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THE GURUS OF GRIFT

PEANUT GRIFTERS TO BIG CON ARTISTS

“[O]ur minds are built for stories. We crave them, and, when there aren’t ready ones available, we create them When we don’t understand what or why or how something happened, we want to find the explanation. A confidence artist is only too happy to comply—and the well-crafted narrative is his absolute forte.”⁴⁵²

— **Maria Konnikova**

⁴⁵² Maria Konnikova, *The Confidence Game: Why We Fall for It . . . Every Time* (New York: Viking, 2016), p. 6.

For a successful con to work, the con-artist must spin a great Con Story. It must have *gravitas*. Someone must identify the “mark” and craft a story tailored to dupe the mark into either parting with cash or to lead him into behavior to satisfy a need. Someone must craft the Con Story, give it intellectual cachet, to invest it with credibility. Someone must serve as inspiration for the phalanx of grifters and con men.

That someone is the racist intellectual who weaves together a bit of fact and lots of fiction. This is the guru of grift.

These gurus of grift ply their trade at the topmost tier of the DEI tale-spinning hierarchy, where compensation is lavish and responsibilities nil.

These are hustlers *extraordinaire*, and they provide the veneer of legitimacy and even a bit of faux intellectualism that is essential to the success of DEI on campuses. These masters of the con provide the story, its essential details, and the plausibility for the intellectual classes of the university to buy into the fraud. They provide the story for others to repeat, *ad infinitum*, so that it gains unquestioned legitimacy by virtue of repetition alone.

These DEI yarn-spinners constitute the mandarin class of hustlers. They generate the ideas and stories that comprise the Con Story of *virtuous victimhood*. Big Con-artists and many hundreds of peanut grifters alike use *victim-signaling* to bring in the cash in what we know as “Victimhood Culture.”⁴⁵³ This culture renders it financially and psychologically advantageous to announce victim status publicly and sell absolution to the college rubes they dupe.

The entire logic of DEI’s Big Con is built on this idea of

⁴⁵³ Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

virtuous victimhood. 1) Claiming victim status for profit and payouts (a version of the protection racket) and 2) Asserting *moral immunity* to justify use of “deceit, intimidation, or violence” to receive that payout.

Rise of the Racist Mandarin

A new breed of racist public intellectual has ascended to the public stage to gain stupendous popularity, luxurious wealth, and, in some cases, superstardom—Kendi and DiAngelo, Oluo and Bell, Dyson and Coates, hooks and Harper. These are some of the best-known of the prosperous DEI gurus who command top dollar on the lecture circuit and who sign six-figure book deals.

They are the creators of the DEI’s toxic neo-Maoism that infests higher education and serves as the informing orthodoxy of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

The racist public intellectual is a member of a category of thought leaders that constitute the “ideas industry” of the 21st century.⁴⁵⁴ The DEI public intellectual is a spinoff within this ideas industry. In fact, some wags have called their lucrative vineyard the diversity industry, which is synonymous with the mantra of “diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

The diversity industry is that confabulation of people and activities that believes that America is afflicted with systemic racism. This malady is allegedly responsible for yielding any and

454 Daniel W. Drezner, *The Ideas Industry: How Pessimists, Partisans, and Plutocrats are Transforming the Marketplace of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

all suboptimal outcomes for that coalition of people designated “persons of color.”⁴⁵⁵

DEI’s idea people contend that education is one way of correcting this systemic problem, which they believe is captured in the umbrella moniker white supremacy. They also believe, as we now know, that it constitutes a fabulous Con Story that can wring extraordinary riches from university administrations riven with guilt.

This chapter chronicles the rise of the Racist Intellectual, whose high-priced meal ticket depends on fooling people that “rampant racism” is a real, tangible, serious problem in America, especially on the college campuses. Following this coterie of racist intellectuals is a tag-along of would-be gurus, consultants, and bureaucrats who constitute the cadres of DEI.

The Chimera of White Supremacy

So-called white supremacy has become the proxy of choice to describe everything that critical racialsists don’t like about themselves—about their lot in life, about outcomes they lament as “inequitable,” about their place in America, which they apparently believe is stuck somewhere around 1950. For these racialsists, it is forever Selma and Tulsa. It is forever Rosa Parks and Emmet Till.

We saw in earlier chapters how white supremacy has become the mass externalization of blame that explains all of their suboptimal outcomes. Pushing this discourse is a new class of persons that came to prominence in the first quarter of the 21st century.

⁴⁵⁵ This contrivance “people of color” strikes me as a convenient means of coalition building where no actual confluence of interests exists. If you can get persons of various ethnicities to sign on to the critical racist ideology with a kind of “me too” slogan or trope, then symbolic capital is generated for the core constituency.

Tagging behind these gurus of the new dispensation is a phalanx of folks armed with minimal education, a handful of brittle ideas, and assorted twitter accounts. They test the winds of popular passion. They surf the latest wave of emotion—often the emotions of hate, bitterness, and envy. Many speak with an insecure bombast and militant certitude that is characteristic of true believers. They are engulfed by a simple idea that, to them, explains a complex reality.

The calculated con of the racist public intellectual is tarted up in *faux* academic lingo of equal parts fantasy and guile and celebrated by audiences of guilt-ridden urban yahoos, whether on Long Island, in Harlem or in the Bronx or in the Upper West Side or in Martha's Vineyard or in Silicon Valley or in Jackson Hole. These are fellow travelers who dwell in an intellectual ghetto constructed for them by the disciplined con artists of DEI. They remain prisoners trapped by their own vanity and the prospect of easy riches. The search for like-minded companionship led them into the ghetto, where their vanity keeps them imprisoned.

I've traced the lineage of DEI's origin to learn its canon, to understand its themes and its core mythos, and to recognize the thinkers and scholars who populate the racist pantheon. This led naturally to a study of the great popularizers of racist ideas, which in turn led into an oily world of consultants, pseudo-academics, diversity grifters, and race hustlers peddling the same mash-up of ideas that seems to have captured the minds of so many on the campuses. This chapter presents the phenomenon of DEI's Gurus of Grift.

Top Tier Hustlers . . . “Grovelers” and “Grifters”

Race hustlers in the top tier are those whose influence extends across all the campuses and on into the larger society. Many have already appeared in this book. They include Ibram Kendi, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Robin DiAngelo, Shaun Harper, Peggy McIntosh, Tema Okun, Derrick Bell, bell hooks, Derald Wing Sue, Michael Eric Dyson, and such like. These are the persons who spin the theories, create the buzzwords, coin the aspirational slogans, and provide the faux research on which the edifice of the DEI grift is built.

We examined the major contributions of Tema Okun and Derald Wing Sue in previous chapters and the deleterious effects of the Okun List and the fraud of racial microaggressions. Let’s next look at a quartet of the most influential of these Top Tier grifters and understand their con game. They are Robin DiAngelo, Ibram Kendi, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Ijeoma Oluo,

Robin DiAngelo—*Guilt Groveler Extraordinaire*

Robin DiAngelo’s name is synonymous with self-abasement and self-aggrandizement. She has monetized guilt groveling and given it *cachet*, no mean feat.

For instance, in a speech at Boston University, she said: “I’d like to be a little less white, which means a little less oppressive, oblivious, defensive, ignorant and arrogant.”⁴⁵⁶ This is one of her standard self-abasing tropes, which she repeats in interviews endlessly.

⁴⁵⁶ Dana Soriano, “White privilege lecture tells students white people ‘dangerous’ if they don’t see race,” The College Fix, March 6, 2019: <https://www.thecollegefix.com/white-privilege-lecture-tells-students-white-people-dangerous-if-they-dont-see-race/>

Some have called what Ms. DiAngelo does a “grift” and consider DiAngelo a kind of Johnny Hooker of the diversity industry. Like Hooker, from the popular 1973 Hollywood film *The Sting*, DiAngelo took her shot at the bigtime to goose some life into her 2018 book-length social fantasy *White Fragility*, which reached #1 on the New York Times bestseller list and sold more than a million copies.

The nationwide racial outcry that has followed the killing of George Floyd has supercharged the Diversity and Inclusion industry, and DiAngelo may be its greatest success story. While she has likely made over \$2 million from her book, the speaking circuit is where she is cleaning up. One of the speakers’ bureaus that represents her told the *Free Beacon* that a 60-90 minute keynote would run \$30,000, a two-hour workshop \$35,000, and a half-day event \$40,000.⁴⁵⁷

DiAngelo reportedly charges up to \$15,000 per session—a March 2019 appearance, for example, cost the University of Kentucky \$12,000, as well as a \$5-a-minute phone-call fee. Recent virtual events run up to \$175 a ticket. The eight to ten private events DiAngelo says she speaks at each month likely net her at least \$1.5 million annually.⁴⁵⁸

457 Charles Fain Lehman, “The Wages of Woke: How Robin DiAngelo got rich peddling ‘white fragility,’” *Free Beacon*, July 25, 2020: <https://freebeacon.com/culture/the-wages-of-woke-2/>

458 Charles Fain Lehman, “The Wages of Woke: How Robin DiAngelo got rich peddling ‘white fragility,’” *Free Beacon*, July 25, 2020: <https://freebeacon.com/culture/the-wages-of-woke-2/>

Oddly enough, DiAngelo has a sparse original research record, unless we count her substantively disastrous human subject psychology experiment, which is described in her 2004 dissertation: “Whiteness in Racial Dialogue: A Discourse Analysis.” This is where she first used the term “white fragility,” which she apparently lifted from a person by the name of David G. Allen, who served on her committee.⁴⁵⁹

For Robin DiAngelo’s fans, it makes not one whit of difference that she could be a creation of P. T. Barnum’s “humbugs, delusions, impositions, quackeries, deceits, and deceivers,” and surely no better than a Melanesian weather doctor casting chicken bones in the dust and intoning about the impending yam harvest. But for normal people, hers is a fascinating and cautionary tale of how a provincial striver can cobble together a dramatic career out of academic fakery to ride the madness of the crowd to riches and fame. She succeeded by combining the fakery of critical racist ideology with the general tendency for soft minds to express guilt and to confess to most anything. She created a new shuck-and-jive, and she has reaped millions of dollars for her Vaudeville act.

But DiAngelo has discovered that her exaggerated self-abasement does not protect her from being devoured by the Diversity machine. She appears to have ritualized her humiliation so deeply that her behavior has become mechanical and reflexive. The scenario of her scrounging in her purse for \$30 to pay reparations to a black television producer will follow her the rest of her life.⁴⁶⁰

She acknowledges that she is constantly striving to escape

459 I patiently dismantle DiAngelo’s seminal work here. Stanley K. Ridgley, “Minute 14 for Robin DiAngelo,” American Greatness, August 1, 2020: <https://amgreatness.com/2020/08/01/minute-14-for-robin-diangelo/>

460 See Matt Walsh’s docu-comedy *Am I Racist?* Released in September 2024.

her very identity. She is ashamed of what she is, and she has made it her mission to wheedle others to share her shame. But that is not how others see her. We see her as mentally broken, crippled by an ideology that she embraces with such enthusiasm that her behavior is a caricature of humanity.

DiAngelo has been destroyed by the very racialists she courted with her weak, simpering brand of sycophancy. While she was one of the most successful of racialist grifters (and the darling of DEI when *White Fragility* was at the top of the charts back in 2020), she lost cachet because she was seen as transgressing on the African-American racialist grift. She was white, you see. It has made no difference how much DiAngelo grovels.

Since DiAngelo is herself white she has to do a certain amount of self-abasement to earn the trust of her audiences. She does so by assuring them that she is aware that just by standing on a stage and speaking she is “reinforcing whiteness and the centrality of the white view.”⁴⁶¹

Ibram Kendi—*Space Aliens!*

Ibram X. Kendi is the author of *How to be an Antiracist*, published in 2019 to great acclaim, and which naturally carries a gushing book blurb by the fake sociologist Robin DiAngelo.⁴⁶² Unlike DiAngelo, however, Kendi is an engaging writer, and he spins a good yarn. I say “spin” and “yarn,” because I have no idea whether

⁴⁶¹ Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019), p. 173.

⁴⁶² Robin DiAngelo describes herself as a “sociologist,” which she is not.

what he writes is true. I don't know if it's false, either. It's probably all "true" in the sense of, well, it *could* be true, even if it isn't.

So Kendi pronounces, performs, and pimps a brand of know-nothingness, and the urban yahoos nod and affirm, for Kendi's know-nothingness is *their* know-nothingness. It's a carapace of ignorance that protects the grift from hard questions and the ultimate realization that they are being had.

For my part, I would not consult Ibram Kendi on anything regarding American history, as he is simply not reliable as historian. On the other hand, if I believed in *hoodoo*, I'd surely consult the mystic Kendi for a prediction on the quality of the impending yam harvest.

Professor Kendi formerly called himself Henry Rogers before his transmogrification into a racist guru, qualified to offer immediate commentary on incidents involving race, regardless of time, location, persons involved, and most important—*regardless of what actually happened or whether he has personal knowledge of the incident.*

The business-savvy Kendi is now subsidized with large corporate contributions, among them a \$10 million drop by former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey⁴⁶³ to fund Kendi's "Center for Anti-racist Research."⁴⁶⁴ Kendi's public *persona* as a writer has made him a millionaire by way of his books. His speeches? A single talk can net him \$20,000 for a virtual engagement lasting just 60 minutes. This is fabulous largesse for today's hustler, a "conjure man" *par excellence*.⁴⁶⁵

463 Margarite Ward, "Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey donates \$10 million to Ibram X. Kendi's center on antiracism at Boston University," *Business Insider*, August 20, 2020.

464 <https://www.bu.edu/antiracism-center/>

465 Hoodoo Sen Moise, *Working Conjure: A Guide to Hoodoo Folk Magic* (Newburyport, MA: Weiser Books, 2018).

Kendi may be a hustler with a fake name. He may be an academic lightweight, as Columbia University linguist John McWhorter once called him in an interview: “I think he’s a preacher walking around promulgating undercooked simplistic ideas.”⁴⁶⁶ He may have a proclivity to intone tautological maxims worse than those of Chung Mee, the drug lord in the Tom Hanks film *Volunteers*.

Chung Mee: “We must all do what we must do, for if we do not, then what we must do does not get done.”⁴⁶⁷

Ibram Kendi: “Racism is a collection of racist policies that lead to racial inequity, that are substantiated by racist ideas.”⁴⁶⁸

But one thing Kendi does well is to practice the *hoodoo* of our universities’ con-artists and rake in millions from the yokels who buy into it. Moreover, he does this while pretending to proletarian roots he does not have, and this pretense is all you really need know about Kendi. Here is Kendi’s set-up:

I am one generation removed from picking cotton for pocket change under the warming climate in Guyton, outside Savannah. That’s where we buried my grandmother in 1993. Memories of her comforting calmness, her dark green thumb, and her—

466 “Calling out Ibram X. Kendi,” Glenn Loury and John McWhorter, *The Glenn Show*, November 27, 2020, 36:25: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qanSigT004&t=2125s>

467 Chung Mee in *Volunteers*, 1985. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090274/characters/nm0361719>

468 “How to be an Antiracist,” Aspen Ideas Festival, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzuOlyyQlug&t=2170s> 34:30 Mark

Wait, *what?* You never worked “picking cotton for pocket change.” No, *you* didn’t do that, Ibram.

Now, pause and consider the technique for a moment and what Kendi accomplished with it, what *you* might accomplish with it. I, too, can use the one-generation-removed formula. How can I suggest to my readers the idea that I’m courageous and connected to great deeds, when the former is doubtful and the latter probably untrue? How can I do this with a factual statement, which really accomplishes nothing *except* to plant a thought in the reader’s mind? Just this way. Let’s say you’re reading my book, with interest I hope. Suddenly, I tell you this:

“I am one generation removed from hitting the beaches at Normandy under withering machine-gun fire.”

With this odd sentence, I link my own experience with that of the Greatest Generation, “hitting the beaches at Normandy” when I actually did no such thing and when I probably don’t have the guts to do such a thing, which is why we call the folks who *did* do such a thing the Greatest Generation.⁴⁶⁹

However, as someone who *actually did* labor 10-hour days in the fields under the hot sun for “pocket change” in my teens, I feel a resonance with Kendi’s chosen trope for a reason that I likely share with other folks, but not in a way that Kendi could ever relate to. His donning of victim sackcloth smacks of parody, and his racist proletarian chic is laughable.

“Picking cotton for pocket change.” Who is he trying to fool?

⁴⁶⁹ My own father would have “hit the beaches at Normandy,” except he was recuperating in a London hospital from a war wound that he suffered in the Italian campaign.

Consider this. Kendi, as an adult, expressed the belief that he believes that white people are actually “aliens.”⁴⁷⁰ He also provides a powerful self-description of what happens when primitive man meets a simple doctrine, with himself playing the role masterfully: “I sat there in my dorm room, sweating, mesmerized, scared. It felt like I have climbed up and consumed forbidden fruit.” This was Kendi’s reaction to reading the creation myth of the Nation of Islam, a fantastical hate-filled fable that inspired Kendi’s search for bizarre explanations for the state of the world. Kendi believed these myths as an adult, and this ought to give pause to anyone inclined to buy into Kendi’s own special sauce.

But DEI racialists wolf this stuff down.

The mistake is to believe that Kendi offers some sort of redemption, that he has anything new, fresh, or different to offer. Says journalist Kelefa Sanneh in a *New Yorker* profile of Kendi in 2019, “As he studied African-American history he came to believe that the basic story was even simpler than he had thought. American history, he discovered, was a ‘battle between racists and anti-racists.’”⁴⁷¹

Again, the primitive binary tarted-up for a guilt-minded audience in the 2020s. Kendi offers a world spectacularly simple-minded in its reduction of American history to the single factor of race, which he splits into a world of evil *versus* good—the racists *versus* the anti-racists. It’s incredibly appealing to a certain type of person for the same reasons that such persons are attracted to cults, and many have bought into this primitive philosophy of life. Its

470 Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be an Anti-Racist* (New York: One World, 2019), p. 134.

471 Kelefa Sanneh, “The Fight to Redefine Racism,” *The New Yorker*, August 12, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/08/19/the-fight-to-redefine-racism> (Accessed: April 7, 2021)

simplicity removes the ambiguities of a world that many persons cannot negotiate.

Others sign on to the Kendi agenda out of fear of being labeled a “racist” by Kendi and his coterie of Kendinistas. This latter process has turned out to be lucrative exercise.

Boston University’s Ibram X. Kendi, whose book has jockeyed with DiAngelo’s on the bestseller list, charges \$150 for tickets to public events and \$25,000 for a one-hour presentation, his representatives told the *Free Beacon*.⁴⁷²

Most recently, Kendi has suffered a loss of cachet in spite of his antiracist credentials. His mismanagement of his Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University forced the layoff of many staff and a retrenchment of the ambitious goals he had set.⁴⁷³ He is increasingly overshadowed by the up-and-coming diversity hustler Shaun Harper at the USC Race & Equity Center as well as the resurgent graphic novelist Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Peggy McIntosh—Research Scientist

My initial inclination was to relegate Peggy McIntosh to second-tier status in this compendium of racialists. She is surely worthy of mention, give her name’s synonymy with “white privilege.” But after her splash onto the public scene in the late 1980s with her

472 Charles Fain Lehman, “The Wages of Woke: How Robin DiAngelo got rich peddling ‘white fragility,’” *Free Beacon*, July 25, 2020: <https://freebeacon.com/culture/the-wages-of-woke-2/>

473 Stanley K. Ridgley, “DEI Downsizing at Ibram Kendi’s Outfit: Kendi’s Boston Center for Antiracist Research takes a ‘New Direction,’” September, 2023, *Brutalminds.com*: <https://brutalminds.com/?p=1611> The post contains commentary on stories from the *Boston Globe* and *Semafor*.

popularization of the term, she gradually faded with no additional significant contributions to the critical racist canon.

McIntosh still plies her trade as a workshop facilitator with her own non-profit. She does substantial business trade from her name and her notoriety as a one-trick-pony who claims now to be a “research scientist.” This last is responsible for my inclusion of her in the pantheon of influential racist ideologues, along with her unusual contribution to research methodology—the “hypothetical anecdote.”

It is rare to find a person with a literature PhD, specializing in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, and who runs racist workshops, who will claim to be a “research scientist” and do so with apparently straight face. Is this a grift, or is it mere self-promotion?

Let’s look at her one-trick “white privilege” from 1988, which still survives in our discourse like some academic zombie.

Anecdotal evidence is generally frowned upon in the social sciences, of course (or at least anecdotal evidence with which we disagree). But McIntosh appears to have invented a new methodology that drops anecdotal evidence to a new low of disrespect. She did this in her 1989 piece called “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies,” which became known as “The Invisible Knapsack.”⁴⁷⁴ McIntosh acknowledges openly in the initial paragraphs of her essay that her notions of “privilege” emerged from her personal experiences teaching in a “Women’s Studies”

474 Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” and “Some Notes for Facilitators,” This essay first appeared in *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, July/August, 1989, pp. 10-12, a publication of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Philadelphia, PA. <https://www.nationalseedproject.org/key-seed-texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack>

program. These experiences led her to believe that there exists a social malady she labeled “male privilege”—“a phenomenon with a life of its own.”

McIntosh moved on to identify what she called white privilege: “White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.” It launched what might be called the *J'accuse* genre of pop social science, in which carefully curated anecdotes serve as the centerpiece.

To her credit, McIntosh acknowledges that her work is not “scholarly” and consists of a compendium of “daily experiences within my particular circumstances.” That is to say—anecdotes. But what makes this article so interesting is its use of what can be called the *hypothetical anecdote*. Here’s how it works.

To illustrate her point that there exists an invisible knapsack of privilege, filled with the copious metaphorical baggage she lists, she compiles a test of sorts—a list of elastic hypothetical conditions that if met confirms the existence of the malady that she describes [some versions of the essay have 26 questions, some 46, and some 50].⁴⁷⁵ I use the word “hypothetical” to be charitable. The list is contrived to lead the reader to a particular conclusion. It is, in fact, the very definition of confirmation bias—a list of “conditions” designed to elicit personal anecdotes to confirm the existence of what is assumed.

The reader is invited to fill in the blanks to create magically the conclusion that McIntosh assumes beforehand. It isn’t

475 <https://admin.artsci.washington.edu/sites/adming/files/unpacking-invisible-knapsack.pdf>

surprising that a scholar trained in English literature would commit methodological blunders such as this one, particularly as it likely arises from deeply held convictions about what one wants to believe. This is typical, in fact, of unscientific thought. In his extensive survey of the literature on confirmation bias, Raymond Nickerson concludes that:

Our natural tendency seems to be to look for evidence that is directly supportive of hypotheses we favor and even, in some instances, of those we are entertaining but about which are indifferent The point is that we seldom seek evidence naturally that would show a hypothesis to be wrong and to do so because we understand this to be an effective way to show it to be right if it really is right.⁴⁷⁶

It's no exaggeration to suggest that McIntosh's essay constitutes an exercise on how to engage in confirmation bias and the illusion of objectivity. Her conditions are elastic. They're downright colloquial, as if penned by an undergraduate, probably one studying "public sociology." Here is what I mean—in her list of conditions that solicit reader input, McIntosh uses the qualifying terms "most of the time," "pretty sure" [five times], "pretty well assured," "widely represented," "I can be casual," "remain oblivious," "I can easily buy," "I can be sure," "I can easily find." The lack of precision and social scientific rigor here is stupendous.

In fact, it becomes an elaborate exercise in wishful thinking or of an explanation born of magical thinking, what one might

⁴⁷⁶ Raymond Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises," *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1998, p. 211.

expect from a “senior research scientist” with a Ph.D. in English Literature.

“Privilege,” indeed.

Ijeoma Oluo—Small Town Girl Makes Good

Some of the books and articles in the “autoethnography” genre offer fine reading and tell elaborate and emotion-laden stories. It’s time wasted, but perhaps if escapist fare is your pleasure? Racist guru Ijeoma Oluo writes this way.

This kind of writing isn’t difficult for folks like Oluo, who time-served at Western Washington University for a political science degree and then offered years of repeated iterations of the same article for the defunct website *Jezebel*, pieces that characteristically sweat with the kind of urban superstition that motivates groupies to evoke cries of “Grrrrrrl, you rock!”

Oluo has leveraged her political science bachelor’s degree into a kind of journalism. In her initial public offering, aside from the lesbian coloring book she self-published in 2015,⁴⁷⁷ Oluo elected to trod the path worn by so many tiresome, hectoring young folks who believe themselves in possession of something crafty and keen, but which is actually the umpteenth iteration of simulacra whose original is completely forgotten. She gifted us with a book in 2018, a peanut hustle called *So you want to talk about race*, and it is testimony to the corruption of the literati that it reached #1 on *The New York Times* bestseller list.⁴⁷⁸

Oluo parlayed that book into guru-status and followed it up

477 Ijeoma Oluo, *The Badass Feminist Coloring Book* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

478 Ijeoma Oluo, *So you want to talk about race* (New York: Seal Press, 2018, 2019).

with a racist screed that was impeccably timed, published just six months after the death of George Floyd—*Mediocre: The dangerous legacy of white male America*. The book catered to an audience eager to populate a pseudocommunity of persecutors, and it edged onto *The New York Times* bestseller list.

No, *Mediocre* is not an Oluo autoethnography, although Oluo does incorporate personal tales of woe scattered amidst disquisitions on Buffalo Bill, Colin Kaepernick, her dreams of Bernie Sanders, and Mormon migrants. The *Times* ran a gushing review of *Mediocre*, gushing precisely because it was penned by fellow racist Brittney Cooper,⁴⁷⁹ a Rutgers University professor best-known for her homicidal exhortations that anticipated the assassin Luigi Mangione: “The thing I want to say to you is we got to take these mother---kers out.”⁴⁸⁰

Like so many before her, Oluo has cobbled together a personal brand and a sparkling public career that offers us a mess of pottage, complete with book tour and speaking gigs. This furious literary activity crafted a persona for Oluo that suited her for keynote speaking at the national conference of the diversity folks. Oluo indeed opened the 2023 NADOHE conference. A long way from her humble beginnings at Western Washington University from which she graduated in 2007.

When she is on the stump—as long as the main topic is kept

479 Brittney Cooper, “In America, Is Power in the Hands of Too Many ‘Mediocre’ Men?” *The New York Times*, December 1, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/01/books/review/mediocre-ijeoma-oluo.html>

480 Cooper is a Rutgers University Associate Professor of women’s and gender studies and Africana studies. She was invited as the closing Keynote Speaker for the 2022 ACPA National Conference. Jackie Salo, “‘We got to take these motherf---kers out’: Rutgers professor calls white people ‘villains,’” *New York Post*, October 29, 2021. <https://nypost.com/2021/10/29/rutgers-professor-calls-white-people-villains/> For the entire interview with Cooper, see: <https://www.theroot.com/the-root-institute-2021-unpacking-the-attacks-on-criti-1847711634>

vague and her fawning hosts don't probe too deeply—her dry, world-weary attitude and the contrived *l'esprit d'escalier* anecdotes are guaranteed to beguile white liberals and elicit snorting approval from her target audience of simpering urbanites. In her book, she adopts an anecdotal style coupled with fact-free universalization of her own limited experiences living in Seattle. This is the inevitable style of the lightly educated, who caters to the base psychological needs of the equally lightly educated. She's a superb plebian megaphone for the perpetually aggrieved.

Critical Racist Performance

Oluo runs the grievance *shtick*. She has mastered it, and if I were searching for examples to illustrate the process of successful personal branding in one of my workshops, Ms. Oluo would suffice. In her public appearances, she affects a style—the caricature of the fatigued black woman, exhausted from dealing with worrisome white folks.⁴⁸¹ *So* exhausted.⁴⁸² This is her version of what we see so much in the cramped and crowded field of racist performance.⁴⁸³

She populates her stories with stick figures who behave just as we expect they will. It likely never occurs to her that these people who populate her tales are carefully curated into her circumscribed world, the theater in which the same play is enacted ritualistically *ad infinitum*, the tiny cast of characters playing their scripted

481 Suzette Hackney, "Black women say they're exhausted after election, but won't give up activism," *USA Today*, December 10, 2024: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2024/12/10/column-black-women-tired-resilient-election-activism/76688762007/>

482 Amanda Miller Littlejohn, "Black professional women are exhausted. They're finally claiming the time to rest," *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2021: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/08/20/black-women-professionals-rest/>

483 Janice Gassam Asare, "Dear America: Black Women Are Tired," The Pink Elephant Newsletter, July 29, 2024: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/dear-america-black-women-tired-janice-gassam-asare-ph-d--bwwie/>

roles. The play is limned in exquisite detail, while everything else is abstract. The writer Stephen Spender might well have been describing Oluo—*anticipating* her—when he wrote in the 1940s of the average person’s tenuous “grasp on reality.” Said Spender:

[N]early all human beings have an extremely intermittent grasp on reality. Only a few things, which illustrate their own interests and ideas, are real to them; other things, which are in fact, equally real, appear to them as abstractions. Thus, when men have decided to pursue a course of action, everything which serves to support this seems vivid and real; everything which stands against it becomes abstraction. Your friends are allies and therefore real human beings with flesh and blood and sympathies like yourself. Your opponents are just tiresome, unreasonable, unnecessary theses, whose lives are so many false statements which you would like to strike out with a lead bullet as you would put the stroke of a lead pencil through a bungled paragraph.⁴⁸⁴

This is the Oluo method. She is a popularizer of certain ideas grounded in her parochial “lived experience,” and in this there is nothing extraordinary about her. This type of thing has an enthusiastic audience, and it taps into the same mentality that comedians cater to—the elevation of transient experiences into cartoonish

484 Stephen Spender in *The God that Failed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1959, 1949), p. 230. Spender was a poet and essayist who came of age in the 1930s and spent much time in Spain while that country’s civil war raged, during which time his intellectual development accelerated in the crucible of conflict. He came to know the mentality of the fanatically committed, and he grew familiar with the psychology that drives fanatical commitment, primarily because he himself was committed to the cause and to the narrative that supported the cause. The cause is hyper-focused, and all else becomes abstract.

lampoonery. In Oluo's case, however, we are in the presence of something special—the elevation of the *non*-experience magically woven into fake tales of oppression.

Oluo's method, whether she knows it or not, follows a tradition that came of age in the early 2000s, when Berkeley sociologist Michael Burawoy gave legitimacy to “public sociology,” an open-door policy that admitted various vagabond projects into the sociology club without paying the steep price of admission. This gave the “anecdote” new luster in academia, and it is here where Oluo finds a comfortable home. The anecdote is her chief currency, but it isn't called anecdote, of course. It goes by a handful of aspirational coinages: “autoethnography,” “*testimonios*,” “lived experience,” “counter-narrative.” Oluo practices a kind of ersatz sociology that leverages her anecdotes and spontaneous observations into a methodology.

There is nothing inherently risible with the anecdote *qua* anecdote; the problem arises with exaltation of the anecdote, coupled with demands that it be accepted as scholarship like that found in proven knowledge-generating social science. It's not difficult to understand why this might be so, why folks such as Oluo aspire to public sociology status. It short-cuts the way around the inconvenience of rigor, standards, merit, and even mild criticism to slip through the side door for a seat at the table. Always with the realization that anecdote-driven twaddle doesn't really belong there. So, it comes coupled with a pretentious didacticism in a

continuous quest for significance and legitimacy.⁴⁸⁵ Public Sociology is to Sociology as Snake-handling is to Religion.

Modern social media provides a wealth of examples of the performances of racist public intellectuals, and certainly Oluo is visible on various platforms as any cursory web search confirms. Oluo's performances consist of tales of what happens to her. Even this is not quite right. They consist of tales of what she believes happens to her. Truth? Who knows.

Here is one extended example of Oluo performing vaudeville in a formulaic format, talking about publication of her book in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. Her interviewer, Charles Mudede, provides classic straight-man cues for what is essentially a maundering Oluo monologue. Let's listen in:

I think there was like this real panic that drove people to the book now I think it's more utility. I think that people are starting to realize now that we've kind of accepted that a large portion of our population is trash, that they're not doing enough to balance all that trash, and that they're aiding and abetting in the trash and now it's about finding it in their day-to-day life and I think I'm so happy to have built something that is helping people find where they are aiding and abetting white

485 See the extensive literature on Significance Quest Theory. The quest for significance is the fundamental desire to matter, to be someone, to have respect. Psychological theorists have long realized that this quest constitutes a major, universal, human motivation variously labeled as the need for *esteem*, *achievement*, *meaning*, *competence*, *control*, and so on. See Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Belanger, Anna Shreveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachechi, and Rohan Gunaratna, "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 35, Supplement 1: *Advances in Political Psychology* (February 2014), p. 73. See, as well, Edward Orehek and Arie W. Kruglanski, "Personal failure makes society seem fonder; An inquiry into the roots of social interdependence," *PLOS ONE*, August 3, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0201361>.

supremacy and at least start down certain paths of, you know, trying to rectify that.⁴⁸⁶

After establishing that Oluo believes that presumably half of the population of the United States is “trash,” Oluo and Mudede hit all of their marks in what turns into a yuk-fest at times—“cultural appropriation,” “white supremacy,” “black hair,” “privilege,” and the like.

There is something uncomfortably embarrassing about two obviously intelligent persons gleefully shackling themselves into their ideological straitjackets and then pontificating within the narrow bounds that constitute their shared mental cell, oblivious to the larger world outside. The cell door is unlocked. All they need do is open the door and walk out.

But they don’t.

Oluo shares the paranoiac’s delusion that history is a series of events that happen to *them*. She has led and apparently still seems to lead a comfortably uninteresting life, but like a paranoiac, she squeezes meaning from the mundane. Oluo appears as the kind of person, regardless of ethnicity, who sniffs out reasons for offense, takes umbrage at a glance, a raised eyebrow, an overheard conversation. You know the type. Everyone knows the type. It’s what DEI “trainings” are all about.

On it goes like this. Oluo, the feted author and celebrity racist, spinning lackluster tales of non-events filled with an asphyxiating oppression. Take, for example, the oppression in the Seattle airport, which is called Seatac. Oluo relates the tale from

486 Ijeoma Oluo with Charles Mudede: So You Want to Talk About Race, Town Hall Seattle, October 3, 2019: 10:07. Accessed: October 12, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CkJVThLCOI>

her book in which she strides the Seatac terminal on her way to her next high-paid speaking gig; she's searching for something to eat, and she is just gob-smacked by the atrocity of a sign advertising something called the *Africa Lounge*. Oluo features this venue, a kitsch-filled airport eatery, in her book as an example of cultural appropriation.

In her event with Mudede, this cultural appropriation is the topic of conversation for interminable minutes as Oluo strikes a passionate chord with an audience that likely cannot fathom what, exactly, the hoo-hah is all about.⁴⁸⁷ Anecdotes like this one—and it's anybody's guess whether they're true or not, but that doesn't matter because they *could* be true—offer the paranoiac's raw material for interpretation according to the conspiracist's grand plan. Brick-and-mortar oppression in the Seattle airport selling burgers and fries.

Is Oluo's world so bereft of actual oppression that she is left to contrive yarns out of the nothingness that all of us experience in everyday life in one way or another, with the major exception that her experiences are that of the lush, racist show business life, and so she gives every mundane incident and non-incident the heft of conspiracy and great moment?

Let's look at this hapless *Africa Lounge*, which I will surely patronize if I'm ever unlucky enough to lay over in Seattle, and I

487 I recall fondly one of my trips to Izhevsk, Russia—this one in 2012—during which I saw briefly through the window a sign for an establishment called “American Café.” Not having the opportunity to visit it, I can only surmise that it carried the same kitsch-filled ambience of the FAQ café just off Red Square in Moscow. The FAQ successfully provided a bohemian ambience of America's 1950s beat cafés, and it was there that I met the information director for the Russian Communist Party, who has since gone on to respectability and remains a good friend. The FAQ café, accessed down stairs to its basement location, featured James Dean posters on the walls, low-slung coffee tables. Was it “authentic”? Who knows? Who cares?

encourage you to do likewise. Here I confess that I left a positive review on the review site “Yelp” for the *Africa Lounge* without ever having visited.⁴⁸⁸ But if you believe everything the DEI folks say about reality, all that matters is that I *could* have visited it and that I *could* have eaten there. We return to Ms. Oluo in the airport, in Seatac.

In her telling, Oluo must suffer the indignities of an oppressive Seattle airport as she travels to her expenses-paid lecture series to collect \$10,000 fees. It is here she discovers a restaurant not to her liking, the *Africa Lounge*. In her conversation with Mudede, it becomes the source of much forced merriment. Unlike other folks—in fact, unlike almost *everybody else* who dwells in the world of airport travel—she takes umbrage at the very existence of a place like the *Africa Lounge*, and it’s not even clear why it leaves her in such high dudgeon.

She is not, after all, from any of the many African nations or many different African cultures that make up that continent of 1.2 billion people. Her dad is Nigerian, and if her dad has a problem with *Africa Lounge*, Oluo doesn’t mention it, but then *Africa Lounge* apparently offers a generic African experience, not a Nigerian experience. Her buddy Mudede is from Zimbabwe, sure, but here he postures as a lay expert on Africa because, as he says, “I am African,” which has no more meaning than someone claiming to be “European” rather than Serbian or British or Greek or Finnish. Her audience is presumably supposed to take umbrage now that they have learned of the *Africa Lounge* and its burgers and fries.

⁴⁸⁸ See review dated October 12, 2020. <https://www.yelp.com/biz/africa-lounge-seattle>

All of this may seem like a joke, but to Oluo it's not. She latches on to this *Africa Lounge*, and she can't let go.

One suspects that she talks so much and in such contrived vexation about trivialities because it serves as her own proxy for actual proletarian strife and striving, which as far as anyone knows, she has never experienced. She magnifies the mundane, shines a spotlight on the superficial, and flogs the imaginary to its feet for a lap around the outrage track before it dissipates into its own effervescence or before the audience wises-up, the latter of which isn't likely to happen since this is an easy audience that pleases easily, applauding every errant throat-clear.

The discussion continues interminably, Oluo oblivious to the fact that she and *only* she is affected so deeply by the kitsch of a modern airport as she bemoans her burden of dining on burger and fries while sitting on a zebra-print stool. She transforms her grotesquely trivial and self-indulgent reaction into a significant cultural fact of chin-scratching magniloquence. But no . . . it's just a restaurant in an airport. You cannot but stumble over this passage mentally when you read it. G. K. Chesterton emerges to explain Oluo's problem, even as she is oblivious:

Are there no other stories in the world except yours; and are all men busy with your business? . . . How much larger your life would be if yourself could become smaller in it . . . You would break out of this tiny and tawdry theatre in which your own little plot is always being played, and you would find yourself under a freer sky, in a street full of splendid strangers.⁴⁸⁹

489 G. K. Chesterton, *Chesterton Collected Works, Volume 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, The Blatchford Controversies* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 223. Published originally in 1908.

In another of her personal incidents, which arises only because of her cachet as a racist public intellectual inspiring the assembled cadres of diversity officers, Oluo takes offense at the venue of one of her lucrative talks, this a lecture to a meeting of the Wisconsin Library Association—*librarians!*—probably no more sympathetic crowd to be found outside the confines of Seattle, unless it's Portland.

If only you and I had such “problems.” An all-expense-paid trip to Wisconsin to speak an hour to a fawning audience where she's booked to speak for somewhere between \$10,000 and \$20,000.⁴⁹⁰ She has a problem, a *big* problem with the venue. She complains that it's a themed safari resort in Wisconsin. Her distaste prompts her to a principled refusal to stay at the “safari” resort, but it extended neither to refusal to speak at the venue, nor to refusal of her five-figure payday. Here is her commentary:

It's called Kalahari and it's a themed Safari Resort in Wisconsin, you know, in case you're missing the Safari you can find it in Wisconsin and, yeah, I'm just like how, how did whole committees, like, oh yeah this sounds fine, like, and, you know, make this decision and then you get too close to the event and someone's, like, mmm, excuse me, you know, and, you know, it was, like, the one black person that's, like, do I have to say it, oh god do I have to be the one to say I don't want to go to a safari.⁴⁹¹

490 See Keppler Speakers. <https://www.keplerspeakers.com/speakers/ijeoma-oluo>

491 Ijeoma Oluo with Charles Mudede: So You Want to Talk About Race, Town Hall Seattle, October 3, 2019: 13:27. Accessed: October 12, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CkJVThLCOI>

Oluo exemplifies the *modus operandi* of the racist public intellectual who inspires and informs DEI. The poser whose know-nothingness is thorough and whose mind is clear of all but the framework of racialism, free to live a life of racialism opining on *anything* that happens . . . without knowing *anything* about *anything* that happens. In this case, she is *just* opining, because nothing *does* happen.

In this way, we are treated to a trickle of Oluo's interpretations of imagined events. Or, in Oluo's case, *non*-events, because nothing is really happening or at any rate, nothing very interesting. In a method similar to the racist Robin DiAngelo, she has assembled a career that parlays a life of limited parochial experience into a jet-set life of speaking gigs and book signings.

This exaltation of the insignificant is classic paranoia combined with classic vaudeville. Do I believe that Oluo is a paranoiac? Not at all. She is a smart, savvy racist hack, who understands what her audience demands, and she puts on a show that is extremely satisfying. And well-compensated.

“‘White Supremacy,’ anyone? That’ll be \$15,000.”

Ta-Nehisi Coates

When students starting out on campuses across the US wonder whether making insincere claims and catastrophizing minute events can be rewarding, they can look to [Ta-Nehisi] Coates and know that it is.⁴⁹²

492 Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019), p. 166.

Few writers boast ignorance as a credential—Ta-Nehisi Coates is one of them. And few persons could get a book into print on the Israeli-Hamas conflict, based on a single 10-day visit to Gaza hosted by terrorist-sympathizers, but Ta-Nehisi Coates did just that. The result is his 2024 bestseller *The Message*, most of it his ruminations about himself and his superimposition of crude racist theory onto a conflict he only dimly understands while timeserving on what has to be one of the dullest travelogues ever penned.

My own expectations of Coates are low, and they have continued to drop with each iteration of a new memoir by this young fellow, who believes he has much to say that is grounded in his “lived experience.” That is to say, the uber-mundanity that is his signature theme that he contrives as he moves his career along (witness his brief terror-tourism in Gaza).

Coates has been a reliable practitioner of a racist writing methodology pioneered by the late Harvard Law Professor Derrick Bell.⁴⁹³ You simply manufacture a point you want to make, then weave an oppression story around it that caters to an audience’s prejudice, add a dash of discount-rack mysticism and . . . *presto!* As is his habit, Coates has never hidden his ignorance of that which he writes about, but rather boasts of his ignorance, considering it a virtue.

As with Kendi, Coates is at best a pedestrian writer. He is most at home with the comic book form, and he has always centered himself in his narcissistic memoirs. The Kendi-Coates method is to begin with a primitive racist theory and then

⁴⁹³ See Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

conjure up a superficial understanding of major events through this racialism. Racialists call this their “lens.” Facts are not simply curated selectively in this method—facts are irrelevant and filtered out⁴⁹⁴ if they are inconvenient. Sadly, this is not parody. It is the author’s idea of chin-scratching sagacity. You can decide for yourself, of course, and enough readers prefer his goulash of prejudice, ignorance, and *hauteur* to make Coates the shrewdest of grifters, if nothing else.

I speak of Coates’s writing because, well, that’s his self-professed occupation. And no matter how much I speak of Coates’s writing, be assured that he has spoken more, is speaking more, and *will* speak more. “Former *Atlantic* writer Ta-Nehisi Coates has charged between \$30,000 and \$40,000 for public lectures.”⁴⁹⁵

He fervently believes that he is a fabulous writer with a “gift,” and he interminably talks about his love affair with words that began as a youngster, about writing, about himself, about the gift he has embraced, and about the young would-be writers he would recruit as disciples. He teaches such writing at Howard University as Sterling Brown Chair in the Department of English and writer-in-residence.

This self-referential style is off-putting, not least because he never delivers on the promises of depth, breadth, wit, soul, heart, detail, romance. Nothing of the sort. Perhaps this has to do with his abhorrence of complexity. Rather, he shoeorns the glorious reality around him into the same pair of frayed rhetorical loafers he’s worn since, well, his last memoir. And the memoir before that.

494 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Message* (New York: One World, 2024), p. 205-206.

495 Charles Fain Lehman, “The Wages of Woke: How Robin DiAngelo got rich peddling ‘white fragility,’” *Free Beacon*, July 25, 2020: <https://freebeacon.com/culture/the-wages-of-woke-2/>

Quite disturbing is the influence that Coates wields, as purportedly a man in-the-know, combined with his unrelieved ignorance. Folks on the campuses look to him. Reading groups discuss his books. And what do they learn? Well, in *The Message*, he manages the feat of pronouncing on the unrest in Israel and its neighbors from the perspective of a tourist ushered around by a Palestinian group called the Palestine Festival of Literature.⁴⁹⁶ He is never far from the provincialism that permeates all of his writing, and he exhibits two of the three methodological pathologies we discussed in Chapter 4—navel-gazing and yarn-spinning. All his work is characterized by these pathologies. But as I have noted, there seems always a large and receptive audience for this artifice. It's the same audience that is swayed by the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, of *The Man who cried I am*, *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews*, *The Turner Diaries*.

Once an author acknowledges up-front that he takes liberties with the facts, that he has an innate suspicion of even the *possibility* of an objective truth, and that he believes that he conveys an “inner truth,” then the entire body of his work becomes suspect. At least for those who think critically. And when the author is a committed racist, given license by a credulous public to salve his vanity at their expense, he is prone to serve up what his audience wants in the way of racist porn. His work is candy for believers, convenient confirmations of the racist myth. No one outside of his committed circle is convinced of anything because of the dubiety of it all, while those who are already locked in the circle nod stupidly and slap the page at the abstract platitudes marching predictably in paragraph formation.

496 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Message* (New York: One World, 2024), p. 122.

Is it true? Did it happen this way? Do these people even exist, or are they “composite characters” created to make a point? Ta-Nahesi, have you omitted anything that might substantially transform your conclusions? Let’s sit back, awash in these ruminations.

In some sense, my trip to the Land of Palestine was a journey backward toward that instinct I’d lost, an ancestral gift I’d forgotten. The gift is not in the blood but in the stories, the axioms, the experiences garnered from centuries of living on the outskirts of a dubious democracy. When I went off to become a professional writer, I was brimming with my own skepticism—not of the country but of the gift, which seemed so diffuse and random, a kind of folk wisdom that stood in abeyance of the empirical. Perhaps the most important fact in this skepticism was that I had no living models If I was skeptical of the gift, I was never skeptical of the people. I came to think of my trade—long-form magazine or new journalism—as a kind of scientific process that, when correctly applied, must necessarily reveal the truth. And for a time I saw the practitioner of that science as an individual, as individual, as singular, as standing alone, applying the process, searching for truth.⁴⁹⁷

Coates actually offers us this line: “I don’t think I ever, in my life, felt the glare of racism burn stranger and more intense than in Israel.”⁴⁹⁸ Egads! What occasioned this growl of anger?

It was this “incident” he describes here:

497 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Message* (New York: One World, 2024), p. 205-206.

498 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Message* (New York: One World, 2024), p. 204.

I got back to the hotel that afternoon exhausted as usual so exhausted, in fact, that I didn't even see the man standing at the hotel's front door. Or maybe I did see him and did not quite register his role until he blocked my path. "Are you a guest here?" he asked. He addressed me with a kind of well-mannered hostility, like an English inspector who keeps calling his suspect 'sir.' I was fixated on the gun holstered on his hip. I reached into my pocket, flashed my key card, and walked inside. I moved through the lobby, shook [*sic*], and got to my room as fast as I could.⁴⁹⁹

The undergraduate inside Coates cannot help himself. He *imagines* a long-past racist American society and then transposes this imagined society onto a foreign country today, in a city of archaeological treasures and in a country victimized by suicide bombers. The jittery Coates—"shook," he says—transports himself in his mind to another land, to another time as he imagines it, so that he can then mine yet another mundane happenstance.

This is his way. He searches for metaphorical pegs on which to hang his hat. One suspects that he is saying what he always *intended* to say before ever set foot in Gaza or in Palestine, and that the incidents he describes (if these happenstances can even be called incidents) are just that—incidental to his canned grand narrative. Indeed, when you strip away Coates's strained prose that desperately flogs life into his unexceptional terror-tour ("enormous guns" and the like), you quickly realize that next to nothing actually happens to Coates.

499 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Message* (New York: One World, 2024), p. 204.

Coates is a terror-tourist, duped thoroughly over the course of a 10-day sojourn that brim-fills him with the hubris to write knowledgeably about Middle East Jewish-Arab hostilities unencumbered by the “complexity” that he mocks as unnecessary to an understanding of what he considers the simplest of conundrums.

Throughout, he puts himself at the center and then furiously navel-gazes, attaching dramatic meaning to the most mundane of scenarios that barely qualify as scenarios. For instance, he espies guard dogs protecting a settlement.

I toured a settlement and seen [*sic*] something that appeared drawn from the world of Mad Max. At the boundary of this settlement, every thirty feet or so, I would see a guard dog rise, growl, and loudly bark. I looked closer and saw a leash attached to each of these dogs. The leashes extended perhaps ten feet up, where they met, at a perpendicular angle, a master cord stretched across the space. The effect was a kind of fencing, a wall made of guard dogs. I felt myself in the presence of a terrible Chimera—a wall of hell hounds that seemed to me drawn from my Montgomery nightmares.⁵⁰⁰

At this point, the obvious thing for a journalist to do escapes Coates entirely. Perhaps a question or two? Does Coates approach anyone in the settlement to ask the most relevant questions that an actual journalist might ask? Something like: “Say, you have some robust guard dogs here. Did something bad happen here to warrant this wall-of-hell-hounds set-up?”

500 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Message* (New York: One World, 2024), p. 192-193.

But Coates walks on by, because, well, it would interrupt what Coates had planned to say all along. This “Chimera” was just a set-up.

Reading Coates, it’s difficult not to reflect upon his ruminations in the context of a professional historian’s caution against precisely this kind of slapdash “history.” James H. Sweet is Vilas-Jartz Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. As Sweet points out, “If history is only those stories from the past that confirm current political positions, all manner of political hacks can claim historical expertise.”⁵⁰¹ He spells out what he means.

In a 2022 piece, Sweet described how the Ghanaian Afro-tourism industry manufactures slavery tales to cater to African-American tourists, black-washing actual Ghanaian history to omit the full African complicity in the slave trade. Without such complicity, it’s difficult to see how the trade would have survived, let alone flourished. Sweet observes how a small fishing village in Ghana called Elmina, one of the largest Atlantic slave-trading depots in West Africa, has morphed into slave tourism.

Elmina Castle is now as much an African American shrine as a Ghanaian archaeological or historical site . . . The Elmina tour guide claimed that “Ghanaians” sent their “servants” into chattel slavery unknowingly. The guide made no reference to warfare or Indigenous slavery, histories that interrupt assumptions of ancestral connection between modern-day Ghanaians and visitors from the diaspora. Similarly, the forthcoming film

501 James H. Sweet, “Is History History?: Identity Politics and the Teleology of the Present,” *Perspectives on History*, Volume 60:6, September 2022: https://www.historians.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Perspectives_60N6.pdf

The Woman King seems to suggest that Dahomey's female warriors and King Ghezo fought the European slave trade. In fact, they promoted it. Historically accurate renderings of Asante or Dahomean greed and enslavement apparently contradict modern-day political imperatives.⁵⁰²

Meanwhile, in another part of his own book, Coates scoffs at this type of tourist set-up when it involves Israel.

"It all felt so fake," says Coates as he coldly reflected on his experience in Israel at the City of David. "I could not escape the feeling of being in the presence of a poorly wrought fairy tale and an enormous con." But Coates offers us no such skepticism of his African sojourn, which is less an active exploratory sojourn than a vigorous mental self-approbation of the sort that is informed not one whit by his actual presence in the shabby Senegalese city of Dakar.

I am reminded of those Western intellectuals who made pilgrimages to the Soviet Union and to Communist China in the 1930s and the 1950s to bear witness to the building of socialism, but who saw and reported only what they wished to see and what they thought they saw.⁵⁰³ They transformed shabbiness into splendor, because that's what ideology demanded. What could an honest account of reality possibly contribute to the midwifing a new world into existence? Why this nettlesome fidelity to fact? Coates will have none of it, and he transforms the squalid environs of Dakar into a kaleidoscope of imagined roots and beautiful

502 James H. Sweet, "Is History History?: Identity Politics and the Teleology of the Present," *Perspectives on History*, Volume 60:6, September 2022: https://www.historians.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Perspectives_60N6.pdf

503 Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

people, culminating in a dramatic walk to the shore's edge where he dips his hand into the water:

I bent down and when I felt the water rush between fingers,
a joy came with the cold of the wave, and I heard the ghosts
singing. I don't know if I've ever experienced a deeper sense of
triumph in my life And looking out on that rocky beach,
I felt the whole of the land speak to me, and it said, *What took
you so long?* What indeed.⁵⁰⁴

In rare candor, Coates acknowledges that all this springs from his imagination, and he chest-thumps over it all: "We have a right to our imagined traditions, to our imagined places, and those traditions and places are most powerful when we confess that they are imagined."⁵⁰⁵ It's not difficult to consider Coates believing that this nonsense is profound in some way, perhaps because, again . . . he made it up.

In the end, it is Coates who provides only one quote worthy of citation, a sentence that captures in one glorious trope his own shortcomings as a writer, as a willfully blind observer, and as an unfaithful truth teller while also communicating the enormity of the DEI project for all of us.

For at least this once, Coates doesn't throw red meat to his paranoid fan-base, but speaks to all human beings who are armed with the critical faculties to know this hustler for who he is: "It all felt so fake I could not escape the feeling of being in the presence of a poorly wrought fairy tale and an enormous con."⁵⁰⁶

504 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Message* (New York: One World, 2024), p. 43-44.

505 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Message* (New York: One World, 2024), p. 57.

506 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Message* (New York: One World, 2024), p. 193.

Conclusion

You have just met the best and the brightest. These are the *crème de la crème* who sit upon the mountaintop of racialism, the idea people, the popularizers of DEI.

DiAngelo, Kendi, Coates, and Oluo constitute a representative slice of the type of opportunistic pseudointellectualism that props up DEI. They are augmented by Derrick Bell, Tema Okun, Derald Wing Sue, and Michael Eric Dyson with their various attempts to provide justification for aggressive prejudice. Their racist works appear in cargo cult journals, and fringe publishers happily publish their books and manuals—Verso, Polity, Seal, Stylus, IAP, Haymarket Books, and such like.

They provide the fool's gold patina for raw racialism.

Many lesser lights attempt to break into the pantheon of the diversity industry. They constitute a choir, and their hymn is always the same—persons like Melissa Harris-Perry, Cheryl Fleming, Layla Saad, Cheryl Matias, Ricki Lee Allen, Zeus Leonardo, Lisa Spanierman.

They provide the depth, such as it is, of this wing of the social justice project. They aren't even the most hateful of the gurus. That dishonor belongs to the likes of Johnny E. Williams of Trinity, George Yancy of Emory, Britney Cooper of Rutgers, and others.

The *dramatis personae* we met in this chapter are damaged people. They are motivated by outsized egos and overblown theory and unparalleled self-righteousness. Their ideas of history are what happens to them, regardless of how mundane or commonplace—everything from Africa Lounges to unremarkable dinners in Dakar to Buffalo Bill to diversity training thought reform to fakery of Space Aliens to fables of Space Traders to simpering obeisance

in every interaction with minority folk to concocting imaginary “microaggressions” for every paranoid occasion. Ideas hinge on non-events, wildly cherry-picked factoids and their slotting into a latticework of racialism.

If nothing else, I wanted to convey the emptiness, the intellectual vapidness, the fraudulence of the entire racist enterprise through the eyes and words of the primary racists who generate the ideas that motivate DEI on campus. With their fevered brows, empty hearts, and fat bank accounts, these are the vacuous persons who exemplify racism and inspire many thousands of others to reject magnanimity of spirit, the evidence of their own senses. And who embrace the bitterness of envy and mysticism.