

Stranger in His Own House

A Reply to Phillip Richards

Martin Kilson

THE 1970S to 1990s era has witnessed a new archaeology of the African-American intelligentsia. This has involved a steady growth of conservatism among black intellectuals and, more recently, some ideological differentiation within conservative ranks. The early set of conservative black intellectuals can be called “hard-core” or “true believer” conservatives, for they cherish laissez-faire American capitalism, while the newer set can be called “soft-core” or “ambivalent” conservatives, for, while they are enamored of American capitalism, they hesitate to give it a full love-embrace, so to speak. Prominent personalities among the hard-core set include Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, Alan Keyes, Walter Williams, and Glenn Loury (though Professor Loury has for two years or so now been recasting himself into a pro-active, liberal conservative). The soft-core set includes Hilton Als, Randall Kennedy, Henry Louis Gates, K.A. Appiah, Daryl Michael Scott, and Gerald Early.

Although hard-core conservatives believe in a natural or automatic capacity of American capitalism to correct its century-and-a-half racist marginalization of African-American citizens, the soft-core conservatives specialize in criticizing mainline African-American intelligentsia and institutions. A recent addition to the soft core is Phillip Richards, as demonstrated most recently in his *Dissent* article “A Stranger in the Village: Coming of Age in a White College” (Summer 1998).

Black Cultural Activism

At the core of “A Stranger in the Village” is Richards’s antipathy to black cultural activism, an antipathy that he packages curiously or not

quite candidly, for he never tells his readers that the “Village” where blackness is so very distressful to him is Colgate University, where he is an associate professor in the English department. The story line of his article is his personal tale of a decade of dissatisfaction with what he views as Colgate’s culturally alienated African-American students:

At my first [black studies] faculty party, the black studies department was explained to me as the embodiment of the black students’ worldview. For some reason, I fell foul of this apparently shared understanding early on. At the time, the majority of African-American students I encountered were taken up with the Afrocentric study of black religions. And I must—my memory is not clear on this—not have fully approved of some of the extravagant interpretations that I was hearing of Langston Hughes’s blues poetry in my African-American literature class. Groups of estranged minorities are often close-knit and sectarian at places such as this. Thereafter, the black students dropped me.

Richards proceeds to compare Colgate’s black students to its white ones.

And in the leisure afforded by their [black students’] absence [from my classes], I had time to write and to work with a series of excellent white students who, perhaps predictably, went on to excellent graduate or professional schools. For better or worse, my experience has plunged me into the white academic culture of the school. Most of my students, even in the advanced African-American literature seminars, were white. They were often better students of black literature than African Americans because of their self-consciously cultivated ability to detach themselves from a text and to analyze it. They brought to my classes a variant of the white academic culture that gives the school its [elite] reputation. They came to Ralph Ellison and Richard

Wright without the crippling feelings of alienation, inevitably experienced by an outsider in a closely knit community [like Colgate University].

CLEARLY, Richards relishes the core precepts of Bookerite accommodationism. One such precept is that African Americans should let go of their anger about their dehumanizing experiences under America's two centuries of racism, because it distorts their career opportunities. But for me what is worse is that Richard assumes that African Americans in general are not as pragmatic in articulating and choreographing their anger as white groups such as Irish Americans, Jewish Americans, and Italian Americans have been. Lacking this pragmatism, Richards believes, African Americans require a hand to guide them in their dealings with white American institutions. For Richards, no doubt, elitist and conservative white guiding hands are preferable.

So Richards offers African Americans an updated version of the accommodationist conservatism of Booker Washington. To wit: trust in the natural workings of the democratic ethos enshrined at the core of our American Republic and reject the challenge to white racism fashioned by the founders of black national consciousness at the dawn of the modern era—Alexander Crummell, Martin Delaney, W.E.B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells Barnett, and James Weldon Johnson.

Richards elaborates by relating tales of everyday life at Colgate. These strike me as strained and forced; he lacks the storytelling felicity that instinctively attracts and convinces. Be this as it may, he tells his *Dissent* readers that the alienation exhibited by most African-American students at Colgate has little to do with Colgate's white realities and everything to do with Colgate's black realities. Above all, because affirmative action practices enabled a sizeable number of black students to enter Colgate University with "[lower] social class [attributes] and test scores," white students and faculty inevitably look down upon and become prejudiced toward black students, who in turn "appropriate a deeply consensual image of blackness."

Blaming the Victim

Richards's way of packaging his tales of everyday life in black-white relations at his "white" college doesn't make it easy for his *Dissent* readers to understand the development of black students' alienation. For example, at one point Richards tell us: "The climate of this college encourages black students to see the meaning of their blackness as estrangement from upper-class American life." Now what precisely does this mean in terms of the origins of black alienation at Colgate? Is Richards charging that the racist realities at Colgate sparked estrangement among black students? If this is his claim, he could have put it more directly. Is he charging that Colgate's black students obsessively, neurotically immerse themselves in an activist cultural style as a way to mask their individual and group insecurity complex, a complex stemming in part from their dependence upon affirmative action?

I believe that Richards wants to tell his *Dissent* readers that African-American students are themselves to blame for their alienation from the everyday life of Colgate. The tenacious neoracism that prevails throughout post-civil rights era American society—reinforced everywhere by broad classism—is of little moment in his thinking. In his view, Colgate's black students cannot complain if white students have rekindled pre-Civil Rights era prejudices. In this variant of blaming the victim, Richards claims that "blackness . . . appeals to white racist prejudice [at Colgate]," and that it justifies a "political apartheid" that in turn reinforces the maladjustment of Colgate's black students as Richards views it.

Richards's tales of everyday life in race relations at Colgate exhibit a kind of "I've-made-a-big-discovery" tone. And what's the big discovery? That there is an intrinsic malfunction in black cultural activism—namely, the inability of its adherents to adapt to the processes of secular achievement (in science and technology, humanities and aesthetics, and so on) at the foundation of modern Western civilization. In short, that black cultural assertion is an obstacle to social achievement. Lacking the space for elaboration, just let me state baldly that this claim is absurd. Moreover, neither Richards nor his

white conservative confreres would dare articulate this view vis-a-vis cultural activism among white ethnic and religious groups. Is Jewish cultural activism as such dysfunctional to social achievement? Are Irish, Italian, Polish, and WASP cultural activist patterns similarly dysfunctional?

Long before Richards's *Dissent* essay, progressive African-American intellectuals drew attention to the need for pragmatic choreographing of black cultural activism so that social achievement is respected. During the formative era of black activism on white campuses (the mid-sixties to mid-seventies), progressive black intellectuals who challenged militant black students in this regard included Kenneth B. Clark (at Brooklyn College), Hylan Lewis (at Brooklyn College), W. Arthur Lewis (at Princeton University), Harold Weaver (at Rutgers University), John Hope Franklin (at University of Chicago), John Blassingame (at Yale University), Nathan Huggins (at Columbia University), Charles Hamilton (at Columbia University), St. Clair Drake (at Stanford University), and myself at Harvard University, to mention just a few.

But unlike Richards's essentially rejectionist demeanor toward cultural activism among black Colgate students today, these progressive intellectuals exhibited basic respect for black folks, for blackness. They recognized that an activist commitment to black culture can be realized along pragmatic, rational-secular, and culturally tolerant—that is, non-xenophobic—lines, just like activist commitment to Jewishness, Irishness, Italianness, Anglo-Saxonnness, and so on. This is in contrast to Richards's neo-accommodationist discourse, which posits the generic inability of black cultural activist patterns to be anything other than irrational, culturally intolerant, and xenophobic.

During the formative days of black students' ethnic activism on white campuses, I was one of the progressive African-American faculty who got involved pro-actively. That is, I endeavored to help African-American students sort out their black cultural or ethnic activism along pragmatic and progressive lines. And despite some real intellectual disagreements—which I always preferred to be can-

did about—I sustained close mentoring ties with many of the militant black activists at Harvard in the mid-sixties to mid-seventies. When intellectual differences didn't interfere, I was faculty adviser to the black students' association. I helped to organize and finance one of the earliest black student journals on a white campus, and I sustained close friendships with activist black students.

So in that formative phase, progressive black faculty at white institutions did two crucial things. First, we impressed upon activist black students the need to infuse one's commitment to blackness with a spirit of cosmopolitan humanism, so that one is able to guard against chauvinistic and mean-spirited forms of ethnic activism. Second, we emphasized that African-American students had an obligation toward a kind of dual fidelity: fidelity to modernist achievement and rigorous academic behavior, on the one hand, and to black folks' honor—to the best traditions of black culture—on the other.

IN PURSUIT of these goals, progressive black faculty at white institutions did not hesitate to chastise black students when their cultural activism turned extremist or mean, small-minded, and twisted. But we also let them know one thing clearly. Namely, that we respected them—even while we also insisted they come to grips with the need for a pragmatic mode of managing black activism within the modern achievement-oriented society.

It is here, then, that Richards's "A Stranger in the Village" looms as intellectually inauthentic. Which is to say, it is little more than an exercise in blackness-phobia. Curiously enough, at one point Richards pretends that his response to Colgate's black students today is similar to the response of progressive black faculty during the 1960s and 1970s. But *Dissent* readers should not take this bid seriously, because it is simply groundless. (I have written about the era of formative black student cultural activism at Harvard. See Werner Sollors et al., eds. *Blacks at Harvard: A Documentary History of African-American Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe* [New York University Press, 1993].)

FINALLY, Richards gilds the lily when he writes about the only African-American student at Colgate whom he considered on an intellectual par with Colgate's white students. Richards tells his readers that he first encountered this student—a black female—“in my American literature survey class. Her presence there meant that she paid little attention to the black [cultural activist] diatribe against my courses.” Although this student did share outward solidarity with black cultural activists (for example, she wore “the striped knit caps that were common to the West Indian cultural nationalists in the college”), Richards informs us that “her resemblance to them ended there.” As he puts it: “For when she opened her mouth to comment on Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, or Ralph Waldo Emerson, she spoke in the high analytic mode that one expects from a senior philosophy major in . . . this school. . .

Her literary insights and analytic prowess stunned not only me but also the white fraternity boys. . . .”

Although I am aware that Richards is a cogent American studies scholar, I was not at all aware that Greek letter fraternity white males as a group possessed special talents in this field, talents that would encourage Richards to use them as measuring rod. But Richards reports that he had a second reason—more important to him, it seems, than the first—for his attraction to this student. “She did not see herself as black, and attributed her academic success partially to this view. . . . In her intellectual excellence and her quirky individualism this student represented a very impressive *protest against the college's [black students'] debilitating ideology of blackness.*” (Emphasis added.)

Richards elevates his high-achieving black student's rejection of her blackness to a general cultural principle. Furthermore, he in-

forms his readers of another of this student's key attributes—that she is not of domestic black origins, but of immigrant black origins, a Caribbean black American. In Richards's curious discourse, immigrant origin guarantees that black students on white campuses—or even at black colleges, for that matter—will “reject the consensual black ideology.”

In the passages where he's celebrating his favorite student, Richards informs his readers that if there are other intellectually rigorous black students at Colgate, they're more likely than not to be immigrant in background too. Here he is pandering to the pernicious propaganda line common among white conservatives: that immigrant blacks possess some intrinsic intellectual gifts not common among domestic blacks. There are no serious data that Richards or any other conservative can adduce to sustain this rubbish.

But never mind. It is, I submit, patently clear from Richards's article that his thinking about and behavior toward African-American students at Colgate is devoid of simple respect for the parity of black with white culture. No doubt this explains, at least in part, his curious bid to conceal the actual university where, during the past decade as a black American assistant professor in literary studies, he has considered himself “A Stranger in the Village.” But his estrangement is not from the white realities of Colgate, with their tenacious neoracist patterns: these are realities that Richards has easily accommodated to. It is rather an estrangement from the black realities of Colgate—realities that Richards considers maladjusted to the high-knowledge milieu of the university. ●

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