech, then, is the effect of a representation of the intellectual's having already sacrificed other worldly goods in order to pursue a life devoted to the Good of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the pithy injunction that the intellectual's responsibility is to "speak truth to power" indexes such a fantastic arrangement in which the intellectual is at once distant enough from the dominant apparatuses of power not to be identified with them, yet at once proximate enough to them for her speech to be heard. In identifying with the idealized consolidation of knowledge called truth, the intellectual disidentifies—though *disavows* may be a more precise term here—with the very power that underwrites her claim to truth.

Ethnic Studies marked its birth in the rejection of such a separation between intellectuals and power on at least two levels. First, it dismissed the claim that the intellectual's claim to truth could be in any way distant from or innocent of power. As St. Clair Drake put it in the context of Black Studies, the very phrase "Black Studies" did much more than imply that black history, culture and politics constituted legitimate objects of study. Rather, the broader implications of the call for Black Studies suggested that what had been accepted as "objective intellectual activities were actually white studies in perspective and content" (quoted in Bailey 1973, 104). Secondly, Ethnic Studies articulated an assumptive logic that posited the relationship between knowledge and power as intimate one, such that the transformation of the means of producing and

acquiring knowledge was understood as both the precondition and the expression of the power of community self-determination.

As knowledge and power came to be understood as reflective of one another, the intellectual in these inaugural moments of Ethnic Studies could not but be cathected with and as a sense of heroic, occasionally even messianic, potentiality, one in which the gap between the intellectual and the leader collapsed. This collapse was perhaps an inevitable result of a philosophy of struggle that insisted on the inseparability of *representation in the domain of legitimated knowledge* (i.e. the curricular structures of the university) with *representation in politics* and privileged the intellectual as the figure capable of holding these two forms of representation in the most intimate proximity (Chiang 2009). The racialized intellectual's body plays a crucial role in stabilizing such a representational calculus insofar as it can be said to double as the person doing the representing and the group being represented (Chow 2002), whether that group is understood as a natal community or one constituted by explicit political solidarity (Third World peoples, women of color, etc.).

But the movements for Ethnic Studies were not the sole origin of such an investment in the figure of the intellectual-as-representative-of-racialized-community as much as they opened up a space for the radical reinterpretation of the intellectual as a figure of race leadership that, as Erica Edwards (2012, 11) writes, "had solidified as a classed and gendered concept." The elitism, in the context of Black Studies, of what Joy James (1997, 6) calls "the historic mandate for the black intellectual to be a race leader," has been encompassing enough to accommodate efforts that cross the political spectrum—to say nothing of a great deal of intra-elite conflict between black intellectuals themselves on the questions of what equality and liberation ought to look like and how they might be achieved. But it is an elitism that, while always contested, has never

strayed far from the fraught and problematic consensus that “singular male leadership” (Edwards 2012, 10) constitutes a necessary precondition for black empowerment. The patriarchal implications that underwrite such an understanding of the intellectual as leader rely on an implicit analogy between the race and the bourgeois family in which the latter provides an idealized, naturalized asymmetry of power and privilege that obtains between the leader and the led, the speaker and the spoken for. Since the naturalization of this intellectual-privileging analogy gives it a taken-for-granted quality, it can reproduce itself by way of habits, concepts, and frameworks that give it a more innocuous appearance. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the now commonsense invocation of “black community” such that the latter supplies as an idealized, univocal conglomeration of collective interests (Reed 1999a, 134), a community that can be invoked as such because it is *not* internally riven by socially structured differences.

What all of this suggests is that the critical Ethnic Studies intellectual does not simply intervene into or transform epistemologies; but that her position as intellectual is the complicated outcome of historically sedimented epistemologies and relations of power. It suggests, moreover, that our theories of intellectual work are problematically incomplete if we do not confront the extent to which we are made by that which we seek to oppose. There is nothing about our position in the academy, however marginal, that is innocent of power, nor is there any practice that will afford us an exteriority to the historical and geopolitical determinations of the place from which we speak, write, research, teach, organize, and learn. No longer can Ethnic Studies stake its institutional life on the promise that it will be a site for the production of “organic intellectuals”—intellectuals who, rather than working to consolidate the hegemonic order of things, represent an emergent and potentially revolutionary class.

Rather, it is from here, from within a particular position of and in complicity, from within constitutive contradiction, that our work necessarily begins. This lesson seems particularly important to stress in a context such as Ethnic Studies, where the intellectual's investment in her own work is performed in and routed through the belief that such work can, or at least should, be of world-transformative value, and where the political orientation of intellectual work is regularly utilized as an implicit, if not explicit, criterion for evaluating what work is and isn't valuable. What kind of intellectual practitioner is produced, we need to ask, when the political is situated as a normative figure in this way? If critique is to be for Ethnic Studies a field-defining practice, it is also necessarily a site where our most extravagant fantasies about the meaning and possibilities of intellectual work are staged. Indeed, critique opens powerfully onto scenes that narrativize the power of knowledge through individual and collective transformation, onto scenes in which the intellectual knowingly moves away from complicity in order to adopt, knowingly once again, a position of oppositionality to dominant modalities of power.

That critique stages our sometimes mundane and sometimes extravagant desires to make a difference in the world is not the problem—fantasy, after all, also marks the space of creative political imagination that Ethnic Studies must protect, especially when so much is arrayed toward its destruction. To confront our collective investedness in the power of critique *as* the site of fantasy is not to dismiss a fantasy life that, to my mind, has been productive of some of the most important work to emerge from Ethnic Studies (as if we could simply elect to do so!). It is, rather, to ask that we set to work on the fantasies that animate us, that we learn to enrich, complicate, and historicize the scenes in which they develop. Or, to paraphrase Spillers (2003, 458), the problem is not that we are made by fictions; the problem is that the fictions that make us—and that we



reproduce—are not elaborate enough for us to apprehend what kind of objects *we* are, and that we produce, for the institutions in which we work.

Yet as we participate—wittingly and not—in the professionalization of the political under the sign of critique, what would it mean to do so while understanding critique itself at once as a scene of political compromise and as an *object of desire* (Wiegman 2012), both of which are constitutive of the critical Ethnic Studies intellectual herself? A political compromise, because while the analytic momentum of our move toward *critical* Ethnic Studies appears to promise a renewed commitment to contest the dominant politics of the university and social order, *critique*, as a means of organizing such efforts, is not solely a move against the neoliberal university but also an appeal to it. It is that university, after all, that we ask to support our projects, our conferences, our new hires, our publications. It is that university that is itself a contradictory institution, in part because we inhabit it, because we insist upon surviving in it, because and in spite of it.<sup>2</sup>

Paying attention to the protocols of institutionality can supplement an aspirational, idealist understanding of critique with a materialist one. *Supplement*, rather than *displace*, because I understand the aspirational investment in critique to be both irreducible and essential to the political imaginary of Ethnic Studies. As such, the Ethnic Studies intellectual is constituted through the (sometimes unspoken) belief in the indispensability of critique to any just world worth speaking of. And it is in relation to that investment in the capacity of critique that I would suggest a certain vigilance that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999, 110) has characterized as the work of deconstruction—namely, "a persistent critique of what we cannot not want." A vigilance, then, that names the habit of investigating that which drives and sustains our very critical enterprise.

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Gouldner has gone as far as to claim that "intellectuals—including professionals, writers, technicians, clerks, journalists, lawyers, people of bookish culture—are a cultural bourgeoisie whose capital is *knowledge* and language acquired during their education" (1975-76, 6). Such a bourgeoisie, Gouldner suggests, has proven itself capable of waging "struggle *within* the ruling group" that "serves as a basis for subsequent revolution.

<sup>2</sup> In light of such contradictions, we might read what Robyn Wiegman (2002, 22) writes about Women's Studies' embeddedness in the U.S. university's "reinvestment in human consciousness, called critical thinking, as the domain of social responsibility and ethics," as also applicable to us: "Being a critical thinker who understands her/his ethical relation to a global social world has the powerful effect of forging a new kind of managed subject for an increasingly mobile and transnational knowledge economy, that economy that elite universities in particular now service with increasing urgency and self-proclaimed progressive need."