

INTRODUCTION

A New Beginning

George Lipsitz

In her magnificent poem “We Know This Place,” spoken word artist Sunni Patterson proclaims that “we are a people of beginnings, field hands of freedom.”¹ In that piece, Patterson speaks from and for the people of her Ninth Ward New Orleans neighborhood, but links their desires and dreams to the aspirations of aggrieved communities all around the world. We begin publication of *Kalfou* in that spirit, seeking to connect the particular historical mission of the Center for Black Studies Research at the University of California, Santa Barbara, to the work of social justice-oriented activists, artists, and academics fighting for freedom all over the world. At a moment when the people in power cannot fix the things they have broken, when policies of calculated cruelty enact the organized abandonment of entire populations, the people of the world have to find each other and help each other. We consider *Kalfou* one of the places where strangers may meet and find common ground.

Kalfou is a journal of comparative and relational ethnic studies designed to connect anti-subordination scholarship to the ideas, experiences, archives, and imaginaries of organic intellectuals, activists, and artists from aggrieved communities. Today engaged scholars all across the nation and all around the world are increasingly developing original and generative research questions by blending together campus and community knowledge into a new synthesis. This efflorescence of engaged anti-racist scholarship has no single professional home. It cuts across different disciplines, fields, areas, and institutions. Its work takes place in Ivy League institutions and community colleges, at academic conferences and community gatherings, inside small private study groups, and in the public activities of large mass-membership social movement organizations. *Kalfou* is a forum for the new ways of knowing and new ways of being

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that are emerging from engaged anti-racist scholarship, a place where emerging currents of thought and action can be identified, assessed, interpreted, and analyzed.

Kalfou is a crossroads where emerging currents of intellectual, activist, and artistic work can come together. It is not the house organ of a single professional organization or the focal point for debates in any one discipline. Befitting the name *Kalfou*—the Haitian Kreyòl word for “crossroads”—the journal presents ideas, evidence, and arguments about interdisciplinary, international, intergenerational, and intersectional approaches to engaged anti-racist scholarship and civic work. *Kalfou* is a place where different paths come together, a place where we can see more than one road ahead. The ethic of the crossroads in Haiti and throughout the Afro-diasporic world promotes the embrace of contradiction, the recognition of occluded affinities among seemingly dissimilar people and practices, and the insistence on practical work in the world as a means of generating the ideas, imaginaries, and actions needed to improve our condition. The crossroads is a place where collisions can occur. People can lose their way at the crossroads. But precisely because choices need to be made at the crossroads, it is a site of infinite possibility. *Kalfou* draws on the ethic of the crossroads to construct a creative social site: a place where the experiences and aspirations of diverse social groups encounter each other, a site where educators, artists, and activists learn from each other. The journal does not represent an organization, a political unit, or a sectarian school of thought. It speaks for and from a field of activity guided by an ethic of co-creation and the establishment of new politics and new polities. The metaphor of the crossroads enables us to anticipate conflict and seek creative responses to it. Rather than searching for immediate final solutions to long-standing problems, we seek ways to fashion innovative improvisations capable of moving the struggle to a higher level. Rather than closing down contradictions, we seek to view them as evidence of problems not yet solved. We do not propose to resolve racial divisions through appeals to a disembodied universalism that would make our differences disappear. Nor do we support a parochial particularism that might trap us forever in our current provisional racial and ethnic identities. Instead, in the spirit of Aimé Césaire, we seek to create a universalism that is rich with particulars, that entails the dialogue of all, the autonomy of each, and the supremacy of none.

The articles in each issue of *Kalfou* cohere around a shared set of research objects that address the skewing of opportunities and life chances along racial lines. Yet the ambition of the journal is not simply to “add on” previously ignored evidence about race to existing scholarly paradigms. Principled study of race as a *research object* requires the articulation of new kinds of *research questions*. At its best, comparative and relational ethnic studies scholarship uses studies of individual instances of racial formation as points of entry into broader

questions about sameness and difference, about how difference becomes structured in dominance, and about which differences come to make a difference in any given society or historical era. Thus the study of race can never be only about race. It must engage as well different dimensions of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore aptly describes as the fatal couplings of power and difference that frame the lived experiences of gender, sexuality, class, citizenship status, and ability/disability. Much of the success of ethnic studies scholarship over the past two decades has stemmed from identifying the generative research questions about difference that are always embedded in the study of racialization and racial formation as proximate research objects. Yet we are at a stage now, at a moment when engaged anti-subordination scholars are starting to see that ethnic studies research objects and research questions enable us to do something new, to construct new kinds of *research methods* based on recognition of the ways in which the study of racial power requires us to identify alternative archives, imaginaries, epistemologies, and ontologies.

Thus, *Kalfou* comes into being at a time when enduring and emerging racial hierarchies require us to rethink scholarly practices and procedures. In the academy and the wider world beyond it, research, social movement mobilization, and artistic practice have historically been relegated to separate and seemingly incommensurate spheres, with each area of endeavor marked by particular conventions, conditions of entry, and principles of validation. Yet today, the persistence, power, and pervasiveness of racial stratification compel researchers, organizers, and cultural workers alike to blur these boundaries, to create new connections and conversations. We are starting to recognize that education, artistic expression, and social mobilization all involve the manipulation of socially meaningful signs and symbols, the deployment of affect-laden appeals and challenges, and the construction of new social identities and new social relations. Moreover, the practice of social mobilization inevitably entails intellectual contestation. For example, advocates for environmental justice, fair housing, and augmented funding for AIDS research and opponents of massive prison-building projects, urban redevelopment schemes, and neoliberal economic policies find themselves forced to challenge the consensus of expert knowledge as deployed by credentialed scientists, judges, physicians, criminologists, bankers, urban planners, and economists. Academics have found that in addition to producing social change, social movements have been generators of new knowledge. For scholars and social movement activists alike, it has rarely been enough merely to add on new evidence to existing paradigms. Instead, it has been necessary to expose and challenge the epistemological and ideological underpinnings of contemporary science, law, medicine, urban planning, and business. In the process of struggle, activists develop new ways of knowing, new sources of evidence, new truth tests, new ideas and analyses. They discover non-traditional archives and generate non-traditional evidence,

ideas, and arguments as constitutive parts of mobilizations for resources, rights, and recognition.

As anti-subordination academics, artists, and activists seek alternative archives, imaginaries, epistemologies, and ontologies, they find questions about culture to be central. Inside social movements, cultural change is often a precondition for societal change. People cannot create what they cannot imagine. Expressive culture is often a realm where new social relations can be rehearsed culturally before they can be implemented socially. Inside artistic practice, expressive culture is often more than merely a matter of escape or ornamentation. Art is a repository of collective memory, a site of shared moral instruction, and a means for calling communities into being through performance. Inside academic inquiry, studies of race and other social identities often revolve around examining how culture functions as a social force, around the social relations of knowledge, and around the roles played by subjective, symbolic, and expressive practices in constituting social boundaries. New kinds of artistic practice and critique are emerging from the front lines of social movement struggles. From the young people's story circles organized by Students at the Center in New Orleans to the improvised public performances of Mexican *son jarocho* music by Chicano/a activists in Seattle and Los Angeles in deliberate acts of public convening, from Sharon Bridgforth's brilliant intersectional approaches to gender, sexuality, and race in her Austin Project and Theatrical Jazz Institute to the restoration of abandoned shotgun houses in Houston's Third Ward by Project Row Houses as a form of art-based community making, socially engaged artistic practices envision and enact a world where education, activism, and art are mutually constitutive activities.

The reach and scope of *Kalfou* require the journal to be intersectional in its approach to social identities, international in its understanding of cultural and social processes, intergenerational in its roster of readers, reviewers, and authors, and interdisciplinary in a new sense of the word. Many journals, fields, departments, and curricula that claim to be interdisciplinary are in fact only multidisciplinary. They contain a loose amalgam of uneasily coexisting projects that contain unacknowledged—and often uninterrogated—allegiances to disciplinary knowledge. There is, of course, a logic in working within the disciplines that is often productive. The disciplines that have been formative in shaping Western thought will not soon disappear; there will likely always be important arguments to be won or lost inside the disciplines. Yet anti-subordination scholars, activists, and artists cannot content themselves with disciplinary approaches; they need to find the right tools for the jobs they have to do and they need to understand the often occluded ideological implications of any disciplinary choice. A central part of the work of *Kalfou* entails revealing the ways in which the disciplines both enable and inhibit the understanding of racial projects and racial formations. The

history of the disciplines leads them to promote and protect racial privilege. As Cedric Robinson argues, racial regimes are hostile to their exposure and exhibition. The absence of insightful work about race in the disciplines is not only a structured absence, but a constitutive one. Nearly every discipline traces its origins to Europe's fear-laden fantasies about those populations Europeans designated as "other." From the racially motivated "intelligence" testing that stimulated the growth of psychology as a discipline to the currents of eugenics pervading past (and present) socio-biology, from the anthropological roots of Kant's philosophical inquiries about differences in reasoning capacity among members of different races to the evolutionary interpretation of ethnic difference in the sociologies of Sumner, Ward, and Park—nearly all academic disciplines suffer from the long-term consequences of their exclusionary origins. It was the conquests of empire that gave rise to anthropology's interest in "primitive" civilizations and geography's impetus to map the globe. It was the "discovery" of different kinds of people around the world that promoted interest in biological typologies. Departments of classics, literature, and "oriental" studies emerged initially as tools of imperialism—disciplining ideological threats to the West by positioning civilizations vertically inside hierarchies and judging societies as "exotic" because they differed from the unmarked norm that was the West. It is not just that the disciplines were once useful to racist elites, but rather that the disciplines continue to naturalize social divisions and hierarchies in ways that make them appear necessary and inevitable.

At a moment when many people seem to believe that racism is a thing of the past, its collective, cumulative, and continuing effects are everywhere. It is not just that the old forms of racism have not disappeared, but even worse, new forms of racialized differentiation and exploitation emerge every day. Yet the pervasive power and presence of racism in our lives is often obscured by a shared social language about color blindness, a frame fabricated to defend racial privilege by promoting the idea that it is racist to notice or mention the existence of race. The promise of color blindness has broad appeal, yet it is riddled with contradictions. Color blindness both disavows and deploys the idea of race; it functions more as a rhetorical prophylactic than a social theory or a political practice. The ideology of contemporary capitalist neoliberalism needs to disavow the idea of race, because race references historical social identities not reducible to market relations, identities that contain repositories of collective memory, sources of moral instruction, and archives replete with epistemologies and ontologies inimical to the interests of market capitalism. At the same time, neoliberalism needs race even more than previous stages of capitalism did. By making public spaces and public institutions synonymous with communities of color, neoliberals seek to taint them in the eyes of white working-class and middle-class people, who then become more receptive to privatization schemes that undermine

their own stakes in the shared social communities that neoliberalism attempts to eliminate. Oppositions between public and private, between producer and parasite, between freedom and dependency function as *racialized metaphors*. As Pauline Lipman explains, “The cultural politics of race are central to constructing consent for privatizing public goods, including schools.”² On the ideological level, race serves as a justification of asymmetrical power, as an explanation for why the market does not deliver general prosperity, as excuse for portraying inequality as inevitable. This contradiction of racial deployment and disavowal makes neoliberalism potentially vulnerable to practices and arguments that reveal the collective, cumulative, and continuing presence of racism as a central force in social relations and as a disavowed but powerful presence in politics and scholarship. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, the presumption that our thoroughly raced world is now post-racial leaves us with the impossible task of figuring out how to ask directions to a place we are not allowed to name. Color-bound problems cannot be solved by color-blind solutions; race-bound conditions cannot be cured by race-blind correctives. Moreover, color blindness does not stand up to scrutiny. Even its adherents are not sure exactly whether it is a social theory, a moral imperative, an achievable or desirable goal, a political choice, a cognitive possibility, or merely a rhetorical device that enables neoliberalism to reap benefits from its racist effects while disavowing any racist intent.

While the scholarship in *Kalfou* is race-based, it is not race-bound. We cannot rely on the category of race to serve anti-subordination ends automatically. Deployed uncritically, race can lead us to a narrow race-based essentialism that unwittingly strengthens the racialized categories it seeks to contest. While it is imperative for us to be *always* anti-racist, we can never be *only* anti-racist. Racism’s pernicious power is never exercised in isolation. Racism always exists situationally and intersectionally. It crosscuts other categories and inflects class, gender, sexuality, ability/disability, citizenship status, language, religion, and region. There is racism everywhere, but there is never exactly the same racism in any two places. There is no general abstract once-and-for-all racism, but rather many different kinds of racism that emerge in specific places at specific times. Racism can corrupt everyone, leaving no one innocent. Members of aggrieved racial groups can learn to profit from racist hierarchies within their own ranks and to deploy racial antagonisms against other groups. Seemingly emancipatory struggles for racial justice can unwittingly strengthen other forms of subordination when they are dominated by the most privileged members of the aggrieved group. The noble cause of anti-racism can be used to advance ignoble efforts to secure the unfair gains and unearned rewards offered by sexism, homophobia, and national chauvinism. Struggles for equal treatment *within* nations that administer empires overseas can amount to little more than seeking an equal right to do wrong. The proclamation of anti-subordination principles does not necessarily lead to actual anti-subordination practice.

There are many ways to go wrong even while trying to do right. *Kalfou* is designed to address these profound challenges by calling to the crossroads a unique combination of academics, artists, and activists to share and savor both the things that unite us and the things that divide us. Just as we traverse the boundaries that relegate education, art, and organizing to separate discursive spaces and physical places, we also seek to move across the boundaries that divide people into distinct racial and social groups by promoting pan-ethnic conversations and mobilizations. Of course, each social group has a unique history and mission. Before a group can ally with others it has to take stock of its own realities. As part of the work of the Center for Black Studies Research at the University of California, Santa Barbara, *Kalfou* proceeds from the assumption that there are circumstances when groups should come together but also circumstances when they should stay apart. Our Center was established as the result of a struggle waged by community and campus militants in 1968 who recognized that creating a unit devoted to Black studies was the only way the academy could be made to recognize and reckon with the epistemological and ontological challenges to white supremacy that had long been lodged in Black communities around the world. For more than four decades, the Center's work has remained true to that mission. Yet while we are *always* Black, we are never *only* Black. The intellectual, moral, aesthetic, political, and spiritual legacy of the radical Black tradition is not the parochial and private possession of Black people, but rather a repository of ideas and actions important to all people. The freedom dreams of Black people have never been only about Blackness, but rather have sought always to create a world transcending citizenship that would eclipse sectarian identifications and allegiances. From Anna Julia Cooper's insistence that the cause of Black women should be every unredressed wrong that needs a voice to Martin Luther King's insistence that an injustice anywhere is an injustice everywhere, Afro-diasporic education, art, and organizing have connected the emancipation of Black people to commitments to justice for all people.

We live at a time when there is difficult and daunting work to be done. The conditions under which we do that work are fraught with peril. Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Mexico compares our challenge to the one that confronted the sixteenth-century artist Michelangelo in creating his statue of David. Without access to perfect materials, Michelangelo worked with the secondhand piece of marble available to him, a piece of stone punctured with holes. Yet the artist incorporated these limitations into his piece, creating a work of beauty from a discarded piece of hollowed-out stone. Marcos contends that we face a challenge similar to the one that confronted Michelangelo. "The world we want to transform," he tells us, "has already been worked on by history and is largely hollow. We must nevertheless be inventive enough to change it and build a new world."³

NOTES

1. As recited on November 5, 2009, at the American Studies Association annual meeting as recorded in the DVD of the event made by the Center for Black Studies Research at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and filed in the Center's archives under the title "Poetic Visions."

2. Pauline Lipman, *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 112.

3. Subcomandante Marcos, "Ideas Are Also Weapons," *Toward Freedom*, November 2000, 8.