

Preface

I began by remembering the most easily forgotten thing: truth telling is not simple. It is not like the Norman Rockwell painting in which a ruggedly handsome white man, whose plaid collar is literally blue, speaks to the town meeting at his white clapboard church, while other white men, wearing ties, listen in admiration. Truth telling isn't like that. Truth's speakers don't often radiate handsome honesty. They are disconcerting and diverse rather than comfortably familiar. They are rarely received with admiring attention. And what they have to say can seem beyond hearing—or bearing. —Mark D. Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church*

Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality has been in the making for some time now. Indeed, the essays contained here span more than a decade. It is not a conventional book; it willfully transgresses genres. At turns academic, journalistic, and autobiographical, the book testifies to the fact that it takes a multiplicity of genres—sometimes working together in the same essay—to effectively render the truth of our lives. This is certainly the case if you believe, as I do, that truth telling is never simple or easy.

Part I of this book advances a variety of uses to which the serious analysis of race and gender together might be put. The first essay in this section ruminates on why and how the discipline of African American studies has for so long excluded any considerable focus on sexuality. It also goes far toward challenging the discipline for the incomplete and monolithic picture of the African American community that it has for so long projected and protected. The second essay in this section takes a look at the clothier and its advertising campaign to examine what it has successfully packaged and marketed—a rarified form of elite whiteness that depends upon the racist thinking and

logic of its consumers for its very success. And the final essay takes the analysis from the prior essay and extends it to a reading of the place and functions of race as the salient variable in the gay marketplace of desire. Taken together with the preface and the introduction, the chapters in the opening section of this book represent an attempt to speak a version of the truth of black gay male subjectivity, a version of the truth of African American studies, and a version of the truth of the black community.

Part II shifts from the broadly cultural to the political. The occasional essays in this section allow for an analysis of race and sexuality in broad terms. It is also a commentary about where both my own thinking and the thinking of the emergent field of black queer/gay and lesbian studies find themselves at present. That is, we think primarily through the lens of race, with sexuality contributing only partly to our perspective that makes the critical difference in what we, on occasion, bring to the discussion.

This book is primarily and explicitly about pushing the boundaries of what we call the discipline (and I do call it a discipline and not a field) of African American or black studies. My interventions and investments in black queer studies to date have been about transforming African American studies. For me, African American studies represents the site and the intellectual terrain on which I am most interested in doing this work of thinking about race and sexuality. I realize that the work I do is related to, indebted to, and should have an impact on queer studies as well. But such is not the fuel that drives my thinking or my intellectual and political investments. I have often thought that queer theory has been late to come to terms with much of its own racial biases. Very able and illuminating critiques to that effect have been and continue to be made by scholars and commentators in many quarters. My own investments, however, as I understand them, are with the transformation of the discipline of African American studies as an institutional formation and as a form of analysis that takes seriously the questions, complications, and richness that serious ruminations on sexuality—in concert with race, gender, and class—bring to the table of analyzing, critiquing,

and recording black life, history, cultural production, and political practices. In the provocative words of Essex Hemphill:

It is not enough to tell us that one was a brilliant poet, scientist, educator, or rebel. Whom did he love? It makes a difference. I can't become a whole man simply on what is fed to me: watered-down versions of Black life in America. I need the ass-splitting truth to be told, so I will have something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal.

Each of the essays in this section tries to demonstrate ways of reading that might result from taking these issues seriously, sometimes independently of each other, and at other times in concert with one another. In all ways, I hope they arc toward a way of thinking that is more inclusive and that moves us beyond some of the old paradigms for race work.

Part III shifts attention closer to the academic arena in order to give a closer examination of the very constitution of gender, sexuality, and race. Theoretical in its orientation, it lays out the academic genealogy of my thinking about race and sexuality, and the uses to which we have put such ideas in the service of our political agendas. These essays form a three-part intellectual discussion of the way we talk and think about race, its uses among black intellectuals and public figures, and on the silence of black gays and lesbians in the dominant forms of African Americanist and black anti-racist discourse.

As a black, gay, male intellectual; as a Southerner with an essentially Christian orientation—at heart I am in search of “the good” (not just “the truth”), and I am consumed with identifying and analyzing what I conceive to be “evil” (not merely “problematic”) in the world—this work has always been personal for me. My investments are substantial and the stakes high. I self-disclose in this way in order to begin by forestalling one of the, by now, age-old ways of disqualifying the personal, intellectual, literary, journalistic truths that people speak from the margins of our society. It is commonplace

in this age of “reverse discrimination” to believe, for example, that blacks are the least reliable witnesses as to what actually happens to them in a racist society, since their view is always already tainted by the very fact of their blackness and their “oversensitivity” to such issues. Similar claims have been made about women and issues of sexual harassment, for example. Indeed, over dinner earlier this summer on my back deck, a white gay male friend whom I have known over my five years in Chicago queried me as to whether I thought that my ready investment in seeing race at work meant that I might see it functioning in places where it might not actually be significantly present. I marveled at the ease with which my friend jumped to the ready possibility or conclusion that my “obsession” with race might produce a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. His disinclination to believe me was amazing. But his ability to call up so readily the rhetorical form that his disbelief assumed signaled to me that something in our societal ways of thinking about black people had not only brought us to a place where this gesture was commonplace, but also where the logic undergirding it could be viewed as neither slanderous nor offensive. Such logic operates on an implied gross fundamental fallacy, of course. That is, if the people who are the most obvious victims of particular forms of discrimination (in this case racism) are also the most readily disqualified as witnesses to those same forms of discrimination, then according to such logic only those people who are not victimized by racism (i.e., whites) are the ones who are, indeed, the best and most reliable witnesses and judges to what actually happens to those racial “others” in our society. So what we have effectively done is to rhetorically de-authorize or de-legitimize the victims of discrimination in our society from ever being able to speak authoritatively about their own experiences of discrimination. We have rhetorically seized their ability to bear authoritative witness to, or even to be in the best position to know, what it is that happens to them in the world. And he who effectively controls the form of epistemology (how we come to know what it is we know) ultimately goes far toward controlling what it is we can know. It is not altogether unlike the old adage that says: Until the lions have their own historians, the hunter will always be valorized.

This is, after all, the kind of thinking that has gotten us into trouble in our attitudes about such policies as affirmative action, creating categories like “reverse discrimination.” This is the kind of thinking that has gotten us into trouble in our public debates over LGBT rights, when the human rights that LGBT people seek have been labeled by the political and religious right in the United States as “special rights.” Indeed, at a moment when gay and lesbian citizens seek the right to have their relationships recognized by the state in the same way that our heterosexual counterparts’ relationships are recognized, the political forces of evil in this country turn this into a semantics debate. “Marriage,” an institution that has (and statistics bear this out) fallen on hard times in the United States, all of a sudden becomes sacred and hallowed ground that should be reserved exclusively for heterosexual pairings. Well, I say if the forces of evil in this country want a semantics debate, let’s give it to them. Let them have “marriage.” Indeed, let’s make marriage entirely a function of the church and leave states out of it altogether. Instead, let all relationships now recognized by the states as “marriages” be recognized as “civil unions.” Under that nomenclature states could also recognize the civil unions of their gay and lesbian citizenry as well, leaving marriage a private or religious affair in which the states have no interest.

It is precisely this brand of cynicism and rhetorical game-playing over the semantics of “marriage,” for example (which is ultimately about winning)—as opposed to any principled positions from real moral convictions—that has created a most lamentable state of affairs in U.S. public life. It has ushered in a kind of general malaise, a hardening of the heart, and even a glazing over of the eyes at the mere mention of that by-now-familiar triumvirate of race, gender, and class (sexuality is sometimes added as an afterthought), that one theologian has rightly called “compassion fatigue.” If our deeds follow from our language, as I am convinced they do, we have spoken into existence a way of simply excusing ourselves from having to think in responsible political ways about the disparities, the deeply irksome complexities, and, indeed, the evils of our society in which we are caught up and participate. Such a position is difficult even to articulate in a society in which compassion fatigue

has become more than simply the order of the day, but has achieved a kind of normalcy akin to an unspoken moral imperative.

Let me take this occasion to give institutionally marginal university programs and departments a much-deserved shout-out. I specifically want to do so for African American studies programs and departments. Though African American scholars are not always synonymous with African American studies, the two do have much in common with each other in the dominant logic of institutions of higher learning. Both—due to deep-seated histories of racism that extend, of course, to intellectuals and intellectual work—are ever in the process of having to prove to others that they belong there, a fact that consumes a great deal of energy and time that would surely be better spent doing one's work.

My African American colleagues across the country have not only had to achieve intellectually at a very high level under circumstances often far less than ideal, but they have also had to manage the mentoring, advising, committee work, political institutional work, and the constant race education work of students and faculty and administrative colleagues. The demands on those unfortunate enough to be in situations where there are too few of them to share the burdensome load of being an African American faculty member can often be crippling and detrimental to otherwise successful career trajectories.

Indeed, to disgruntled white colleagues who speak disparagingly of the few financial benefits that have—due to the sheer compelling nature of market forces, and certainly not from any sense of institutional benevolence—befallen some African American scholars working at the very highest levels of achievement in some of our nation's most prestigious colleges and universities, I offer the following sobering thoughts. Were it not for years of institutional racism that kept people of color out of our nation's most prestigious colleges and universities, we might have produced by now a cohort of faculty of color with PhDs in the United States who could fill the need we

now have to diversify our nation's faculties. The same is true when we speak of the need for faculty who work in the areas of African American studies, Asian American studies, Latino/a studies, and Native American studies. Since the multicultural explosion in our nation, which took place largely in the 1980s and early 1990s, the intellectual necessity for such work that we might today classify broadly as ethnic studies has become abundantly clear to many of us in academia (and the numbers are mounting). That being the case, the need for faculty of color in our institutions should neither shock nor surprise. And that we must now provide remunerations that might be "unprecedented" to such highly sought-after faculty members should neither shock nor surprise those of us who learned as early as high school economics about the law of supply and demand.

From what I have seen as a department chair now at two major research universities (one public and one private), what we have done for a few scholars of color who we might classify as stars or rising stars (meaning they are working at the highest levels of distinction and productivity in their fields), does not exceed what institutions have done for distinguished white colleagues. And more to the point, given the amount of "diversity work" faculty of color are called upon to do—both that which is institutionally sanctioned and that which goes beyond what is—the truth of the matter is that no institution could afford to pay most of us what we are actually worth. Some of those same disgruntled white colleagues who complain about the salaries of stars and rising stars among black faculty are the very ones who become the gatekeepers of "quality" when it comes to hiring black faculty. The language of "qualified" gets bandied about in discussions of such hires in a way that it simply does not when white colleagues are being considered for faculty positions. We might speak about the caliber of a white colleague's work; we might speak about him or her not having published enough; we might even speak of his or her intellectual pedigree; but rarely would such sweeping statements as "there are just so few qualified applicants" be used with regard to a pool of white applicants for a faculty position.

Let us canvass any of the English departments (I know those best) at top universities in the United States and consider the black faculty at those institutions. What you will find—and with very few exceptions—are faculty members who by any measure of “quality” are achieving at the very highest levels of distinction in the field. Canvass those same English departments at those same top institutions and consider the white faculty members there. What one will find is a range of faculty members from the very distinguished to the mediocre or, what some call, in insider’s academic administrative parlance, “dead wood.” This phenomenon is likely not unique to academia, but since that is what I know best, I will limit my remarks to that institution. My contention is this: there seems to be room in academia for a broad spectrum in quality of white academics, whereas there seems to be very little tolerance for such breadth when it comes to black academics. A double standard? To be sure. So what is the answer to this conundrum? I have often said, and will repeat here, that one of the ways in which we will know when black people in the United States are truly liberated and equal to their fellow white citizens will be when there are as many mediocre blacks in academia as there are currently mediocre whites. This is not meant to denigrate the mantles of “quality” or “merit,” but simply to show that even these sacred truths are subject to the vagaries of racist thinking and ideology.

But none of this is new. Those of us conversant in the institutional discourse of diversity have learned to spout off such realities with the same ease with which people rehearse the quartet of race, gender, sexuality, and class when we talk about cutting-edge scholarship today. Much of what we now understand as cutting-edge scholarship in any of the traditional social science and the humanities disciplines could scarcely have been imagined before the advent of African American studies, ethnic studies, gender studies, and so forth. In the more than three decades over which these so-called marginal disciplines and areas of inquiry have emerged in the academy and, indeed, moved to the fore in recent years, it has become possible for them to make several intellectual strides, strides that make the work of an entire new generation of scholars possible. We are now, for example, able to recognize

the significance of work on race that has been proceeding relatively unnoticed in traditional disciplines. We are able to give the work of people interested in thinking about race and gender an intellectually larger—and at the same time culturally more specific—context in which that work can be appreciated. And, not to put too fine a point on the matter, we have been able to open up possibilities for the reconsideration of grand historical and cultural narratives such as citizenship, the individual, the human, and modernity, to name but a few.

Indeed, the reason that race, gender, class, and sexuality can be taken as seriously as they are and be as central to how we now produce knowledge even in traditional disciplines is a direct result of the intellectual and institutional work that has for so long proceeded at the margins of the academy in departments like African American studies. The margin forced the center to change, to alter the very ways in which we produce knowledge itself. Our early twenty-first century epistemologies, or ways of knowing and producing knowledge, are radically different from those of the middle of the last century. And we have not been fair about according much of the credit for that to those very programs, curricula, and new disciplines that have been maligned, contested, and starved for resources for so long. Still they rose and evolved new vistas from which to comprehend and make sense of our world.

We can only hope that these kinds of intellectual interventions will also point up the urgency for us to be sure that our institutions take seriously the responsibility to diversify their faculty and student populations. For while the biological significance of race has been thoroughly disqualified, I would hate to see the proverbial baby of representational politics thrown out with the bathwater of biological race. Because while the particular racial markings of bodies may not theoretically matter (as if colorblindness were either desirable or achievable), the narratives, the experiences, the social, political, and economic dramas that animate our realities, the stories we tell and produce, and the intellectual questions we pose are as vital as ever. Therefore, we need to be ever vigilant and attentive to the status of race in our work as well as in our lives.

Building our African American studies departments and programs, accord- ing them the same respect and autonomy that we accord traditional dis- ciplines, and making the hiring of minority faculty a priority across the dis- ciplines is not just good for black faculty, it is good business. If knowledge continues to develop in the way that it has over the last few decades, our scholarly communities, our curricula, and our institutional standings will rise and fall, at least in part, on our success in recruiting and retaining African American faculty, and on the building of strong African American studies de- partments. What we have been witnessing over the last several decades is not just the knowledge-corrective power of African American studies, but the in- stitutionalization of African American studies as a discipline. Recall that it was not until 1892 at the University of Chicago that the first department of sociology was founded. And the discipline of my own training, English stud- ies, was not a recognized discipline of study until rather late in the nine- teenth century. When we remember the histories of the so-called traditional disciplines that seem to us so normative today, we begin to see what we are experiencing now as part of a much larger evolution in the production of knowledge—what Thomas Kuhn might have called a “paradigm shift.” As African American scholars and as African Americanists, we should take great stock in the way African American studies occupies such a central role in that process. And our institutions would do well to support what is perhaps the most important intellectual movement of our time by strengthening African American studies, ethnic studies, and gender studies, and by diversifying our faculties in the process.

When I imagine the future of African American studies and of race discourse in the United States, I still, despite much evidence to suggest the contrary, have great hope for both these enterprises. I have hope that I, or at least my black (gay, lesbian, or straight) children, will be able to live in a world where their beauty will be publicly honored, appreciated, and celebrated alongside a variety of different kinds of beauty. I have hope that we may live in a world where the novelty of the fact of blackness might become a relic of a long-

dead past. I have hope that in academia, we will no longer be constantly called upon to make the case for the importance and centrality of African American studies as a discipline because it will enjoy the kind of institutional generosity of resources that departments such as English, history, biology, or sociology currently do. Indeed, there will be no more “programs” in African American studies because they will all be departments with the same autonomy afforded other disciplines in institutions of higher learning. And gone will be the days when African American studies is called upon to staff its courses, run its curriculum, and meet its administrative, advising, and teaching obligations with shared labor in the form of jointly appointed faculty or, worse still, faculty affiliates who have no real institutional obligations to African American studies other than that which they have generously elected to have. In these ways, we cripple the enterprise of African American studies from the start, forcing it to survive—in the way that no traditional disciplines do—by frequently having to depend upon the good graces of other departments. And Tennessee Williams taught us well what happens to those whose fate it is to depend upon the kindness of strangers.

I also have great hope that someday African American studies departments will have more than the handful of faculty members currently found in most of these units in universities across the country. I have great hope that they will be places in which it will be commonplace to think not only about issues of race in conjunction with questions of diaspora, gender, sexuality, and class, but that there will also be faculty in these departments who represent the range of intellectual interests and the diversity of the African American community. When I look at my own hometown of Chicago at present and consider that four of the major research universities in our metropolitan area have a black gay or lesbian scholar at the helm of their particular race-based intellectual enterprises (Beth Richie, head of the Department of African American Studies at University of Illinois at Chicago; Cathy Cohen, director of the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture at the University of Chicago; Darrell Moore, director of the Program in Black and Diaspora Studies at DePaul University; and yours truly as chair of the

Department of African American Studies at Northwestern University), I am heartened about the future of black studies. It gives me great hope that we are not only on our way to a more inclusive and intellectually more radical—not to mention responsible—version of our discipline, but that the future of the discipline—its evolution, its coming of age, its survival—depends upon our taking careful account of the overlooked complexities of black life in the United States. Those complexities include populations, questions and considerations, institutions, histories, rhetoric, politics, and cultural productions that have been marginalized by the discipline at best or, which is more often the case, entirely ignored.

So while there is a lot of work—good work—to be done, we also could not be in a better place to face the challenges of the discipline than we are in today. We are ready to move beyond the centrality of the lone “race man” standing at the precipice between a monolithic blackness and the rest of the world broadcasting a prêt-à-porter version of black life. As the epigraph with which I began this preface reminds us, “truth telling is not simple.” That is true not only of one’s personal truth or testimony, but it is nowhere truer than when one tries, as we must, to tell the truths of our institutions or even of an entire people. That is not the work of the lone straight black man, be he Douglass or Walker, Du Bois or Washington, King or Malcolm, Jackson or Sharpton, or even our contemporary black public intellectual versions of the same. No, that work, the work of telling our truths as African Americans, takes a diversity of voices. Both we who would be representative speakers (race men and women) and the media bear some of the responsibility for the current state of affairs. The media wants, requires, and indeed in some cases produces, such lone individuals. It makes the work of summing up black life and experience (as if there were only one) or of getting a line on black folk much easier when there are the one or two people we can turn to for that perspective. And we race men and women don’t make the situation any better by yielding to the pressure to pontificate often on matters far beyond anything resembling our expertise instead of recommending someone who might know more on a particular subject than we do.

Telling the truths of black life in the United States requires a multiplicity of voices. It takes voices invested in the stories and experiences of black men and women; black heterosexuals and black gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender folk; middle-class blacks as well as the black poor, and working and upper classes; incarcerated blacks; black entrepreneurs and businessmen and businesswomen; black professionals; black artists and culture producers; black sex workers; black single parents; black adoptive parents; black families in the broadest sense of that troublesome word; black churches in their various and complicated formulations; black academics; black children and so very much more. When we allow ourselves to be summed up by sanitized versions of black life in adherence to a form of black respectability, we tell only part of our story. And I am convinced that we have finally arrived at a time when this mode of representing black life in the United States no longer serves us in the ways that it might have at an earlier point in our history. The time has come for African Americans to embrace, celebrate, and document our greatest strengths as a community—our diversity and our complexity.

If African American studies is at that proverbial fork in the road, I choose the road less traveled. It is my sincere hope that this book might serve as another modest step down that road that other fellow travelers have already begun taking. For this way lies the future of the new African American studies. Down the other: worn out, monolithic versions of black life, which serve only those who believe that their authority and legitimacy over the dispensation of black knowledge derives from the centrality and repetition of such tired narratives. I believe they are wrong. And I feel certain time will bear me out.

This book represents the evolution of the thinking of one black gay male scholar about “race” since the explosion of cultural studies in the United States. The overarching premise is that African American studies has had to evolve and, in many cases, remake itself in response to the shifting American landscape, itself a cultural and critical hybrid. Indeed, African American

studies has also been shaped by the very process of its institutionalization in American universities over the course of the last thirty-five years.

The result in the field of African American studies has been a division into two large conceptual camps. One camp is what we might call the celebration and culture bearers camp; that is, those scholars and culture producers who view African American culture as an entity that needs to be celebrated, as a thing to be transmitted and presented to the world in the mode of respectable admiration. With a critical lineage, liberally understood, dating back to the Harlem Renaissance in the work of figures like Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston, this same conceptual camp seems to honor the role of culture producers as primary over the role of the critic and of analysis more generally. This is evidenced most readily today, perhaps, in the form of conference programs like those of the College Language Association and the African American Literature and Culture Society, and in the work published in the *CLA Journal*.

The other camp might be called the cultural studies camp. The critical lineage of this conceptual grouping can be traced back to the scholarship of the late 1970s to mid-1980s with the likes of Henry Louis Gates Jr., Houston A. Baker Jr., Hortense Spillers, and Mae G. Henderson—who represent an avant-garde who first seriously took up poststructuralism in the examination of African American literature and culture. This has resulted in a second wave of such scholars who were trained in academia during the rise of cultural studies in the United States. The effect of this has been the production of a new African American studies influenced by cultural studies, resulting in an ever-broadening notion of African American culture. This new African American studies is also the result of more-recent challenges like those posed by scholars who have raised and continue to raise questions about the diasporic context for African American studies, those pressing us to think more critically about the role of gender in African American studies, those working in the emergent field of black queer or gay and lesbian studies questioning the role of gay and lesbian sexuality in African American studies, and those pressing the issue of class analysis in African American studies. In their own ways,

each of these challenges the more traditional mode of African American studies by defying the notion of African Americans as a monolithic community, and presses to tell a truer story of our complexity, diversity, and cultural richness as a community. Put more pointedly, such challenges force us to debunk and trouble the waters of the central role that race alone has held in the analytical work of the field.

The essays collected in this volume, all written between 1991 and 2003, represent the progress, pitfalls, and possibility of race as a category of inquiry in African American studies over the course of the last crucial decade when the critical—not to mention political—landscape of the United States shifted and was radically reoriented. The essays in this book—at times occasional, sometimes theoretical, and at still other times deeply personal—taken together, I hope, will not only carry us further toward complicating and politicizing our thinking about race and sexuality, but also their deployment in our communities; our political lives; and our public, personal, and sexual lives.

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