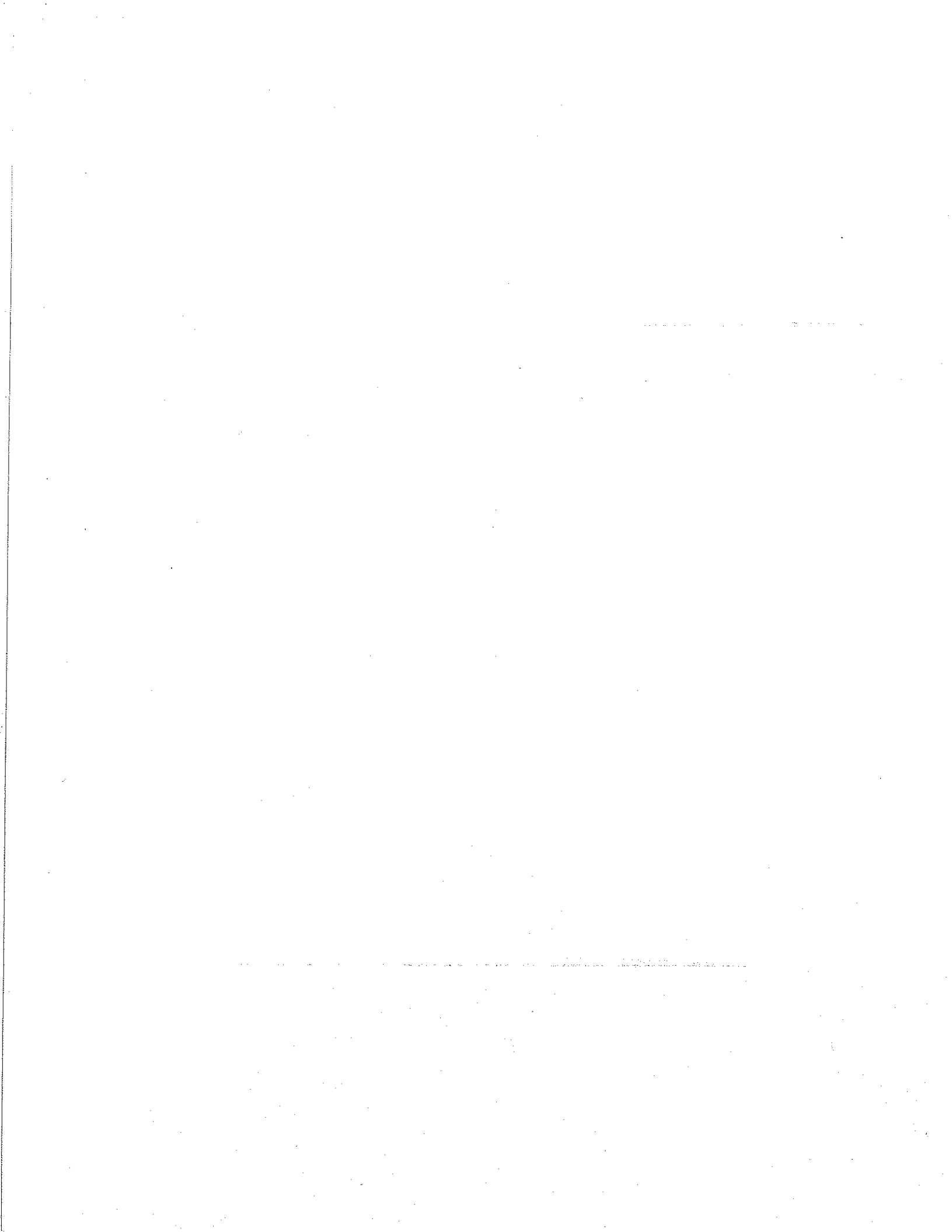


**Toward Trans-Communality the
Highest Stage of Multiculturalism: Notes on
the Future of African-Americans**

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Sidney Wilhelm's much neglected 1970 work, Who Needs the Negro?, infused with a severely pessimistic projection about the future of African-Americans, is absolutely necessary reading for today. Any understanding of the current and future crisis of racial/ethnic populations, in the United States must take into account the profound techno-global political-economic transformations that Wilhelm glimpsed and which are even more developed now. Wilhelm argued that, as technological efficiency such as automation reduced the need for workers, African-Americans were rapidly moving from being a functionally exploitable population, of use to the wider society, into being a marginalized discarded people, confined to reservation-like ghettos and controlled by increasingly heavy structures of repression. Today, 23 years later, Wilhelm's argument is even more salient as the computer age and the ability of capitalism to move its assembly lines around the world is undermining the need for a large industrial work-force in the U.S. itself. My retrospective use of Wilhelm's work here is aimed at rethinking the dilemmas and directions of African-Americans as we move toward the 21st century. Although my notes here are aimed primarily at the African-American situation, there are several parallels with other racial/ethnic populations such as significant portions of the Latino, Indigenous, and Asian-American communities.

FROM EXPLOITABLE TO CAST-OFF PEOPLE

Historically, as Wilhelm points out, African-Americans had

actually attained are overlooking, "the very radical economic shift taken by White America." (3) Instead of a pluralistic American resulting from "the Negro revolt" there will be, "the vigorous re-emergence of racial separation with all the overtones of genocide." (3)

It is futile, said Wilhelm, "to ignore "the drastic rate of technological change since 1950." (150). There will be increased productivity on the part of capitalism. But any notion that such increased productivity and efficiency will bring about greater inclusion of African-Americans in economic vitality is sadly mistaken. Automation will reduce the need for workers, "while private capital provides less employment, productivity does not suffer, but rather sets spectacular records. " (149) Obviously, said Wilhelm, "Profit, not public welfare is the goal of business. Attaining greater profits at the expense of labor takes precedence over the consequences to the general public." (150)

Automation of course has a general impact on workers, across "race" lines. But Wilhelm noted that the cutting edge of this technological revolution was slicing through society at precisely the historic moment in which millions of African-Americans went from being a largely rural to a mostly urban population dependent on industrial growth. "As the displaced black farm workers move into the city and automation takes over assembly line production in industry the ration of Negro-to-white unemployment soars." The basic devastating fact for Wilhelm is

Indian, illegal drugs turn the ghettoized Negro into a virtual invalid. (233-234)

And what will the society do with a "discarded" population that lacks even functional value as an exploitable group? Having removed African-Americans from the economic system, society can now remove them "from sight without providing any massive remedial programs" (167) And:

As White America moves the Negro out of sight, it seeks to render the black minority harmless as well as inconspicuous. The policy of racial isolation, therefore, necessitates the creation and sustainment of a strategy designed to contain and, if necessary, restrain, the Negro. White America treats the Negro as an infectious disease from which escape must be sought....(168)

To control and contain this population will require the use of increasing repression as a primary technique of control:

The nation with a vigorous tradition of violence resorts to a police state first to isolate black skinned people from white contact, and second to restrain any Negro from breaking out of the reservation...a police force assigned to preserve "law and order" remains fundamentally racist because it is charged with the responsibility to maintain the separation of all Americans according to race. (248)

Thus the "problem of the ghetto" is not one of "black violence"

make for very efficient simultaneous expansion of production and contraction of the centers of control. Capitalism is global insofar as it produces and draws profits from worldwide operations but its control centers remain confined to a few Euro-American and Asian points of concentration. Thus the process, described by Marx and Engels in the Manifesto of concomitant globalization and centralization of capital is now proceeding at hyper-speed. As Renate Holub points out:

the growth in information technology enables those in command of this technology to organize and manage the various processes of production more flexibly....The extent of geographic transferability of this practice, also adds to the profitability of this practice as well as the concentration of control of the "global assembly line." (178)

This high-info-tech capitalism, able to assemble and disassemble whole units of production while moving them around the world like chess pieces, (thus employing and disemploying millions of people) is radically transforming of the internal work-forces in the United States and Europe in a way that outstrips the changes envisioned by Wilhelm. The decline in need for African-American workers, so pivotal of Wilhelm's argument is part of an ever broadening impact on other racial-minority and white working-class communities.

The horrendous dislocation/relocation of industrial production lines is directly related to a crucial reduction in

something to those to whom they were granted. As meaningful concessions, they aid in the incorporation into the State of those groups as allies of the status quo. In this way, control can be a mix of coercion (when necessary) and actual societally unifying rewards rather than disruptive and socially expensive brute repression at all times. Not all members of elites will agree with such an approach. Factions will arise in these circles among "conservatives" who are against concessions, and "liberals" who favor them. Both will agree on the need to maintain the status quo. They disagree on the methods to be used for that end. Thus concessions will seem dangerous to "conservatives" for whom the fear of "give them an inch and they will take a mile" requires the use of the gun and club rather than compromise. But astute elite groups, that take on the coloration of the "liberal," see those compromises as more effective ways to maintain the basic order through flexibility rather than rigidity. F.D.R.'s New Deal is a classic example of this building of a bloc of alliances through granting concessions to a wide range of Americans. The "New Deal" entailed a recognition by F.D.R. and his "liberal" elite supporters of the necessity of granting some concessions as a way of avoiding the highly disruptive use of outright force during the economic crisis of the Depression. The very transformation of labor activism from the term "workers vs. bosses" to "labor-management relations" bespeaks to success of this continued bloc building in the 1950's and 1960's.

the top 1 percent of the country has more net worth than the entire "bottom" 90 percent. Meanwhile some thirty-three million people, many of them white, are living in poverty. Of course the fact that more people are "in the same boat," does not mean that everyone is in the same part of the boat. Different structural locations will give some more initial security than others. Some will feel impacts of the economic dislocations more, some less; some sooner, and some later. These differentials, along with the generally increasing marginalization of many workers across race lines, lead to two possible outcomes. One is increasing group competition and conflict among those being marginalized. Given the permeation of racism of this society, such inter-group competition and conflict is quite likely. The other possibility, which would require a high degree of organizational action, is that the "in the same boat together" understanding could be a basis on which to build coalitions. But let us leave this point for the moment. There are other significant transformations of the situation envisioned by Wilhelm that must be understood before talk of coalition creation can proceed.

FROM "BLACK METROPOLIS" TO "DARK GHETTO,"--INDUSTRIAL DECLINE,
THE INTEGRATIVE ABSORPTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN NEW INSIDERS, AND
THE END OF INTERNAL COLONIALISM

The "internal colonial model" pioneered in its application to the minorities of the U.S. by Blauner (1972) and Barrera (1979) has been "out of fashion." But, whatever its limitations

Chicago the "Black Metropolis;" and to which James Weldon Johnson (1977,1925) refers when he describes Harlem as, "the cultural Capital." In such communities were compressed layers of African-American doctors, lawyers, newspaper owners and reporters, photographers, movie theater owners, impresarios, baseball players, teachers, beauticians, entrepreneurs, gamblers, gangsters, Pullman porters and their union organizers, longshoremen, factory workers, political leaders, socialists, communists, nationalists, preachers, Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Muslims, musicians, composers, artists, writers, and many others. Out of these zones came the great American music of "jazz," the literature of those such as Baldwin, Hurston, Wright, Himes, the art of those such as Augusta Savage, Romare Bearden, and Jacob Lawrence to name but a few--all of which captured the intricate multi-toned dimensionality of this life. Of course this was a life of constant struggle with racism, of constant vulnerability, but it was also a life of fertile intermingling of different strata in ways that created a tangible structure of life.

This concentrated richly heterogenous internal colonial community has not completely vanished. But it has been severely eroded in many urban areas. This transformation is captured in the tonal change from earlier positive description such as "Black Metropolis" and "Cultural Capital" to Kenneth Clark's (1965) wrenching analysis of Harlem entitled, Dark Ghetto. The simultaneous weakening of the urban industrial job-providing

government, the military, cultural institutions, academia, and the churches, are becoming more racially/ethnically diverse. Increasing racial/ethnic pluralism at the top is matched by increasing class homogenization at the bottom. President Clinton's assertion that he wanted a cabinet "that looks more like America" reflects this top-level pluralistic tendency. In short, the Gramscian hegemonic bloc building is continuing but primarily at the middle and upper reaches, while it is being generally scaled back and shutdown for those at the bottom.

Consequently, the ghettos and barrios of the late twentieth century come less and less resemble internal colonies. Partly this is because they now largely contain and constrain those who are no longer functionally exploitable by the society. But the end of internal colonization results also from the loss of heterogeneity that also marked the classically segregated ghetto as internal colony.

But even this picture is too simple for it suggest merely that the "middle class" has moved out of the ghetto leaving a homogenous lower economic strata behind. Thus a demographic analysis tells us that those who "move up" also largely "move out" of the ghetto as William J. Wilson (1978) has argued. Such analysis, however accurate, does not by itself tell us about the consciousness and the action of those who having moved up and out, occupy highly complex and different positions in the overall structure of the society. For many African-Americans, now occupying these new positions, the issue is one of what Gramsci

But on the other hand there is clear evidence of persistent critical anti-status quo consciousness and action the "the New Insiders." As Pareto also argues:

In moving from one group to another an individual generally brings with him certain inclinations, sentiments, attitudes that he has acquired in the group from which he comes, and that circumstance cannot be ignored. (1965: 112)

For an example of this portable set of community "inclinations" among New Insiders, that they carry with them into the mainstream institutional zones, consider Representative Ron Dellums, Social-Democrat, radical anathema to the conservatives, and now Chair of the House Armed Services Committee. Dellums continues his basic anti-militaristic Social-Democratic agenda while also fighting to maintain military bases in California that are currently threatened with closure. He cannot be neatly categorized unless the ambiguity and fluidity of his structural location is itself considered to be a form of category. Dellums is more visible than most, but his structurally complex situation is not unique to the New Insider situation.

Moreover, many African-American New Insiders have formed thousands of caucus groups inside the organizations to which they now belong. Dellums for example belongs to one of the most well-known of these groups the Congressional Black Caucus. But there are several thousands of these caucuses. In a survey I conducted of these caucus groups, I found that they often create

aid us in answering this question. On one end of the spectrum are institutional zones with a fairly high degree of maneuvering room. In such zones it is possible for the African-American New Insider to enunciate and carry out some degree of community oriented action that actually challenges, or at least tries to challenge the status quo. Universities are good examples of such zones. Similarly, elected political office at local, state, and national levels, such as the U.S. congress can also bring with it, a fairly high degree of maneuvering room and community connectedness. This is not to say that the sailing is smooth in such places. To the contrary, universities and electoral politics are often the sites of intense combat between many of the New Insiders and the Old Guards. But the very fact that such battles can occur distinguishes these institutional zones from the other end of the spectrum occupied by the military, the CIA, the FBI. In these zones we find minimal to virtually zero amounts of maneuvering room for the New Insiders. Between these polar ends are a wide variety of variations within cultural institutions, public education, local, state, and federal government, private philanthropic organizations, and the media to name but a few. All of these areas are in need of sustained analysis.

In particular, the inclusion of large numbers of African-American men and women in the military, especially in the army, is itself an important development deserving of more analysis given its ramifications for political-social strategies. Here

with a social/economic environment of disintegration and despair in the inner cities. Not surprisingly when juxtaposed to the dead-end conditions that many find on the street the military not surprisingly takes on profoundly positive connotations that makes it very attractive and therefore absorptive for many.

Consequently, I believe that the civilian/military split in the African-American population is of great importance, notwithstanding the lack of study of this phenomenon. For example, during the U.S./Iraq Persian Gulf War, 51 percent of African-Americans opposed the sending of troops. This opposition cut across class lines and was much higher by far, than white opposition. Compared to nearly solid white support for the war the African-American figure is certainly significant. But what about the 49 percent of African-Americans who did not oppose the war? I have not seen any statistical breakdown of military/civilian attitudinal patterns among African-Americans. But I hypothesize that either membership in the military, or connection with someone in the military were significant in shaping support for, or at least lack of opposition to the war among African-Americans. Any understanding of the future political tendencies of the African-American population will have to take into account the basic fact that the military, especially the army, is now the only major societal source of advancement and job-security for many working class African-American women and men who do not want to be in the discarded population being confined to the ghetto.

courage, and cultural continuity. Today there are thousands of grassroots organizations, such as tenants unions, anti-drug coalitions, stop-the-violence alliances operating inside the ghetto. Many of these are locally based and created. They benefit from the experience of people who were activists in earlier years and who remain dedicated to community progress. In essence there is a great deal of organizational and philosophical activity aimed at challenging economic/social inequality. But a key problem is how to link these usually compartmentalized activities and activists together in the context of the damaging industrial/economic system of relations.

I will not pretend to offer a programmatic approach that addresses this complex issue here. Certainly, we need many hands working on developing a strategically oriented, multifaceted activist analysis to understand a wide variety of areas. We need to know more about: the implications of the end of hegemonic concessionary bloc building for large areas of society; the impact of African-American/Latino inclusion in the military; the role of the New Insiders who have integrated into key junction-points of the dominant structure; and the relationship between various racial/ethnic groups now living in economic hopelessness and apprehension. We cannot persist in analyzing race as if the U.S. economy was expanding industrially the way it did through so much of formative years of the 20th century. Nor can we analyze race and ethnicity outside of the context of the global assembly line. We must build on the work of writers such as Omi and

historical identity has injected constructive critical dimensions into the field of intellectual/political struggle that must be used, even as they are transformed and transcended where necessary. Black Feminist, Indigenous, Latino and other developing systems of epistemology and theory are aiding us all in dismantling the smothering claims of Western unicultural uniformity under whose guise the powerful nations exercise their domination of the world. The militant critique offered by multi-cultural perspectives not only opens the door for viewpoints heretofore excluded, but also provide an important philosophical framework that emphasizes multiplicity rather than deadening uniformity, and Dialogue rather than Monologue. As Patricia Hill Collins says about Black Feminist Thought:

The approach to Afrocentric feminist thought allows African American women to bring a Black women's standpoint to larger epistemological dialogues....Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial truths....Each group becomes better able to consider other groups's standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups' partial perspectives. (1990: 236)

Such writers point to the positive embracing but rooted nature of such diverse vantage points. From the strongholds of different vantage points, an outreach to others, that is shared rather than imposed from one unique command center is necessary.

collective identities and allegiances. Similarly Trans-communal Cadres of Latinos, and African-Americans involved with issues such as violence in the barrios/ghettos would through such communicative-action, create forms of dialogue and also a sense of belonging to the Cadre itself. There are already such efforts underway in this country. At the time of this writing major nation-wide, grassroots-based "Urban Peace Summit" in Kansas City is being organized to bring together Latino and African-American gang members, ex gang members, ex convicts, and community activists, and engage intellectuals. The Summit is being aimed at stopping the violence, building coalitions, and working for social/economic justice in the cities. Interestingly the coalition building here is both trans-ethnic and trans-structural insofar as it includes could include people who are now occupy "New Insider" positions in the dominant institutions along with grassroots activists. I anticipate that not only will dialogue result from such interaction, but a sense of common experience and therefore the ability to comprehend and be sympathetic to one another will be created in ways that would be impossible without such direct interaction. Similarly, trans-communal dialogue developed through the "Chinatown/Harlem/East Harlem Initiative" (Kuo Wei Tchen, 1990) that established links among the Chinese-American, African-American, and Latino communities in New York. By contrast, the demise of the Black/Korean-Alliance in Los Angeles following the upheavals there, demonstrates the need for analysis and action that addresses the complexity of relations

Given the way in which global capitalism moves so rapidly and with such devastating effectiveness using highly sophisticated communication systems, any effort to resist the rapacious marauding of these political/economic empires must involve improved communications and comprehending interaction among widely different groups around the world. In part, we can ourselves employ electronic communications as is done by such electronic mail networks as PEACENET. But we also need tangible, experientially based, shared action to create links of solidarity that go beyond slogans. A shared sense of "esprit de corps" or a "structure of feeling," shared among the participating members and developed through Cadre formation, is necessary in order to form "critical communities." (Holub, 1992: 162) of different racial/ethnic and other groups. There is a "fragile ground of a gradually evolving new 'structure of feeling'" leading to "a new moral and social paradigm." (Holub, Ibid.) The creation of Trans-communal Cadres can be one way to draw from already existing ethnic/racial/other groups while creating new communities that transcend without obliterating the preexisting communities. Such Trans-communality will recognize and reinforce distinctive-communal groundings and perspectives while also providing the means for communication and shared action among those different groups. An ever widening network of Trans-communal Cadre based interaction will increasingly well-placed to challenge the global economic powers that now can run rampart over the peoples of the world. Coupled with the

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