Beyond Black Demons & White Devils: AntiBlack Conspiracy Theorizing & the Black Public Sphere

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BEYOND BLACK DEMONS & WHITE DEVILS:
ANTIBLACK CONSPIRACY THEORIZING & THE BLACK
PUBLIC SPHERE*

Regina Austin**

I. Introduction

We live in conspiratorial times.\(^1\) Almost everyone has a favorite conspiracy theory or two. Even so, I suspect that, relative to other groups, black people espouse an inordinate number of conspiracy theories, most of which involve plots directed against them.\(^2\) Of course, black people bear more than their share of problems to theorize about and have more than their share of reasons to believe that their conspiracy theories are true. Although blacks appear to be fairly quiescent and uninterested in mass political protest, there is a great deal of activity at the level of social discourse in the form of antiblack conspiracy theorizing.

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\(^2\) Although I am black, I use the third person plural in referring to black people because my experiences are not necessarily exemplary of the experiences of others, particularly since black Americans differ according to class, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, geographical location, and country of birth or ancestry.
Antiblack conspiracy theories are first and foremost the stuff of folklore — rumors, legends, tales, and such that circulate by word of mouth among ordinary everyday people. However, formal evidence of some of these theories can be found in black-authored texts sold primarily at black bookstores and vending stands; academic social science literature, particularly works dealing with urban legends; news articles appearing in the white-dominated mainstream and black presses; movies; and popular music. There are, no doubt, a host of other theories that either have not yet found their way into the formal discourse or never will.\(^3\)

Antiblack conspiracy theories are not uniformly accepted by black people, not the least because the theories often rest on the slenderest of factual foundations.

Even though conspiracy theorizing is far from an ideal form of discourse and leaves much to be desired as a manifestation of black critical judgment, it has its usefulness. Because I respected the speakers, I felt compelled to investigate the speech. What I found leads me to believe that antiblack conspiracy theorizing is not all bad.

Whether the theories are true or not, I would argue that the theories themselves reveal much about the concerns of contemporary blacks regarding law, medicine, economics, politics, and the media, and warrant serious consideration on that account. The theories represent critiques of major institutions and social systems by a people who are and have been foreclosed from full participation in them. Antiblack conspiracy theorizing generates a counter-response to exclusion and discrimination by mobilizing collective black self-interest in a way that contributes to the growth and the strength of the black public sphere. The black public sphere includes both politics and economics, and therefore encompasses both audiences and markets. It consists of the institutions and mechanisms that blacks control, which provide outlets for black labor and creative genius. However deviant it may seem, antiblack conspiracy theories are among the modes of discourse that determine everyday social, political and economic interactions and transactions at the most basic operational level of the black public sphere. The theories and the theorizing are important for that reason if for no other.

In the discussion that follows, I grossly categorize the documentable antiblack conspiracy theories, discuss the criticisms made against

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3. From time to time I have been informed of antiblack conspiracy theories that I have not been able to document with sources available to me. I am not a folklorist and have not undertaken a systematic search to uncover the full range of theories that may be in existence today. I have accordingly limited my analysis to theories that are discussed in the formal sources cited in the text.
them, and finally explore the merits of the theories and the theorizing and delineate their significance to the burgeoning black public sphere.

II. A Web of Conspiracy Theories

Among the most broadly disseminated antiblack conspiracy theories are those dealing with the wholesale destruction of urban black communities by means of drugs and guns. A graphic explication of one of these theories appears in John Singleton's black coming of age movie, *Boyz N the Hood.* The father figure, Furious Styles, takes his adolescent son and a friend to a vacant lot in the Compton section of Los Angeles. The boys are not comfortable with the residents there, but Styles warns them that "we cannot afford to be afraid of our own people anymore." On the lot is a large billboard advertisement offering to buy homes for cash. As Styles explains how gentrification drives down property values, a small crowd forms. Styles warns those assembled that blacks must hold on to their communities and "keep everything black, black-owned, with black money" like other ethnic groups do. When a resident objects to Styles' assessment and blames the decline of the community on young people selling drugs and killing each other, Styles responds that the locals do not own the planes or ships that bring drugs into the country. He links the importation of drugs to the gun shops and liquor stores that are on every corner. He explains the drugs, liquor, and guns are there because "[t]hey want us to kill ourselves . . . [and the] best way you can destroy a people is if you can take away their ability to reproduce themselves."

In some versions of the drugs-and-guns conspiracy the target is black males rather than the community in general. These theories posit that while black males are involved in drug dealing and the violence and slaughter associated with it, whites are the chief beneficiaries of their activities. According to the theory (here stated in the terms of a cynical nonbeliever):

White people import the drugs, white bankers launder the drug money, and white people garner most of the profits . . . . White people even import and sell the [guns] that black drug dealers use to slaughter each other. Ergo: the slaughter of black men is a white

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4. See Sandy Hamm, "'Conspiracy Against Students, Black Youth,'" NEW PIT. COURIER, Aug. 28, 1993, at A1 (reporting that the leader of a black campus group believes that blacks are the victims of a government conspiracy to oppress their communities with crack and street violence).

5. BOYZ N THE HOOD (Both Inc./Columbia motion picture 1991).
conspiracy, and drugs are the tool these clever devils have chosen to carry out their plan.6

Whites too are accused of conspiring to destroy black males by demonizing them. The demonization is apparent in the exaggerated treatment accorded black male criminal behavior by the media and government officials.7 Remember Willie Horton?8 Horton, a convicted killer who raped a white woman and stabbed her fiance while on furlough from a Massachusetts prison, figured prominently in political ads supporting presidential candidate George Bush when he ran against Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. Willie Horton symbolized the threat that black males, aided by white liberal politicians, pose to innocent whites. Playing on racial fears, the ads' signifying was not limited to the criminal element; every black man was a potential Willie Horton, rapist and murderer.9

The demonization of black men has clearly had an impact on ordinary whites. It allowed Bostonian Charles Stuart to credibly accuse a black man of murdering his pregnant wife. More recently, it allowed South Carolinian Susan Smith to credibly accuse a black man of abducting her two small children. Of course, the black man in each case was fictitious; both Stuart and Smith were accused of murder themselves.10 The effect of the demonization is also apparent in myriad

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8. Television commercials sponsored by a political action committee supporting George Bush's 1988 presidential campaign and featuring Willie Horton ran for 28 days on cable television. See Stephen Engleberg, Bush, His Disavowed Backers and a Very Potent Attack Ad, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 3, 1988, at A1. Although Bush campaign officials publicly censured the ads, the committee allegedly received unofficial word that the campaign was “thrilled” with what they were doing. Many critics accused Mr. Bush of deliberately using race to incite the electorate. Susan Estrich, Democratic challenger Michael Dukakis’s campaign manager, stated that “[t]here is no stronger metaphor for racial hatred in our country than the black man raping the white woman. If you were going to run a campaign of fear and smear and appeal to racial hatred you could not have picked a better case to use than this one.” See Andrew Rosenthal, Foes Accuse Bush Campaign of Inflaming Racial Tension, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 24, 1988, at A1. Representative Charles Rangel of Manhattan stated, “Let’s face it, if we talk about a murderer and a rapist and you have as part of the commercial black folks’ faces, then you don’t have to be a Democrat to know that is an appeal along racial lines.” Id. Despite these charges, James Baker, Bush’s campaign manager, did not take the committee up on its offer to pull the ads from the air until the 25th day of the campaign. See George Bush and Willie Horton, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 4, 1988, at A34.
9. See Anthony Walton, Willie Horton and Me, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 20, 1989, § 6 (Magazine), at 52 (describing a young middle-class black man’s reactions to being identified with Willie Horton).
mundane examples; for instance when white people encounter black males on the street, the men often clutch their women while the women clutch their purses.\textsuperscript{11}

The statistical portrait of black men in America is the best evidence that the conspiracies to destroy them by whatever means are real; extraordinarily high rates of incarceration,\textsuperscript{12} unemployment,\textsuperscript{13} and premature death\textsuperscript{14} confirm that something pretty pernicious is working against black men.

Extermination or genocide is the theme of other conspiracy theories circulating among blacks today. For example, various theories link AIDS to the decimation of blacks at home and abroad.\textsuperscript{15} One set of narratives posits that, if HIV originated in Africa, it was either specifically developed to ravage African peoples or resulted from uncon- 

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\item \textsuperscript{11} See generally Elijah Anderson, Race and Neighborhood Transition, in The New Urban Reality 99, 114-15 (Paul E. Peterson ed., 1985) (describing the reactions of whites encountering blacks on the streets, including one instance in which Anderson himself, a black male, was jogging on the sidewalk); Brent Staples, Into the White Ivory Tower, N.Y. Times, Feb. 6, 1994, § 6 (Magazine), at 22, 36, 44 (a black writer's recounting the responses to his presence on the streets near the University of Chicago when he was a graduate student).
\item \textsuperscript{12} It has been projected that at the end of 1993 blacks, who comprise only 12.4\% of the population, constituted more than one-half of the prisoners in state and federal prisons. Joe Hallinan, Blacks Surpass 50% of U.S. Prison Inmates; Experts Fear Trend Could Continue, S.F. Examiner, Jan. 20, 1995, at A6. In 1991, the latest year for which official statistics are available, black, non-Hispanic males constituted 45.5\% of male state prison inmates. Bureau of Justice Statistics, DeP't of Justice, Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics-1993 611 (1994). White non-Hispanic males were only 35.4\% of the total. Id. Recent data indicate that black non-Hispanics comprise 44\% of the jail population; about 90\% of these prisoners are male since women are only 10\% of the jail population. Paul Levitt, Local Jail Population Soars to 490, 442, USA Today, May 1, 1995, at 6A.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Unemployment among black males is roughly twice that among white males. In 1994, the average seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for black males between the ages of 16 and 19 was 37.5\%, compared with 16.3\% for comparable white males. Current Labor Statistics: Employment Data, Mon. Lab. Rev., March 1995, at 84 (official statistics compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Dept of Labor). The average seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for black males 20 years old and over was 10.3\%, compared with 4.8\% for comparable white males. Id. The figures for 1994 were much like those for 1993 when average black male unemployment stood at 40.1\% for males ages 16 through 19 and 12.1\% for males age 20 and older; the figures for comparable white males were 17.6\% and 5.6\% respectively. Id.
\item \textsuperscript{14} While overall life expectancy at birth in 1992 was 75.8 years, for black males the figure was 65.0 years; this figure was much lower than the life expectancies for white males (74.2 years), black females (73.9 years), and white females (79.8 years). Mortality Patterns - United States, 1992 From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 273 JAMA 100 (1995). Looking at life expectancy data in another way and using 1992 figures, whereas white males had a 99\% chance of reaching age 15 and a 88\% chance of reaching age 55, the odds for black males were 98\% and 75\% respectively. Diane Crispell, This Is Your Life Table, Am. Demographics, Feb. 1995, at 4.
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trolled biological experiments conducted by the U. S. Government.\textsuperscript{16} Along the same lines, efforts to encourage or force black women to utilize specific forms of birth control, such as the long-term implanted contraceptive Norplant, have been attributed to a conspiracy to reduce the black birth rate.\textsuperscript{17}

In a number of instances, specific black individuals, typically male celebrities and public figures, have been identified as the targets of conspiracies. It is widely assumed that Malcolm X was murdered as a result of a conspiracy hatched by the leadership of the Nation of Islam and fueled, if not aided, by the FBI, CIA, and New York City Police Department.\textsuperscript{18} Similar speculation about government involvement in the assassination of Martin Luther King exists, but is less well accepted.\textsuperscript{19} There is evidence supporting the widespread charges that the Reagan and Bush administrations plotted the downfall of black elected officials such as D.C. Mayor Marion Berry and Congressman Floyd Flake of New York.\textsuperscript{20} Some blacks believe that Mike Tyson and Clarence Thomas were the victims of a generalized scheme to bring down prominent black men; their cases are particularly disturbing to those who adopt the conspiracy line because each involved a black woman accusing a black man of sexual deviance.\textsuperscript{21} O.J. Simpson, who

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\item[16.] See Patricia A. Turner, I Heard it Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture 151-63 (1993). But see Tony Brown, Why AIDS Isn’t AIDS in Africa, Phila. Trib., June 1, 1993, at 7A (alleging a conspiracy to magnify the extent of AIDS in Africa to cover up the failure to treat common diseases).\textsuperscript{\footnotemark[16]}
\item[17.] See Donna St. George, Pregnant Teens Get Norplant, Advice from Boston School, The (New Orleans) Times-Picayune, Jan. 27, 1994, at A2 (alleged conspiracy to reduce black births among the reasons raised against a plan to make Norplant available to students at a school for pregnant teenagers). See also Steven A. Holmes, Norplant Is Getting Few Takers at School, N.Y. Times, May 3, 1994, at A16 (15 months after Norplant became available in Baltimore school genocide allegations continue to deter young women from having implants).\textsuperscript{\footnotemark[17]}
\item[18.] See Karl Evanzz, The Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X (1993); Baba Zak A. Kondo, Conspiracies: Unravelling the Assassination of Malcolm X (1993). See also Abiola Sinclair, Media Watch: Who Really Killed Malcolm X?, N.Y. Amsterdam News, Feb. 26, 1994, at 26 (reporting on a public forum held in Harlem at which both Evanzz and Kondo were among the speakers).\textsuperscript{\footnotemark[18]}
\item[19.] Philip Melanson, Who Killed Martin Luther King? (1993) (raising numerous unresolved questions about the possible involvement of federal intelligence agencies and the Memphis Police Department in King’s murder).\textsuperscript{\footnotemark[19]}
\item[20.] See Mary A. Fischer, The Witch-Hunt, Gentlemen’s Quarterly, Dec. 1993, at 242 (describing the disproportionate number of federal political-corruption probes targeting black politicians that were initiated in the 1980s).\textsuperscript{\footnotemark[20]}
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is presently on trial for the murder of his ex-wife and her friend, is
another black male celebrity who has been added to the list of con­
spiracy victims.\textsuperscript{22}

Conspiracy rhetoric has also found its way into the discussion of
other kinds of political harms. Included in this category are the al­
leged conspiracies to keep blacks off juries in prominent cases involv­
ing blacks,\textsuperscript{23} and to suppress the black vote in the 1993 gubernatorial
race in the State of New Jersey.\textsuperscript{24}

Most antiblack conspiracy theories charge white people in general
with either deliberately neglecting or intentionally harming blacks.\textsuperscript{25}
Occasionally, the alleged conspirators belong to a specific nonblack
ethnic or religious subgroup. It is Jews who are indicted most often.
For example, Professor Leonard Jeffries, Jr. of the City College of
New York has claimed that when he was growing up there was a con­
spiracy between Jewish filmmakers and Mafia financiers to portray
blacks in movies in a way that undermined the self-image and esteem
of young blacks like himself.\textsuperscript{26} Nation of Islam head Louis Farrakhan
has charged Jews with conspiring against him and his organization.\textsuperscript{27}
“Outside influences” said to consist of conservative elements among
blacks, Jews, and organized labor allegedly worked to bring about the
firing of Ben Chavis from his position as executive director of the
NAACP.\textsuperscript{28} Mr. Chavis was discharged after he settled, without board
knowledge or approval, a sexual discrimination lawsuit brought by a
black female employee, but prior thereto Chavis had been criticized

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22. Stanley Bailey, Simpson’s Case: A Division for Black and White, PHILA. TRIB., July 29,
1994, at 22; James Strong, Strong Points: If O.J. is a Tom, What’s the Fuss?, NEW PITT. COUR­
1992, at 54 (discussing suspicions raised by the low representation of blacks on juries in nation­
ally prominent cases involving blacks).
24. Acel Moore, Was the Low NJ Black Vote the Result of a Conspiracy, PHILA. INQUIRER,
Nov. 11, 1993, at A27.
25. Losing Ground, NEWSWEEK, Apr. 6, 1992, at 20, 21 (discussing the extent to which
blacks believe that contemporary social conditions are attributable to white conspiracies); Jason
DeParle, For Some Blacks, Social Ills Seem to Follow White Plans, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 11, 1991,
§ 4, at 5.
26. The accusation was made in a speech given by Professor Jeffries at the Empire State
Black Arts and Cultural Festival on July 20, 1991. Text of Jeffries’ July Speech, N.Y. NEWS­DAY,
27. See Farrakhan Says Jews Plot Against Him, BALT. SUN., Jan. 25, 1994, at A9; Desda
Moss, Farrakhan Fires Aide, Assaults Jews, USA TODAY, Feb. 4, 1994, at 1A.
28. Kevin Powell, Soul on Ice, VIBE, Nov. 1994, at 68, 70; J. Zamgba Browne, Chavis
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on a number of grounds, but most especially for his inclusion of Louis Farrakhan in NAACP-sponsored leadership summits.

In an important book entitled *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture*, folklorist Patricia Turner documents and analyzes a number of antiblack rumors, legends, and conspiracy theories that pertain to commercial transactions.29 The folk discourse links consumer products like beer (Coors), cigarettes (Kools), fast foods (Church’s and Popeyes), athletic shoe wear (Reebok and British Knights), and apparel (Troop) to the Ku Klux Klan, the government of apartheid South Africa, or South African corporations.30 Either the products cause sterilization or otherwise contaminate black bodies, or profits from sales of the products are used to oppress blacks.

Economics is the subject of other conspiracy theories as well. For example, it was alleged that Spike Lee was the victim of a conspiracy to underrepresent the box office take for his movie *Malcolm X*.31 Moreover, allegations of various conspiracies to keep blacks from operating local businesses appear to be quite common.32

In sum, then, the antiblack conspiracy theories circulating among blacks today deal with a broad range of subjects including law, medicine, economics, politics, and the media. Moreover, they address issues that impact on the everyday lives of a large number of black people. The theories, in turn, provoke a wide range of responses and interpretations, particularly among black commentators and writers. In the next section, I discuss critical assessments of antiblack conspiracy theories and theorizing.

29. Turner, supra note 16.
30. Id. at 82-107, 127-36, 139-144, 165-79.
31. Patrons throughout the country reported that, when they asked for tickets for *Malcolm X*, they got tickets for other popular films showing at the same theater. The media, however, discounted the idea that these incidents at the ticket window were the product of a conspiracy. See Keith Boseman, *The Black Year in Cinema*, Hyde Park Citizen, Jan. 14, 1993, at 14 (though cross-charging might have occurred, *Malcolm X’s* length and audience dislike of Spike Lee account for the film’s poor box office performance); David Mills, ‘*X*-ed Out at The Box Office, The Ticket Conspiracy That Probably Isn’t’, Wash. Post, Dec. 10, 1992, at C1 (attributing wrong tickets to random cashier errors that occur across the board rather than to a conspiracy to distort ticket sales for Lee’s film). But see Abiola Sinclair, *Is There a Conspiracy Against Spike Lee*, N.Y. Amsterdam News, Jan. 16, 1993, at 23 (wrong tickets only one of several suspicious factors that depressed attendance at *Malcolm X*).
32. See, e.g., *Off-Duty Miami Cop Shoots Teen in Incident Outside Nightclub*, Miami Times, July 9, 1992, at A3 (rap star Luther Campbell whose clubs were closed after violence occurred outside of them implies that there is a conspiracy to keep blacks from owning clubs in the Miami area), Patricia Colbert, *Attack on Community Pharmacists?*, Michigan Citizen, Feb. 27, 1993, at A5 (black-owned pharmacies closed because of violations of laws regarding controlled substances; owner alleges conspiracy between regulators and large corporate chains seeking to control prescription drug market).
III. THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST ANTIBLACK CONSPIRACY THEORIZING

In some quarters, antiblack conspiracy theories are dismissed as deviant discourse, the product of ignorance, paranoia, hysteria, and despair. This position is not totally without justification. Though I question the overall weight and tenor of some of the arguments against antiblack conspiracy theorizing, I cannot deny that they have some validity.

Detractors argue that the theories generally lack factual support, and reflect their adherents lack of sophistication and unfamiliarity with mainstream culture. Strongly working against the theories is evidence that most white individuals are innocent of the conduct the theories attribute to whites as a whole. This point was made in an interview by Nathan McCall, a black reporter for the Washington Post and author of the autobiography *Makes Me Wanna Holler.*

McCall was shocked and relieved to discover that whites had no idea that blacks are told from a very early age that it is better to be white than black. Says McCall,

> It was a shock because for a long time I was part of the school that said that the oppression of black folk was some sort of big conspiracy. And when I crossed over into the mainstream and met some whites and became friends with them and had some candid discussions about race, I discovered that even the best-intentioned whites don’t understand how they affect us, and how white society impacts upon minorities. It was a relief in the sense that I stopped thinking that all white folks were out to get me. It’s different when you understand that you’re being stepped on as a result of ignorance rather than as a result of evil intent.

If individual whites are blameless of conspiratorial behavior, many of the so-called “targets” of conspiracies are not; rather, they have only their own foolish conduct to blame for their downfalls from power, prestige, and prosperity.

It is also claimed by critics that conspiracy theories compound their adherents’ feelings of powerlessness and become an excuse for blacks’ failing to take responsibility for their own lives. Furthermore, the theories allegedly obscure the real provable evils that are being inflicted on black people every day. Indeed, conspiracy theories have

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35. Id. at 46-47.
37. See Matthew Cooper, *The Return of the Paranoid Style in American Politics,* U.S.
been blamed for fostering behavior that is counterproductive. For example, the story that Dr. Charles Drew, the black physician who developed techniques for processing and storing blood plasma, bled to death as a result of discriminatory treatment at a racist Southern hospital has discouraged some blacks from giving blood or donating sorely needed organs.\textsuperscript{39} Members of Drew's family have tried with only limited success to convince blacks that the story is a myth.

Similarly, the Tuskegee "bad blood experiment" in which 399 black men were denied treatment for syphilis for the putative purpose of determining its long-term effects has spawned fears and suspicions that make some blacks reluctant to accept some forms of medical care.\textsuperscript{40} For example, persons infected with the AIDS virus reportedly declined at some point to take AZT on the ground that it was an experimental drug being given to blacks as guinea pigs,\textsuperscript{41} while campaigns to immunize black children encounter opposition in part based on the fear that the government is targeting blacks for the use of dangerous and unsafe chemicals.\textsuperscript{42}

Among the conspiracy theories most frequently analyzed and most vociferously criticized are those that pertain to Jews.\textsuperscript{43} I cannot in this
essay do more justice to the controversial issue of black/Jewish relations than works exclusively devoted to the subject.\textsuperscript{44} Group hatred per se is inconsistent with the universal moral ethic on which the black liberation struggle has proceeded thus far and there is really no place for group hatred in the formulation of a praxis for everyday struggle. Blacks today interact often with Jews as peers (neighbors, schoolmates, colleagues and bosses), and as empowered subordinates (tenants, employees, customers, clients, and patients). Blacks need to find a way to talk about the competition between themselves and other groups such as Jews over scarce social, political, and economic resources that does not degenerate into xenophobia. Of course, the same holds true for other groups in terms of their discourse about blacks.

All of the criticisms outlined here raise important points for anyone who finds antiblack conspiracy theories attractive in any way. In my view, blacks should strive to be tough-minded, fair, ethical, and constructive in their indicting and blaming, even when the medium is conspiracy theorizing. It may seem empowering to make whites and other nonblacks out to be devils, but it can also be diverting, debilitating, and divisive. Black conspiracy theories can go too far and produce such stereotypes and scapegoats that blacks are unable to pursue their own agendas and waste energy challenging the wrong groups and the wrong conditions in the wrong way. At this point in history, blacks should be focusing on engagement, competition, and exchange, not fantasizing about recriminations and revenge.\textsuperscript{45}

Conspiratorial thinking tends to separate the world into black(s) and white(s), good and bad when reality is more complicated than that. Black people's enemies are not always all that obvious. The theories tend to leave something out. Blacks can be oppressors as well as the oppressed, and black women, who figure less frequently in the theories, can be the target of nefarious plots the same as black men. The conspiracy theories might reflect these circumstances, but they do not.

A number of folklorist Patricia Turner's informants reported that the conspiracy rumors they told her were confirmed on the news programs \textit{60 Minutes} or \textit{20/20} or so they themselves had been told.\textsuperscript{46} Of


course, in most cases that was not true. Well I am sure I heard, I think it was Bill Russell, on 60 Minutes, quote an old saying that went something like “Choose your enemies well for they are the people you will come to resemble most.” This adage should be the watchword for those who believe in antiblack conspiracy theorizing. Blacks cannot stop whites and others from demonizing them, but blacks can be circumspect in denouncing whites and others as devils. Having experienced the consequences of indiscriminate accusations, blacks should refrain from acting as others do. When blacks theorize, they should have reason to believe that, through hard investigative work, their indictments will stick. Moreover, overreliance on the rhetoric of conspiracy theories reduces its efficacy in situations where the theories have a solid factual basis.\footnote{Earl Ofari Hutchinson, The O.J. Case: The Danger of Crying Racism, NEW PITT. COURIER, Oct. 8, 1994, at A7 (arguing in the context of the alleged conspiracy against O.J. Simpson that alleging racism is central to every issue is like the shepherd boy’s “crying wolf”).}

However, though I believe that most of the criticisms of antiblack conspiracy theorizing are valid, I fear that conspiracy theorizing has become yet another excuse for demonizing and denigrating blacks. The critics make both more and less of the theories than they deserve. Black folks are not the only people in this country using the rhetoric of conspiracy theories. There is no reason why blacks, for their theorizing, should be scolded like children or attacked in ways that are condescending and demeaning. Not all conspiracy theories are the same, and not all of them are insupportable. Distinctions can be drawn among them. More than that, antiblack conspiracy theorizing, if properly understood and responded to, can lead to a genuine public criticism and the creation of a decent social space for blacks and others dissatisfied with contemporary conditions.

\section*{IV. The Case in Support of Antiblack Conspiracy Theorizing}

Antiblack conspiracy theories represent yet another example of blacks’ resorting to deviance, in this case deviant discourse, as a means of dealing with their political, economic, and social marginalization. Moreover, the theories are evidence of the black public sphere at work—formulating opinions critical of mainstream institutions like the medical profession, the political establishment, and corporate America; circulating them through available channels not controlled by the dominant white society; and producing practical responses. Through theorizing, blacks express what they are concerned about in a way that is unmediated by the strictures of conventional reporting.
Addressing topics of public concern in the form of “allegations about ‘real’ happenings and metaphors that contain ‘symbolic truths,’” the theories come close to being free, uncensored speech. There is a logic and a rationality to many antiblack conspiracy theories. Although they sometimes have a fantastic quality, the theories offer explanations at a time when bad things are happening to blacks and no one is adequately explaining why.

A. The Theories’ Critical Component

Conspiracy theories do not purport to be objective, unbiased accounts that will withstand tough scrutiny. Rather, they are an obviously imaginative and creative oral folk art form which attempts to grapple critically with the complexities of a postmodern, post-industrial political economy.

For example, the theories that attribute AIDS to governmental misconduct or experimentation counter the implication, rampant in news reports, that HIV not only originated in Africa, but was caused by the perverted, promiscuous behavior of Africans. The transmission of AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean is attributed to the sexual promiscuity and wantonness of blacks in much the same way that syphilis was ascribed to the sexual practices of black Americans at and during the time of the Tuskegee bad blood study. Although the government did not cause the syphilis that afflicted the black victims of the so-called Tuskegee “experiment,” the government certainly tried to prevent its subjects from obtaining effective treatment after penicillin became available. The conspiracy theorists understand that the solution to the scourge of AIDS, like the solution to the problem of syphilis, lies not in the cause, but in the cure and that is in the government’s hands. The absence of large-scale efforts to cure AIDS in the so-called “Third World” is tantamount to the government’s causing the disease.

Similarly, the mercantile conspiracies that deal with consumer products have an economic content that reflects ordinary blacks’ understanding of mass capitalism and their lack of control over corporate merchandisers. Companies that specifically target blacks are more likely to become the object of mercantile rumors than others. Blacks

51. Fine, supra note 48, at 159.
do not want the attention; they are ambivalent about consumption, especially when it smacks of exploitation (particularly inferior products at excessive prices). They do not confuse such consumption with liberation. It may be that the theorizers invoke the language of immorality and discrimination in deciding to boycott one product or another, but the idea of avoiding inefficiency and exploitation is implicit in what they do. Without access to the information that has become a prerequisite for the daily consumption of highly literate sophisticated consumers, some blacks rely on conspiracy notions to protect themselves from excessive manipulation, economic abuse, and physical harm.

Blacks who, in analyzing the crack trade, indict the whites who import the drugs, sell the guns, and launder the money for being engaged in a collective effort to destroy black communities are offering a sophisticated reading of contemporary property relations. At the core of such conspiracy theorizing is an understanding that, while private (nonstate-owned) property is largely held, not individually, but collectively or corporately, it still does not work to blacks’ mutual advantage. “Conspiracies” explain “[h]ow [there can] be private things . . . in a situation in which almost everything around us is functionally inserted into larger institutional schemes and frameworks of all kinds, which nonetheless belong to somebody . . . .” And those somebodies are most definitely not black.

The drugs-and-guns conspiracy theories are all the more significant because they defy the conventional wisdom that ordinary black people do not or are not supposed to assess or discuss their plight in macroeconomic terms. Nor are they supposed to advocate policy positions on issues of business and finance, global economics, or foreign relations. Black Americans, after all, are not principal players on the national or international economic stages. These matters fall within the near exclusive domain of white men. Ignoring this division of labor is another form of black economic deviance. Thus, when blacks try to imagine the machinations of oppressors operating in executive suites and corporate board rooms, they are ridiculed for being preposterous and told that they do not know what they are talking about. Defying the strictures, conspiracy theorizing opens up space in which blacks can speculate about the macroeconomic forces oppressing them and the actors who are in a position to do something about it.

52. Turner, supra note 16, at 133.
Consider also the use these and other conspiracy theories make of old confirmed enemies like the Ku Klux Klan and the United States government. Invoking the name of historic adversaries is a way of conveying the severity of the contemporary harm and the continuity of the discrimination and oppression blacks suffer. Some white people tend to forget what whites have done to blacks, while some black people, claiming to be too young or too fair-minded to remember themselves, let whites get away with it. Invoking the name of old foes puts limits on the forgetting and forgiving.

Finally, blacks accuse old foes because indicting new ones is not an easy matter. When blacks act out of collective self-interest and interact with members of other groups proceeding on the same basis, blacks are typically accused of being belligerent, prejudiced, and unfair. As writer and novelist Ishmael Reed put it: "In this country, everybody practices ethnicity. It's only blacks who are required to be universal." The charge of reverse racism is muted when the names of old confirmed enemies are raised.

The district court opinion in United States v. Clary illustrates the impact that a analytical acceptance of the critical component of antiblack conspiracy theorizing might have on the law and on black people's belief that the legal system works for them. Clary examined the racial impact of the federal criminal statutes and relevant sentencing guidelines that punish possession of crack cocaine with intent to distribute nearly 100 times more harshly than possession of an equal amount of powdered cocaine. Because blacks are more likely to be caught with crack than are whites, the statute and the related sentencing guidelines have had a disproportionate impact on blacks—an impact the Clary court held violated the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution.

The court's reasoning echoes that of the conspiracy theories regarding the demonization of black men. The court noted that historically there has been a racially biased dual system of criminal punishment; for example, stiffer penalties have been imposed on the use of certain narcotics after the drugs became popular with minorities. The court attributed the harsher sentences for crack possession to the impact of

56. 846 F. Supp. at 770.
57. Id. at 796-97.
58. Id. at 774.
media reports that generated public panic about crack cocaine and associated the drug with black males.59

The fear of increased crime as a result of crack cocaine fed white society's fear of the black male as a crack user and as a source of social disruption. The prospect of black crack migrating to the white suburbs led the legislators to reflexively punish crack violators more harshly than their white, suburban, powder cocaine dealing counterparts.60

The court found no hard evidence on the congressional record of crack's relatively greater potency or dangerousness to justify the harsher sentences.61 Rather they were designed to curry political favor, but the court held that political favor does not supply a rationale sufficient to support, in the face of a constitutional attack, sentences that are so exaggerated as to be irrational.62

The court's discussion of the consequences of the harsher penalties on black men echoes the conspiracy theorists as well. According to the court, the stiffer penalties have "been directly responsible for incarcerating nearly an entire generation of young black American men for very long periods, usually during the most productive time of their lives."63 Continued incarceration at the present pace, projected the court, "threatens the possibility of the ultimate extinction of the black race in America."64 It concluded further that, "if young white males were being incarcerated at the same rate as young black males, the statute would have been amended long ago."65

These arguments seem more credible when they come from a federal district court than when they are the substance of a popular antiblack conspiracy theory. The opinion is backed up by the experience of its author and the legal and social science research on which he draws. Not surprisingly, the opinion also flew in the face of weighty authority denying the validity of equal protection challenges to the federal laws mandating harsher sentences for crack possession.66 The decision

59. Id. at 781.
60. Id. at 784.
61. Id. at 791.
62. Id. at 795.
63. Id. at 794.
64. Id. at 792.
65. See, e.g., United States v. Stevens, 19 F.3d 93 (2d Cir. 1994); United States v. Lattimore, 974 F.2d 971 (8th Cir. 1992); United States v. Willis, 967 F.2d 1220 (8th Cir. 1992); United States v. Watson, 953 F.2d 895 (5th Cir. 1992); United States v. Maske, 840 F. Supp. 151 (D.D.C. 1993). Acting under the equal protection clause of the state constitution, the Supreme
was overturned on appeal to the Eighth Circuit. If the disparity is to be reduced, it will likely be the result of action by the United States Sentencing Commission and Congress.

B. The Theories' Plausibility

A conspiracy theory is not generally justified by facts, but by "an internal validation, arising from the account's verisimilitude, internal coherence, and persuasiveness." Anti-black conspiracy theories are credible according to the world view of their adherents. By and large, the theories are not totally preposterous or overly romantic. They tend to have an air of plausibility. They capitalize on a number of factors that prompt black people to accept their import even if the theories' factual bases are dubious. First, blacks have been the targets of actual bizarre conspiracies in the past, as in the case of the FBI's secret surveillance of Martin Luther King and the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. If such conspiracies happened once, they can happen again because not enough has changed. As writer Lorene Cary put it:

We Americans continue to value the lives and humanity of some groups more than the lives and humanity of others. That is not paranoia. It is our historical legacy and a present fact; it influences domestic and foreign policy and the daily interaction of millions of

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Court of Minnesota overturned a law that proscribed penalties for possession of crack that were four times greater than those imposed for possession of powdered cocaine. State v. Russell, 477 N.W.2d 886 (Minn. 1991). The legislature subsequently increased the sentence for possession of powdered cocaine to equal that mandated for possession of crack. See also Randall Kennedy, The State, Criminal Law, and Racial Discrimination: A Comment, 107 Harv. L. Rev. 1255 (1994) (arguing that Russell was wrongly decided because it devalued the impact of crack dealing on law-abiding blacks).

67. United States v. Clary, 34 F.2d 709 (8th Cir. 1994).

68. The United States Sentencing Commission has recommended that Congress reduce some of the sentences for the sale of crack cocaine to equal those for the sale of powdered cocaine. Attorney General Janet Reno, however, will ask Congress to reject the proposal. See Reno Backs Strict Sentences for Sellers of Crack Cocaine, NY Times, Apr. 16, 1995, at A18.


72. See supra notes 40-42 and accompanying text. The Tuskegee experiment is but one of many medical experiments that have reportedly been conducted without the consent of their black subjects. See generally Harriet Washington, Human Guinea Pigs, Emerge, Oct. 1994, at 24 (recounting a history of testing that involved exposing blacks, particularly prisoners, to a number of substances including radioactive materials, live cancer cells, and powerful drugs).
Americans. It influences the way we spend our public money and explains how we can read the staggering statistics on black Americans' infant mortality, youth mortality, mortality in middle and old age, and not be moved to action.73

Second, circumstantial evidence lends credence to most contemporary conspiracy theories. For example, the proposition that the government is partly responsible for the devastating impact of crack on black communities is supported by evidence of police corruption at every level and a national foreign policy that favored dictators and rulers in league with drug traffickers.74 Similarly, many blacks believe conspiracy theories about the government because they have firsthand knowledge of how insensitive and arbitrary the government can be through their own encounters with the police, social service workers, and city hall bureaucrats.

Third, institutionalized channels of news and information do not satisfy blacks' demand for explanations, and conspiracy theories fill the void.75 Inundated by "inexplicable events," blacks have numerous opportunities to find today's so-called "official stories" inadequate or unsatisfactory.76 Blacks may distrust the news because there are too few blacks disseminating it.77 Moreover, those who subscribe to conspiracy theories may have concluded that the news and information being disseminated by the mass media simply do not jibe with their own experiences or assign responsibility in a way that accords with their world view. In fact, for many blacks, the absence of stories in the mainstream press favorable to blacks and critical of white supremacy is more than a matter of the stories' being undiscovered or unnewsworthy; rather coverage of blacks' stories is being deliberately distorted or suppressed.

Finally, it is nearly impossible to verify that the conspiracies do not exist because disproving a negative proposition is difficult. One of folklorist Patricia Turner's informants, a prison inmate, saw no reason to suspend judgment on this account:

73. Lorene Cary, Why It's Not Just Paranoia, Newsweek, Apr. 6, 1992, at 23.
74. Turner, supra note 16, at 199.
75. Id. at 80, 113 (quoting Tamotsu Shibutani, Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor (1966)).
76. Id. at 151.
77. In 1994, minorities, including blacks, Latinos, and Asians, comprised only 10.91% of journalists employed by America's daily newspapers. Small Increase in Number of Minority Journalists on U.S. Daily Newspapers, Jet, Apr. 24, 1995, at 22; William Glaberson, Minorities' Presence in Newsrooms Rises Slightly, N.Y. Times, Apr. 5, 1995, at B8. This number represents only a slight increase from 1993's figure of 10.49%. Id.
What then is irrational about our fears? And if there is no proof that a conspiracy exists to destroy the Black assertive minded male, what proof is there to say none exist? Certainly it would be irresponsible to equate all of the social ills that face blacks as part of a gigantic conspiracy to destroy us. But it would be equally irresponsible to deny that a conspiracy does not exist. Motive, means, and opportunity . . . can be established in the case of the conspiracy to destroy “undesirables” specifically the black male. Drugs is but a small means, in this madness. While we—Blacks—may have the power to “just say no!” to this menace, we are powerless to say anything about the unseen . . . the unseen power structure behind it all.78

C. The Theories’ Practicality

Antiblack conspiracy theories facilitate practical responses. They suggest that blacks have a measure of control over their condition.79 Conspiracy theories are better than generalized indictments of “the system”—a system which operates on automatic pilot without the intervention of anyone—because conspiracy theories posit human agency as the source of problems and imply that human agency has a role to play in effectuating solutions. “System analysis” does not afford the same opportunity. “Any event can more readily be confronted, or avoided, if it is the result of others’ volitions (even malevolent or extraordinarily powerful ones.)”80 Blacks can certainly choose not to eat at certain fast food franchises or buy a particular brand of sneakers. By the same token, if there is a conspiracy to destroy blacks with drugs, woefully inadequate sex education and counseling, or powerful marketing enticements, blacks can avoid playing into the hands of the conspirators by passing up narcotics, using contraceptives, and refusing to engage in conspicuous consumption.

Similarly, blacks may talk about the conspiracy to destroy black men as being a response to the threat posed by black male sexuality or the enormity of their rage.81 The truth is that, if black males are being targeted for elimination, it is likely attributable to the fact that they

79. Id. at 151.
80. Zukier, supra note 69, at 87, 90. See also John Fiske, Power Plays, Power Works 254 (1993) (positing that “[r]esistance against an ‘it’ (a system) is harder to mobilize than resistance against a ‘them’ (a social alliance”).)
81. See, e.g., Frances Cress Welsing, The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors (1991) (arguing that black men are under attack because they have the greatest capacity to pass on melanin to their offspring and thereby bring about the genetic domination and annihilation of whiteness).
have gone from being the core of Marx's reserve army to being truly superfluous labor. Black males are victims of "structural unemployment." Automation and deindustrialization have reduced the demand for low-skilled manual black labor. The service and agricultural work black men used to perform is now being done by immigrants who are willing to work for less than blacks will.\textsuperscript{82} Black men are handicapped in competing for better paying, skilled positions in the formal economy because they lack the requisite education and training and are confined to inner city neighborhoods where employment opportunities are declining, not growing. Finally, the supply of good jobs with benefits, opportunities for advancement, and job security are dwindling for white men.\textsuperscript{83} Black men are accordingly the least of the white male-dominated power structure's worries.

Though their labor power may be unneeded, black men are still exploitable as consumers and as objects of containment. Their bodies represent commodities that can be confined in prisons, jails, and detention centers so as to make some people rich and put other people to work. The criminal justice system is big business. Corrections creates an estimated $25 billion-per-year market with private firms and corporations supplying services ranging from architectural plans to health care, and products ranging from handcuffs and barbed wire, to pinup calendars and junk food.\textsuperscript{84} Moreover, the task of policing and confining black men has been assigned largely to members of the white working class.\textsuperscript{85} The unemployed and underemployed of the economically depressed rural and remote areas in which prisons are frequently located benefit from the expansion of the black prison population. NIMBY\textsuperscript{86} notwithstanding, having a nonpolluting, state-run prison next door may be more of a victory than a defeat where employment

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83. See Sylvia Nasar, More Men in Prime of Life Spend Less Time Working, N.Y. Times, Dec. 1, 1994, at A1 (the number of white males working full time and year round is less than it was 10 or 20 years ago because the growth in blue-collar jobs has not kept pace with the working-age population); Louis Uchitelle, The Humbling of the Harvard Man, N.Y. Times, Mar. 6, 1994, § 3, at 1 (reporting on the employment difficulties experienced by as many as 20% of the members of the Harvard Class of 1958 who are now 56 or 57 years old).
85. Gilbert Price, Capitol Comments: The Battle over Prisons, (CINCINNATI) CALL AND POST, Apr. 14, 1994, at A3 (following a prison riot caused in part by understaffing and racial tensions, prison system increased the number of minority corrections officer to 20% and the number of minority wardens to 27%); Sandy Hamm, New County Jail: Jobs or Just Warehousing?, NEW. PITT. COURIER, Dec. 7, 1994, at A1 (at old facility blacks were 65% of the inmates
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prospects are otherwise gloomy. Crime prevention and drug rehabilitation programs, by contrast, would employ folks who look and live more like the poor urban black, brown, and white men and women who now wind up incarcerated.

Nonetheless, conspiracy talk has done a good deal to focus attention on ways blacks can save their young men from the fate theoretically intended for them without large-scale support from government. All-black male schools, mentorship programs, and rite of passage ceremonies are among the concrete proposals being tried or discussed. The real problems afflicting black males will not be solved, however, without giving serious thought to the development and implementation of an industrial policy that considers the interests of black men foremost. That, however, may be beyond black people's control and is therefore beyond the scope of their conspiracy theories.

and only 15% of the correctional officers; percentage of black inmates likely to exceed the percentage of black officers at new facility because of hiring process involving connections, prior prison records, and civil service examination scores). See also Vincent Thompson, Phila. First: All Latino Recruits, Phila. Trib., Mar. 23, 1993, at A8 (reporting on the addition of 25 Latino corrections officers to the ranks of the Philadelphia prison system in which Latinos constitute 16% of the prison population, but only 1.5% of the guards).

86. "NIMBY" stands for "not in my backyard." It is "used as a slogan objecting to the siting of something unpleasant, such as nuclear waste, in one's own locality. . . ." John Ayto & John Simpson, The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang 150 (1992).

87. See, e.g., Rhonda Cook, Less Than Half of New Prison Beds, Jobs Will Be Filled with '93 Funds, Atlanta Const., Jan. 15, 1993, at F3 (prisons built in rural towns seeking the steady employment of prisons not staffed because of a decline in the prison population); Mary Ellen Klas, Two Prisons Designated to Be Built in South Florida, Palm Beach Post, May 26, 1993, at A10 (Florida looks to build penal facilities in the southern part of the state because "population-poor, land-rich" rural North Florida which considered prisons clean and productive industries cannot accommodate any more prisons); Jane Braxton Little, Expansion Will Nearly Double Size of Summerville Prison, Sacramento Bee, July 14, 1993, at B1 (a California town near the Nevada border voted for prison expansion though there was some opposition especially to the use of the facility for maximum security inmates); Susan L. Smith, Southwestern Communities Vie to Lure Next State Prison, Wis. State J., March 4, 1995, at A1 (the most agriculturally dependent county in Wisconsin seeks prison jobs to stem the loss of population); Paulette Thomas, Rural Regions Look to Prisons for Prosperity, Wall St. J., July 11, 1994, at B1 (prisons characterized as being "a growth industry, an economic development tool for rural areas"); Virginia Young, Rural Towns Eager to House New Prison; Rivals Look to New Jobs at Women's Facility, St. Louis Post Dispatch, Feb. 6, 1994, at D1 (small Missouri towns vie for a women's prison with its stable base of jobs). But see Ann Bancroft, Northern Counties War of More Prisons, S.F. Chron., Apr. 26, 1994, at A15 (opposition to prisons mounting in rural areas because prisons generate urbanization, steep indirect costs, and urban problems); Andy Furillo, Prison Splits Job-Hungry Weed, Upscale Mount Shasta, Sacramento Bee, Apr. 11, 1994, at A1 (proposed prison pits residents of a working class mill town that has lost jobs against inhabitants of a nearby scenic upscale tourist and retirement community who fear the influx of urban ills).

88. See generally Jawanza Kunjufu, Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys (1985); Jawanza Kunjufu, Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys, Vol. II (1986); Jawanza Kunjufu, Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys, Vol. III (1990).
D. The Theories’ Mobilizing Potential

Conspiracy theories create solidarity and facilitate mass mobilization. They “enable[] people to personalize their ideas and feelings, and focus[] attention on a real or imagined enemy.”89 “[T]he ability to name [a] perceived oppressor/conspirator [gives] people a sense of power over them. The process of identifying or naming contributes to an atmosphere of communal problem-solving.”90

Conspiracy theories flourish in times of crisis, “when basic values are no longer taken for granted.”91 These are such times for many blacks. Their problems multiply while solutions vanish in thin air. There is anxiety and ambivalence about the possibility of integration, sexual politics, and crime and violence. No overriding ideology unites blacks. Enemies have black faces as often as they have white ones. The leadership of national black organizations seems tired and remote. Conspiracy theories ease the anxiety by reminding blacks of their common plight. Though blacks cannot hope to possess the degree of solidarity the theories attribute to whites, theorizing about a common enemy promotes a greater measure of unity than would otherwise exist.

Those blacks who theorize together about the antiblack conspiracies of others assume the characteristics of conspirators themselves. Operating at the folk level, outside of the mainstream, their discourse is in a sense secretive and covert. Moreover, it is “unlawful” and unsanctioned in that it challenges the status quo. The membership is flexible. Anyone privy to the word can be a part of the operation. Though the details are vague and the participation of some will rise no higher than mere acquiescence or approval, the purpose and thrust of the theories is well enough known to permit concerted overt action by many.

Blacks are often warned against pursuing their own self-interest with the admonition that, if blacks act out of self-interest, whites will do the same. The antiblack conspiracy theories, which posit that others are plotting against blacks, allow blacks to act on their own behalf. The theories provide a cover for competitive behavior.

Recognition of black people’s need and ability to compete with whites is crucial to blacks’ achieving a measure of agency over their own lives. Although blacks must resist white supremacy at every turn, blacks should also recognize the inadequacy of the concessions white supremacy is likely to accord them and proceed on the assumption

89. Preface, Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy, supra note 69, at vii-viii.
that they must generate and sustain a black public sphere, that is, a space in which they can pursue the good life both in spite of white people and without regard to them. The black public sphere is not simply an excuse for the redistribution of wealth from rich whites to not quite as rich blacks. It is rather a space in which blacks generate and consolidate wealth through the production of goods and services and the creation of markets and audiences that fully utilize their labor power and creativity. Black folks can compete like anyone else and should operate under the influence of the conceit that their vision of the good life for themselves is broad enough to encompass a good life for others. That good life can only be assured through concrete mechanisms like institutions that blacks control, and structures of feeling—culture, ethics, and politics—that enable blacks to pursue collectively self-interested behavior.

It would be easier for blacks to generate audiences and create markets, especially to satisfy a demand that mainstream purveyors of goods and services deem too dangerous to cultivate, if both the would-be producers and consumers assumed a conspiratorial air. Conspiracies are energizing; the sense of being on a mission entailing risk and defiance moves people to act.

There is no better illustration of this than the story of the distribution of Sankofa, a film directed by independent filmmaker Haile Gerima. Sankofa explores the continuing psychological impact of slavery on diasporic blacks who forget their history. The movie tells the tale of Mona, a black American fashion model who encounters a griot while on a photo shoot at Ghana’s Cape Coast Castle, once a distribution center for slaves awaiting shipment across the Atlantic. Possessed by the ancestral spirits called up by the griot, Mona travels back through time and is incarnated as Shola, a house slave who is raped and abused by her brutal white Louisiana master. Reluctant at first to join her lover (Shongo) and her maternal friend (Nunu) in rebellion, Shola eventually participates in the revolt which leads her back to Africa and the present. Mona emerges from a Ghanian slave dungeon a transformed person with a stronger racial identity.

Sankofa was shown at foreign film festivals to high praise, but was not picked up by a mainstream American movie distributor. Gerima


94. Joanna Connors, "Sankofa" Packs Powerful Message, CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER,
and his wife Shirikiana Aina were forced to distribute the film themselves. The film has been given limited runs in rented theaters in selected cities usually under the sponsorship of local community groups whose fundraising efforts have underwritten the costs. Word of mouth, ads in black media, and personal appearances by the director have generated an audience for the film that is almost entirely black.95 Interest in the film was peaked by its subject matter and by the mainstream’s rejection of the film as being “too black,” “too violent,” “too painful, and “too serious” for a mass audience.96 Arguments that a disturbing movie about human suffering in an historical context like slavery would not succeed at the box office became much harder for blacks to accept with the success of Steven Spielberg’s Holocaust movie Schindler’s List.97

If there is a conspiracy to keep dignified black images off the big screen or to limit the extent to which black suffering is depicted,98 it did not succeed with Sankofa. Sankofa was saved by those who sponsored the showings, volunteered in order to reduce the costs of exhibi-

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95. Connors, supra note 94; Bill Morrison, 9 Years of Rejection: Haile Gerima Had to Create “Sankofa,” an Epic Tale of Slavery, Outside the Hollywood System, NEWS & OBSERVER (Raleigh, NC), Jan. 13, 1995, at 4; Carrie Rickey, Director Takes Movie on Road, ORANGE COUNTY (CALIF.) REGISTER, Sept. 10, 1994, at F3.


97. Schindler’s List and Sankofa are often linked in the minds of blacks because they were distributed at about the same time and deal with similar subjects, but received different critical responses. For example, economist Julianne Malveaux pointed to the disparate reception accorded these two films as an example of America’s refusal to recognize that the “seeds of slavery are the root of contemporary inequality.” Julianne Malveaux, Beneath the Confrontational Nature of Anger; Varied Views of Louis Farrakhan, S.F. EXAMINER, Mar. 7, 1994, at A1. See also Abiola Sinclair, Media Watch: “Sankofa”-Will Our Holocaust Ever Be Respected?, N.Y. AMSTERDAM NEWS, Apr. 16, 1994, at 28 (Sankofa which was criticized as being “too direct” did not receive the same immunity from criticism as Schindler’s List). Cf. Malveaux, supra note 96, (if there had been a slavery museum in Washington, D.C., Sankofa might have been treated more favorably by distributors). The comparisons were fueled by the effort of use Schindler’s List to address the issue of blacks’ insensitivity to Jews. See Bob Duhart, Whitman “blew” It with Schindler Film, PHILA. TRIB., Feb. 22, 1994, at A1 (New Jersey governor’s proposal that the Spielberg film be shown to counter the perceived anti-Semitic statements of a Nation of Islam minister draws fire for failing to included films on the black experience in the recommendation); Kevin Weston, Why Some Teenagers Laugh at “Schindler’s List,” OAKLAND (CALIFORNIA) POST, Feb. 13, 1994, at 1 (questioning the wisdom of taking black teens who know too little about their own history to a Hollywood film on Martin Luther King’s birthday).

98. See Jehron X. Hunter, Pan-African Film Fest Earns Praise, Starts Debate, PHILA. TRIB., Feb. 1, 1994, at 4B (citing reports that there seemed to be a conspiracy to keep Sankofa out of American theaters).
tion, and paid to see it and told their friends and family to do the same. Now blacks are asking each other when they meet on the street if they have seen Sankofa. The conspiracy, probably more imagined than real, spawned a kind of counterconspiracy that in turn engendered an audience. The success of Sankofa is an important step in the development of a viable market for independently produced and distributed black cinema. 99

V. Conclusion: Antiblack Conspiracy Theorizing and the Black Public Sphere

Ordinary black people struggle to understand the forces that are oppressing them and to articulate their concerns, albeit in ways that are deemed deviant by others. Conspiracy theorizing by blacks is a form of creative and imaginative speculation about concrete conditions that seem to defy conventional treatment. The theories tend to focus on the material sources of black people’s problems, as opposed to psychological or social causes. The theories address a broad spectrum of areas. The targets include large institutions that blacks consider dysfunctional or destructive of black well-being. Moreover, the theories imagine a role for human agency. Their unspoken concern is not simply what white people are doing to blacks, but also what blacks can do for themselves.

To be sure, conspiracy theorizing also has negative implications. It can be counterproductive and an excuse for indulging in the worst sort of stereotyping and scapegoating. It can stifle initiative and impede clear thinking. It can generate individual and collective paranoia, hostility, and divisiveness. Nonetheless, conspiracy theories should not be dismissed out of hand as a backward discourse, and the very act of engaging in theorizing should not itself become another reason for blacks to be demonized.

Despite valid criticisms, ordinary black folks are often on to something with their theorizing and their conspiracy theories should be dissected and analyzed by people with the appropriate knowledge and training. Lawyers can do some of this work. We have the skills to unravel the complex layers of seemingly benign behavior that pile up to effectively suffocate black Americans. I am not suggesting that the theories should be approached as if they were literally true. Not even their adherents give them that much credibility. At the very least,

though, the theories indicate the issues that blacks are concerned about and the general nature of their anxieties. They are a good starting point for inquiry.

I have not and cannot convey here the passion and frequency with which blacks relate antiblack conspiracy theories to one another and discuss them for all the world as if they were the gospel’s truth, which in some cases they are. My take on conspiracy theorizing is more legal than literary; it stresses the rational and practical aspects of the theories over the spiritual and idealistic. But behind the theorizing, there is a real anger about blacks’ collective socioeconomic status that has no other effective outlet, a real hunger for explanations that finds no genuine satisfaction, and a real critical imaginativeness that defies the postmodern wisdom that the woes of this world are beyond the wit of the ordinary sufferer. Black people need and want information about their situations. They need and want stories to guide them as they go about their daily affairs. Conspiracy theories to some extent fill the void, but they would be more useful if they provoked serious, systematic scrutiny.

Blacks, whites, and others must move beyond the ideological swamp of black demonization and white devilization, to wrestle with a reality that is constructed not of whole truths and nothing else, but of operational truths and something more. Black people will not totally cease their theorizing and give their conspiratorial imaginations a rest as long as they have so many troubles to theorize about. In any event, racial conspiracy theorizing is a dialectical process; if whites demonize whites less, blacks are likely to have fewer suspicions about whites.

Moreover, conspiracy theorizing is among the rites and rituals by which blacks organize their everyday behavior. Conspiracy theories function like consumer information which allows blacks to enter into some commercial transactions on a more egalitarian basis. The discourse of conspiracy theories is the language in which ordinary black people, not experts or elites, talk about their problems at the macro/institutional level. Conspiracy rhetoric prompts behavior that tends to improve the lives of many blacks.

All and all, conspiracy theories are not as deviant as they might seem. Black people’s critical vocabulary certainly needs to be more expansive than conspiracy rhetoric allows, but anyone who cares about black public discourse and a viable black public sphere should recognize that conspiracy theories are a base on which blacks might proceed to enlarge the terms with which they challenge the status quo.