

conomic development that, were it fully examined, could seriously, perhaps even fatally, challenge his fundamental vision. In the background of both his books Fukuyama perceives the growing presence of a vaguely defined, but unmistakably real entity called the World Economy—an entity that begins to surround and overshadow even such powerful national economies as our own, much as ours surrounds and overshadows the state economies of Illinois and California and New York.

Here the question that remains unasked is whether this emerging supranational aspect of capitalism does not call into question the plausibility of an end of history posited on the triad of science, democratic government, and capitalism. Surely the last two of these constitutive forces depend on strong and stable national entities within which to exert their social influence. But if the world economy continues its self-generated growth, the consequences for both democratic politics and capitalist economics are likely to be disastrous. What will be left of the relevance of liberal political structures for an end of history if the world economy makes ever more irrelevant the boundaries of the nation-state—massive ecological effects and unmanageable immigration pressures as examples? What is left of the relevance of capitalist national economies if their real-world counterparts are increasingly defenseless against economic penetration, to the point at which they can no longer even exercise effective control over so fundamental a means of self-regulation as the quantity of money within their national control? The world economy, in a word, is an entity whose sole unifying attribute is a commitment to an economic system that erodes the longevity of its presently constituted members. The self-consuming aspects of such an institutional framework seem ill-suited to serve as the setting for Fukuyama's vision.

These prospects are still distant, save for the already manifest pressures of international finance and migration. Nonetheless, the contradictions of a world economy of capitalisms suggest that at some imaginable time in the future another set of institutional structures may become necessary to create a durable setting for

humanity's journey. Perhaps wishfully, I can imagine one in which each of the three legs of Fukuyama's design have been changed in significant fashion. In place of science guided to an important degree by economic and military incentives, I could picture it guided by the need to protect the fragile ecosphere against further deterioration. In place of political structures concerned with the rights of individuals within their national boundaries, I could picture the addition of transnational rights—the protection of immigrants as a case in point, the outlawing of international exploitation as a second.

And in lieu of our present range of capitalisms, I could even see a range of "socialisms" that sought to combine the flexibility of markets and the protection of individual property with safeguards against the many negative side-effects of markets and the asocial consequences of both the absence of property among the lower portion of the population and its excessive possession among the topmost portion. Some such an amended triad might form the basis of an End of History better suited to cope with the problems generated by its present supposed terminus. I should add, however, that I suspect even such a much-hoped-for future will be not so much an end to human history as another resting place. □

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**Jerry Watts****CULTURE AND ICONS**

REFLECTING BLACK: AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURAL CRITICISM, by Michael Eric Dyson. University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 384 pp., \$19.95.

MAKING MALCOLM: THE MYTH AND MEANING OF MALCOLM X, by Michael Eric Dyson. Oxford University Press, 1995. 248 pp., \$19.95.

**I**t was not long ago that very few readers had heard of Michael Eric Dyson. However, during the past five years Dyson has been an intellectual whirlwind. His writings have appeared in many national journals, he has published two books, appeared on *Oprah*, testified before Congress, and delivered many, many lectures both

in this country and abroad. Articles in the *New Yorker*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *Atlantic Monthly* have called him one of our nation's most prominent public intellectuals.

But one has not been exposed to the Michael Dyson experience until one has heard him speak. His rhetorical flourishes have left many audiences gasping, for Dyson is able to integrate the polysyllabic vernacular of academic philosophy with the cadences of black urban speech. At his best, Dyson harnesses his verbal mastery in engaging discussions. From the reports of others, Dyson at his worst can appear to be more fluff than substance. (I, for one, have rarely seen Dyson when he wasn't in top form.)

*Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism*, Dyson's first book, is a collection of previously published essays. They are primarily journalistic and impressionistic forays into contemporary black life and culture, covering topics from rap music to the cultural significance of the *Cosby Show* to the commodification of Michael Jordan's body; from Leonard Jeffries, the reigning charlatan of African-American parochialism at New York's City College, to the 2 Live Crew pornography trial.

The utter boundlessness of the subject matter informs us that it is a young author's book. Even for the experienced writer, essay collections are notoriously difficult to coordinate. Unfortunately Dyson seems to have taken anything and everything he has written and thrown it together. Needless to say, the center does not hold. The best essays here are quite dynamic, the worst are forced efforts at profundity. Others are just elaborate restatements of received wisdom. Because of the diversity and disjointedness of these essays, the collection is difficult to review.

Dyson offers an intriguing overview of rap music. For him rap is significant because it captures the sensibility of urban black youth attempting to navigate a social structure that excludes them. Rap is therefore both an affirmation of black urban life and a scream about its dead-end possibilities. As Dyson notes, there are severe tensions within rap music between those rappers with political visions and those who are simply interested in providing entertainment. Some rap artists crudely celebrate violence while others offer humane condemnations of it. Much of rap is

decidedly sexist, if not misogynistic. Yet rap cannot be ignored, for it contains creative forms of Afro-American opposition and accommodation.

In an interview republished here, Dyson makes further claims about rap that border on overstatement. He labels rap star KRS-One's "edutainment" (the merger of entertainment and education) "a noteworthy and salutary achievement." I beg to disagree. I went to hear one of these edutainment lecture/performances at my college and was shocked at how much of what KRS-One had to say was utterly superficial and wrong.

Dyson further states, "Rap music is a profoundly oral culture that exhibits the quest for literacy that has impelled the Afro-American community forward." If anything, rap may have *hindered* the quest for literacy among many members of our younger generation. But Dyson outdoes himself when he argues for the significance of MC Hammer's dance record "Pray." Dyson argues that Hammer's record and video bring the message of the church "into a secular arena with the powerful motifs that are common to the church, and yet they transcend the narrow, sanctuary-bound messages that don't reach a wider populace." So a rapper's admonition to pray while he sings and gyrates his hips is important because it leads listeners to piety. Come now, Mike. Might our good man Hammer not better embody the gospel by spending his money on something other than race horses and huge mansions in Atlanta?

What does rap mean to intellectuals like Dyson? Is it possible that academics celebrate rap in order to feel vicariously connected with the plight of the black urban poor? Might this identification with the music substitute for authentic political engagement? My hunch is that a sector of the black intelligentsia (including Dyson, Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates, Tricia Rose, and Houston Baker) have concertedly assumed responsibility for defending the creative validity of rap music in the face of its devaluation by mainstream white society and cultural institutions. In effect, instead of being native informers, Dyson et al. might be considered the natives' promoters. Jokes aside, the celebration of rap by intellectuals like Dyson gives them a way to enter into dialogue with their less fortunate

urban peers. Hopefully, this cultural entrée can be harnessed to generate a broader dialogue between hip-hop and traditional intellectual communities. Yet, this can only occur if those traditional intellectuals who celebrate rap can overcome their feelings of ethnic illegitimacy and defensiveness when engaging and confronting black rappers. Till then, traditional intellectuals who write about rap may continue to use it as another badge of their “otherness” within the academy.

**I** raise the question of the traditional black intellectual’s relationship to rap because I don’t perceive the profundity of the music. I have no problem with calling rap an urban popular art form that simultaneously entertains and affirms marginal black lives. But as far as I am concerned, rap is merely this generation’s equivalent of Little Richard, James Brown, and Carla Thomas, with one major difference: rap has a more pernicious hold on the minds of today’s urban youth than rhythm and blues had on us thirty years ago. This stems in part from the image of rap as thoughtful and even “deep.” Where does this come from? Simply put, even rap groups with political intentions (for example, Public Enemy) are not politically sophisticated. One can enter into a more informed political discussion at any neighborhood barber shop. I do not need to listen to rap to hear the latest versions of various conspiracy theories about the secretly planned destruction of black men.

Dyson’s discussion of Spike Lee’s movie *Do the Right Thing* is quite illuminating. Like many reviewers he sees this movie as a heroic attempt to depict the tragic way that racism affects black life. Even so, Dyson believes that the movie fails as social commentary. He argues that Lee is caught in a cul-de-sac resulting from divergent ambitions—“to present the breadth of black humanity while proclaiming a black neo-nationalistic aesthetic.” Dyson is critical of Lee’s inability to create characters who are more than symbols: Lee’s characters often lack complexity and instead are caricatures of pre-determined racial roles.

From my vantage point, the pivotal scene in *Do The Right Thing* takes place when Sal, the

Italian-American pizza shop owner, fights with a local black male, Radio Raheem. The police arrive and Raheem is “accidentally” killed. In retaliation for his murder, Mookie, a black male who works for Sal, throws a trash can through the pizza shop window. A fire is lit and the shop is consumed by flames. I read *Do the Right Thing* as a crude neoconservative farce in blackface. In the movie, the black urban dwellers are by and large shiftless jokesters who have little more to do than “hang out.” Raheem, the victim of police brutality, is a brain-dead brute who plays the same record over and over on his boom box. The only character with a political vision has a feeble if not farcical one, which centers around putting black people’s portraits on the wall of the pizzeria in place of the Italian-American icons that Sal displays. Raheem’s death is not tragic, it is pathetic. There are no heroic qualities to any of the black folks to make this a tragedy. The burning of Sal’s pizzeria is a feeble act of crowd mayhem. (Why, for instance, wasn’t the anger of the black mob directed at the police instead of Sal? After all, it was the police who killed Raheem.) Had a white director or producer created *Do the Right Thing*, Dyson would have been up in arms claiming racism. If this be the new black cinema, then bring back *Shaft!*

Besides his frivolous commentary on the mediocre musical score to a banal and easily forgotten film, *Mo’ Money*, the only truly vacuous essay in the Dyson collection is a discussion of Michael Jackson’s postmodern spirituality. Like too many other writers, Dyson assumes that the mere association of the label postmodern with things black miraculously upgrades the cultural status of the black phenomena. In this way, Jackson’s apparent shallowness becomes a sign of his hidden depth. His weirdness embodies a universal representativeness. Dyson calls him a “Promethean allperson.” Choreographed performances become moments of spontaneous joy. Dyson states that “central to Jackson’s career is an abiding spiritual and religious consciousness that is expressed in his body of work as a performer.” Perhaps Dyson is referring to Jackson’s abiding commitment to accumulating pieces of green paper with the inscription “In God We Trust.” As if this were insufficient, Dyson proceeds to drown Jackson in cultural studies hy-

perbole:

Jackson's performances richly fuse Bakhtinian conceptions of carnival with Afro-American forms of spiritual ecstasy, producing a highly animated hybrid that creates space for cultural resistance and religious agency.

Cultural resistance—embodied in Michael Jackson?

We live in an age of cultural inflation, but then we always have. Grandiose claims of cultural influence always abound when any new group of intellectuals and artists begins to push into the mainstream. Like previous generations of ethnic intellectuals on the verge of entering center stage, the black intellectuals of today come bearing the fruits of their devalued culture. Such first generations to "break through" are often incapable of being honestly critical of the artistic productions of their ethnic peers. They can either unfairly condemn their fellow ethnic artists/intellectuals, defending the existing standards as "universal." (Often such universalists are seeking individual acceptance from those in cultural authority.) Or they can celebrate every nuance of folk culture. Perhaps an instructive example of this phenomenon would be the differences within the emerging postwar Jewish intelligentsia between a highbrow literary critic like Harry Levin of Harvard and a celebrator of Yiddish literature like Irving Howe. Dyson has chosen to defend the emerging creative productivity of black Americans. But the problem is that he attempts to offer creative discussions about materials that are often not very rich in meaning. It is like quoting from Hegel to illuminate the buttoning of one's shirt.

Dyson is a critic whose worldview has been dominated by the influence of the electronic media. Although he claims he is commenting on the impact of these cultural media, he is in fact their prisoner. His commentaries on Michael Jackson, Michael Jordan, and Bill Cosby are essentially commentaries on their media-created personae. The main criterion that Dyson employs to evaluate these figures is merely their popularity. He claims that the "moonwalk" dance performed by Jackson before fifty million viewers (on Motown's twenty-fifth anniversary show) elevated the performer from musical superstar to a "world historical figure." Cosby is "a formi-

dable national icon . . . a powerful symbol of the graceful confluence of talent, wealth, and industry that are the American Dream."

**D**yson's second book, *Making Malcolm: the Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X*, is significantly better than his first. He begins with a short reflection on an encounter he had with black male students in his class at Brown who challenged him on his right to run a seminar on Malcolm. The students were angry at the fact that Dyson not only criticized Malcolm but did so in front of white students. Worse, he was directing a seminar in which even white female students had the nerve to criticize Malcolm. Evidently, these black male students viewed Malcolm as their ethnic/class/gender icon and no one, including the black male professor, was supposed to criticize him. Dyson was hurt and angered by their attempts to monopolize "Malcolm." The idea of Malcolm had been absorbed within various personal identities. The tale is quite telling, for it exposes the depth to which the myth of Malcolm has saturated some black male minds—even Dyson's.

The best part of *Making Malcolm* is an extended review of the literature on Malcolm X. The discussion is excellent and could serve as a road map for any novice student of Malcolm trying to weave through the literature.

In Chapter 4, "Malcolm's Shadow: Masculinity and the Ghetto in Black Film," Dyson surveys the images of black manhood in some of the most popular recent "black" films. In the portrayal of black ghetto life in movies like *Juice*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn* and *Boyz N the Hood*, Dyson sees an image of black maleness that he believes has as its focal point the idealization of Malcolm X. Dyson believes that the prevailing image of Malcolm as the model black man is saturated in sexism and macho bravado, and states that "without the sustained hero worship of Malcolm X, contemporary black cinema . . . is almost inconceivable." Perhaps he is correct, but he has to do more to establish this linkage than merely assert a correlation between the sexism and bravado of Malcolm and the sexism and bravado of black male film directors. Still, this is an aside. Whether the linkage exists or not, we do know that the values pro-

jected in such films are often quite frightening. To his credit, Dyson has written a provocative discussion of these movies. Whether or not we have Malcolm to thank for this state of affairs is beside the point.

**I**n some crucial respects Dyson does not succeed in rescuing the historical Malcolm from the myth of Malcolm. He may be closer to a celebratory mode than he would like to admit. More precisely, though he criticizes the sexism of Malcolm, he doesn't seem to realize how much Malcolm's appeal depends on his sexism. One cannot say, "If only Malcolm weren't sexist," for it is in part his sexism and his rejection of all femininity that makes him such a "heroic" black male figure. In fact, there is very interesting material for an analysis of Malcolm as myth that Dyson simply overlooks. The image of Malcolm as "our manhood" speaks to the deeply held needs of the Afro-American community and particularly the Afro-American male community. If Malcolm was "our manhood," what does this say about the majority of black men who in no way were as public or vociferous in denouncing American racism as Malcolm? In other words, does not the invocation of Malcolm as the quintessential black male speak to a sense of unacknowledged weakness in the black community?

A major absence in *Making Malcolm* is any discussion of Louis Farrakhan. After all, it is Farrakhan who most conspicuously appropriates the stylistic mantle of Malcolm. It is therefore no accident that despite Farrakhan's endorsement of Malcolm's murder (and possible implication in it), he is viewed by many blacks as a direct descendant of Malcolm. This is particularly true among many of those black males most deeply invested in hip-hop. And why not? Like Malcolm, he is a master of strident denunciations of white America. Like Malcolm, he is an avid black nationalist. I am aware that to designate Farrakhan as Malcolm's direct descendent will be considered ethnically sacrilegious to some blacks. But herein lies the problem that Dyson conspicuously avoids. For most of his political life, Malcolm was the advocate of an anti-intellectual, cult-like movement that had as its basic philosophy a neo-Booker T. Washington celebra-

tion of petty capitalist enterprises (dry cleaners and small restaurants). Like Washington, the Nation of Islam abdicated a critical political engagement with a racist status quo in behalf of "self-improvement" and moral uplift. Are we to ignore the larger part of Malcolm's political life?

One of the ironies of the legacy of Malcolm is the way his reactionary social vision becomes whitewashed and emerges in the Reagan era as proto-revolutionary. For the greater part of his political life, Malcolm was an insular black nationalist, and worse, a black supremacist (à la the myth of Yacub and the morally superior black person). As Dyson correctly argues, black nationalism thrives during moments of intense white racism (and thus will probably be on the scene as long as there is a United States). The Malcolm that is reconstituted in the 1990s has a split identity. For the urban black youth, the Malcolm that is being recuperated is the parochial Malcolm, the Malcolm who was a spokesperson for the Nation of Islam. White progressives and black intellectuals like Dyson have in mind another Malcolm, who rejected crude nationalism for a more cosmopolitan vision. I am often left speechless by their attempt to define Malcolm's recognition of the humanity of white folks as a crucial moment for all Afro-American people.

Dyson recognizes but does not discuss that aside from his membership in the Nation of Islam, Malcolm's politics were decidedly rhetorical. Dyson celebrates the rhetorical, even going as far as to argue that the thousands of black sermons delivered every Sunday constitute a tradition of "rhetorical resistance that has been prominently featured throughout black cultural history." Undoubtedly, much of my disagreement with Dyson about the significance of Malcolm stems from the fact that Malcolm is a hero to Dyson whereas I don't think of him as a significant political thinker.

Michael Dyson is a work in progress. He is an intellectual instigator, one who starts the tension but leaves before the rumble. As such, his significance depends in large measure on the vibrancy of the intellectual community that surrounds him. One can only hope that he will find an intellectual community that provides him with both affirmation *and* criticism. In many respects,

he will rise to the level of his intellectual ambitions. I must confess to a degree of pessimism. On national television a few days before the Million Man March, Dyson claimed that it was a march *against* sexism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism. His capacity for glib apologetics casts doubt on his political and moral seriousness. Those of us who learn from this dynamic young voice can only hope that academic ambitions and the lure of fame do not derail him from realizing his considerable talents. Dyson must contend. The choice is his. □

## George Packer

### THE POOR AND US

IF YOU CAME THIS WAY: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE LIVES OF THE UNDERCLASS, by Peter Davis. John Wiley & Sons, 1995. 202 pp., \$22.95.

THE WAR AGAINST THE POOR: THE UNDERCLASS AND ANTIPOVERTY POLICY, by Herbert J. Gans. Basic Books, 1995. 195 pp., \$22.

**T**wo years ago I came to know a forty-year-old woman living in a housing project in a decayed industrial city north of Boston. When I met Lois, she had just lost her job at Head Start after her car was stolen, and was collecting unemployment insurance, though she hadn't applied for the disability benefits to which she was probably entitled because of her extreme obesity, which required her to use crutches. A local mall had rejected her application for a position as Santa during the Christmas holiday. She was all for welfare reform and making the poor work. A son was heading toward criminality; her daughter, nearly as obese as she, was graduating from high school with honors and a deficient education. Lois's weight squeezed her features into a narrow-eyed look of apparent ignorance and meanness, but she was smart and utterly decent. She had been raped by her father and beaten by her husband, she was often depressed, her project apartment was in shambles, and sometimes she smelled bad. She also led the project's tenants council and was active in a regional coalition of community groups. But she complained that the

middle-class suburbanites in the coalition neglected her and the tenants council, never came to visit, never delivered help. I asked another coalition member, a teacher at a local college, about Lois's isolation in the group. An ally and friend of hers, he replied: "Maybe it has something to do with Lois being so fat."

It seemed a brutal thing to say, but I immediately realized that it was true. What most middle-class people feel toward the poor is a degree of pity along with fear, revulsion, even hatred. There's no point in charging this attitude with classism or any other offense, which would only drive it underground. You can't shame people out of such feelings. To humanize the poor and undo their current status in America as social outcasts, even enemies—the shared purpose of these two very different books—you have to start by admitting that it's easier to talk about them than to deal with them or enter their lives. Once you've acknowledged your real feelings, you can begin the harder work of finding out what the poor are really like, and what they and you might even have in common.

Herbert J. Gans, the Columbia University sociologist, has written a learned and humane account of how the poor in America came to be stigmatized and made pariahs in the decades after the War on Poverty had its brief heyday. Gans's main argument is that the term *underclass*, coined by Gunnar Myrdal in 1963 to define "an unprivileged class of unemployed, unemployables and underemployed who are more and more hopelessly set apart from the nation at large and do not share in its life, its ambitions and its achievements," soon lost its economic connotations and became a journalistic and scholarly "label" for the destructive behavior of the poor. Instead of describing entrenched structural poverty, which was Myrdal's original intent, *underclass* came to mean what was meant in the nineteenth century by the *undeserving poor*.

Gans takes pains to trace the course of this label into the 1990s, with the implication that a different name would cast less blame for their misery on the poor themselves. It isn't clear that a more "objective" term (as *underclass* itself once seemed) could somehow remain neutral in the war against the poor; but Gans shows convinc-