DERRICK BELL’S “AFROLANTICA” AND GENTRIFICATION IN HARLEM

TWILA L. PERRY*

My reflection on the work of Professor Derrick Bell focuses on the word “Afrolantica” from the short story, “The Afrolantica Awakening,” in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. In “The Afrolantica Awakening,” an island suddenly and mysteriously rises in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of South Carolina. The island is beautiful and possesses great mineral wealth. Strangely, only those who are African American can survive in this new place—those of other races suffer life-threatening breathing difficulties that force them, almost immediately, to leave the island. Debates soon ensue among African Americans and among whites in America as to whether African Americans should emigrate en masse to the new island, called Afrolantica.

Bell uses the story of Afrolantica to review the history of recurring debates among African Americans from the 1600’s all the way to the present on the subject of emigration. Because of the persistent racism they have faced in America through the centuries, what Bell has often called “the permanence of racism,”2 the theme of some African Americans yearning for a place apart where they might feel truly free has been an enduring one. Bell also uses the story as a vehicle to review the debates that took place among whites, especially after slavery, about proposed colonization projects that would send the formerly enslaved Blacks to Africa or to other locations outside of the United States. The theme in “The Afrolantica Awakening” of African Americans physically leaving America is one Bell clearly found intriguing. It is also the theme of the last story in the collection, probably Bell’s most well-known story, “The Space Traders,” in which white Americans agree to turn over the entire African American population of the United States to space aliens to be taken away forever in exchange for material riches. Although in “The Afrolantica Awakening” the departure of the African Americans from America is voluntary and in “The Space Traders” it is not, both stories suggest that Bell viewed the relationship between the races in America with a substantial degree of disappointment, frustration, and pessimism.

At the end of “The Afrolantica Awakening,” as the first ships of African American emigrants approach the new island, full of anticipation, hopes and dreams, the island slips back beneath the ocean as suddenly as it had emerged. As they watch Afrolantica disappear, the people in the ships are at first shocked and terrified, but then begin to feel what Bell describes as “an Afrolantica awakening, a liberation not of place, but of mind.”3 In “The Afrolantica Awakening,” Bell does not fully elaborate on the meaning of “a liberation not of place, but of mind.” However, in a later book, *Afrolantica Legacies*,4 he takes the story of the would-be emigrants a step further. Upon their return to America, the group proposes and adopts a series of principles that they term the “Afrolantica Legacies.” They believe that these principles will help other Blacks in America transform their thinking in ways that will enable them to survive and, indeed, thrive in America.5

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1 Derrick A. Bell, Jr., *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1993).
2 Id.
3 Id. at 46.
4 Derrick A. Bell, Jr., *Afrolantica Legacies* (1997).
5 The focus of this essay is on Bell’s short story “The Afrolantica Awakening.” In *Afrolantica Legacies*, the later book, Afrolantica again emerges from the sea, reigniting the emigration debate as some of the earlier emigrants decide once again to leave America for the island.
While I do not count myself among those who have been attracted to emigration as a solution to
the enduring problem of racism in America, Bell’s “Afrolantica” strongly resonates with me, both as an
individual and as a scholar. The story inspired me to connect my own reactions to changes taking place
in the historically Black community of Harlem with the emergence and disappearance of Bell’s
Afrolantica. In 1988, more than a decade before the start of the recent tide of gentrification in
Harlem and other inner-city neighborhoods, I moved to Harlem, a place long considered by many to be
the capital of Black America. I moved to Harlem for a number of reasons: I had grown up in the
neighborhood and had always retained fond memories of it, I was attracted to the space and historical
detail that could be found in housing in Harlem, and my familiarity with the neighborhood gave me
confidence that I could navigate around some of the more serious problems confronting the community
during the 1980’s. In the course of my search, I happened upon the building in which I still reside—a
housing cooperative that had been established by African Americans in 1929. This cooperative was
completely autonomous; it had been established totally independent of any form of governmental
assistance or subsidy and with no connection to the labor unions that had organized and built a number
of housing cooperatives in New York City in the 1920’s. I was entranced by the cooperative’s history of
success, and this remarkable place became my home, and, in a way, my very own Afrolantica.

In Bell’s story, Afrolantica sinks back into the ocean—it completely disappears. While there is no
prospect that Harlem will cease to exist as a physical entity, the community is undergoing profound
demographic changes that may very well end its status as the place long considered by many African
Americans to be the cultural and historical center of Black America. The Harlem many African
Americans have lived in, visited or imagined even if they have never set foot in it, may soon no longer
exist. Similarly, the cooperative that I live in is undergoing demographic changes that may very well end
its status as an institution that had been proudly owned and managed by African Americans since before
the Great Depression.

The debate among African Americans today is not so much about the desirability of a separate
nation or en masse emigration of Black people from the United States as it is a debate about whether
predominately African American institutions or communities should continue to exist. Thus, there are
different views among African Americans as to whether the recent changes in Harlem represent a net
positive or a net negative for Black people. And in the cooperative where I live, there are a variety of
reactions to the possibility that the cooperative may lose its identity as a successful African American
institution.

At the end of “The Afrolantica Awakening,” as they watch Afrolantica sink back into the ocean,
the would-be emigrants discover that they already possess the qualities of liberation they had hoped to
gain in the new land. This ending may resonate with some as a lesson that if you are willing to take a step
that you believe is in furtherance of your freedom, you may discover that you were already more free
than you realized. In this interpretation of the story, the would-be emigrants may be better off than they
were before the trip, even though they never got to Afrolantica. Indeed, the loss of Afrolantica may in
the end have propelled them forward in their quest for freedom and equality, especially if the principles
embodied in the “Afrolantica Legacies” prove to be a beneficial guide for them and for other African
Americans.

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6 There is empirical information which indicates that African-Americans are already no longer the majority in
Harlem. See Sam Roberts, No Longer Majority Black: Harlem is in Transition, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 6, 2010, at A16. It has also
been argued, however, that African Americans in Harlem have been substantially undercounted in the census and in
other studies. See, e.g., id. (“Some experts say the decline in the black population may be overstated because poorer
people are typically undercounted by the census, and Harlem has a disproportionate number of poor people.”). Still,
there seems to be general agreement that the African-American population of Harlem is in decline. See also ALLON
SCHOENER, HARLEM ON MY MIND: CULTURAL CAPITAL OF BLACK AMERICA (1968).
Does it matter whether or not Harlem continues to exist as a neighborhood of political, economic and social importance for African Americans? Some people believe that the dismantling of historic Black neighborhoods represents a step toward less racial segregation and greater racial equality. If there are no more “Black” neighborhoods such as Harlem, will African Americans experience a “liberation not of place, but of mind” that increases their sense of freedom and that might inspire other kinds of thinking about new strategies for the pursuit of racial equality? Or will African Americans find that they have simply lost something that they once had, while gaining little or nothing in return?

There are many who hail the “new Harlem”: a place of increasing racial diversity, upscale restaurants, and expensive cooperatives and condominiums. There is no question that there have been changes in the neighborhood. And in many ways, Harlem is a more attractive place to live than in the 1970’s and the 1980’s when it was overwhelmingly Black and poor. However, it seems clear to me that the new housing and amenities that are transforming Harlem into a trendy location were put there for the newcomers to the neighborhood and are out of the reach of many of the African Americans who have historically lived there. Many of these people are slowly being displaced. Thus, the “integration” of Harlem seems to be coming at a heavy price for African Americans, and if large numbers of Blacks are ultimately forced from the neighborhood, this will not be a demonstration of the triumph of integration. It may, instead, be a sad illustration of Bell’s theme of the permanence of racism.

It could be argued that African Americans have no “special claim” to Harlem. It is certainly true that other ethnic groups including Native Americans, Jews, Italians and Irish have inhabited the neighborhood in the past. Blacks from the Caribbean have been a presence in Harlem from its earliest days as a Black community and immigrants from Africa have been a growing presence. Hispanics, largely from Puerto Rico, have long been the driving force in what was known as Spanish Harlem, and for some time now, there has been a growing population of people from a number of different Spanish-speaking countries.

The fact is that African Americans do not have and have never had the power to exclude anyone from Harlem even if they had ever wanted to do so. However, it is not irrelevant that they were forced into Harlem at the beginning of the twentieth century as a result of the racial discrimination and hostility they faced in other neighborhoods. In the face of this segregation about which they had no choice, African Americans turned Harlem into a vibrant place of culture, business and politics.

In the end, I do not believe it is necessary to rely on assertions of “special claims” to argue that there is injustice in forcing people out of an area they have long occupied for the sole reason that others, who have economic advantages often denied racial minorities, now desire to live there. The question is not whether Harlem should be an “Afrolantica,” a place apart, where only Black people can live. Harlem, like any other neighborhood, has to be an open place where anyone can choose to live. The concern is that, as housing in the neighborhood becomes increasingly expensive, there will be many people, who, because of America’s racial wealth and income gaps, will not have the choice to live there. Those likely

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8 Anderson, supra note 7, at 299–304.

9 Roberts, supra note 6.

10 Id.


12 See generally Melvin L. Oliver & Thomas M. Shapiro, Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality (1997).
to be excluded will include not only African Americans, but also many Hispanics and African immigrants who came to Harlem before the price of housing skyrocketed.

The question can be asked as to whether there is a role for the law in ensuring that Harlem does not become a neighborhood that is ultimately segregated again—as a virtually all-white area because African Americans and other minorities simply cannot afford to live there.\(^\text{13}\) So far, it seems unlikely that the law will function as an effective tool to support a substantial continuing presence of African Americans in Harlem.

The role of the law in determining access to housing for African Americans has varied through the years. At times, legislation such as the Fair Housing Act has supported the access of African Americans to decent housing.\(^\text{14}\) At other times, the law has been a central part of the apparatus that has limited or denied Blacks housing opportunities. Examples of this include the federal government’s role in the creation of policies such as redlining and the locating of public housing in already segregated neighborhoods like Harlem during the urban renewal initiatives of the 1960’s.\(^\text{15}\)

What does seem clear is that in the context of gentrification, the anti-discrimination principle designed to increase housing opportunities for African Americans operates as a principle of race neutrality. Race neutrality combined with the lack of an adequate government commitment to affordable housing will inevitably result in the displacement of African Americans not only from well-known Black communities such as Harlem, but also from the centers of cities all across this nation. Fair housing laws and principles of race neutrality in housing do not address the reality of America’s racial wealth and income gap, and this gap has been devastating for the housing prospects of many African Americans.

The only way to ensure a continued African American presence in Harlem is for African Americans to be able to compete economically for housing. This will require, in the end, massive, long-term measures to improve the economic standing of African Americans as a group. More must also be done in the short term to insure a chance for access to the housing that already exists or is currently being constructed. This means requiring that a substantial number of units in all new housing be set aside as affordable to long-term residents of the community. This has been done to some extent, but not nearly on the scale necessary to insure that Harlem does not become a community in which African Americans are a rarity, or are not present at all.

If Harlem disappears as an African American community, or if the cooperative that I live in is transformed from an African American cooperative into a white cooperative, there will be costs to African Americans that many people may be uncomfortable acknowledging. The reality is that the loss of place can mean the loss of leadership opportunities, the loss of leadership development opportunities, and the loss of political power. It can also mean the loss of businesses opportunities and a diminishing of the kind of cultural cohesiveness that helped to make Harlem a significant place in the first instance. The consequences of loss of place should not be minimized even if it turns out that the loss of “Black” neighborhoods inspires a new experience of racial consciousness that leads African Americans to analyze their continuing plight in creative new ways.

\(^\text{13}\) Perhaps the only remaining option in Harlem for African Americans and other racial minorities will be public housing. There is a possibility that Harlem could become a community in which whites live in the desirable brownstones, cooperatives and condominiums and African Americans and other minorities are, in effect, segregated within Harlem in low-income public housing. There is also the possibility that public housing in Harlem will eventually be demolished, eliminating even that limited presence of minority residents.


The combination of the story of the mythical lost continent of Atlantis with the recurrent theme of emigration among African Americans was a wonderful stroke of creativity. Derrick Bell’s concept of “Afrolantica” continues the debate about what African Americans need and may not need in order to be and to feel truly free. “The Afrolantica Awakening” can inspire many important conversations about the advantages and costs of integration, the significance of Black institutions and neighborhoods, the need for increased economic power and other critical issues in the quest of African Americans for equality and justice.