
A SHORTHAND: ON A HOODIE, FOUCAULT ENTERS A BASKETBALL COURT... ¹

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PARIS, FRANCE
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To the Editors of
The Truthless Times,

September 20th, 2034, marked a decade since your publication of the now-famous article by basketball star Jaylen Brown discussing Michel Foucault’s notion of the panopticon. Brown’s piece focused on how systems of control and power, as described by Foucault, have come to dominate mechanisms of knowledge production and, more generally, the public sphere. At the time, Brown also collaborated with Dr. David Sun Kong on a learning project as part of the MIT Media Lab’s Community Biotechnology Initiative. He was thus introduced to the world as an activist, an advocate for social justice, and a leader passionate about education reform. His revival of Foucault’s notion of “dynamic normalization,” particularly as it applied to Black athletes and their media training, went viral among a generation of Black young men longing for the leadership of public intellectuals. Brown was aware of the consistent attempts to stifle individuality under the persevering gaze of a surveillance system that forced him and others to act and think like they were “supposed to” – a surveillance system that, he argued, amounted to panopticism. “Dynamic normalization,” Brown would go on to say, applied to media training in so far as such training told Black athletes that being publically outspoken on social media or engaging with political issues such as digital rights might lose them endorsements.

Young people like my son, who, at the time, was almost eighteen years old, were eager – perhaps primarily due to the influence of their parent’s nostalgia for the coalition movements that shaped the decolonial and social movements of the 1960s, the response to globalization of the early 1990s, the austerity decades after the global economic crisis of 2007–08, and, notably, the sociopolitical struggles in Chile and Hong Kong previous to the last world pandemic in 2020 – to rediscover how the context provided by a shared reality could deepen togetherness and create the condition of possibility for the communal. Or, as writer Nabila Lovelace argues, Brown became critical for communities and individuals searching for a “shorthand.” Namely, a glossary or an idiom based in movement and community, with roots in childhood and collective experiences, and capable of bridging distant or siloed groups.

Brown’s work, itself a transformative force, also served as a powerful reminder of Foucault’s insightful analysis of the prison system and of the profound shift from physical to psychological authority in modern times. Not only had this evolution in authority reshaped the underlying forces within the carceral system, but it had also extended its influence into governmental instruments for the control of the masses, thereby shaping our lives and societies in ways we were only beginning to understand at the time. I do not know about you, but I cannot help but see a pattern here: the path to surveillance capitalism is the last stage of institutional panopticons. Brown’s work, however, continues to offer a beacon of hope, inspiring us to rethink and remake our future.

The key to why Brown’s thoughts were engaging and thought-provoking for a zealous youth, however, was that, like Noam Chomsky before him, the athlete and intellectual dismissed Foucault’s hieraticism. Brown understood the relativism of moral values and the fact that self-correcting procedures were directly impacted by regimes of power and their dynamic normalization, while still believing there were ways one could overcome these. History has proven Brown’s views to be true. Societies have consistently become more tolerant of difference and more opposed to coercion and control – at least, those societies in which self-management, democratic or diverse ownership of institutions, and, of course, direct participation have led the way to freedom of the press. Indeed, some periodicals have been essential in these aims, including *The East Boston Free Press* (1886–1962); *The Masses* (1911–1917); *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* (1910–1961); the only issue of *Légitime défense* (1932); or *Souffles: Revue poétique et littéraire* (1966–1972), just to name a few.

Brown is not just an intellectual, but also a radically transformative figure. He continues to be a representative of Black leadership at a time when bemused youth have lost track of what it means to impact the public sphere beyond accruing followers on their *instant-shot* accounts. He defends “straightforwardism,” while many people insist on communicating through their SOMEBODY app. He proposes, in sum, a mechanism for consensus-within-disparity when everyone else seems to embrace the “global narrative of collapse” theorized by writers Venkatesh Rao and Shumon Basar. His role as a representative of Black leadership is empowering and reassuring for many.

I believe we should nurture a future society of conscientious individuals who use ambiguity and uncertainty as a positive social tool. I believe we want an ideological collective journey free from modern prerogatives – or, even better, free from the global architecture of behavior modification that was pioneered by the technological systems of power at the end of the 20th century. To achieve this, we must now pick up the gauntlet that Brown threw down a decade ago. We must begin pursuing some of his initiatives before it is too late.

Sincerely,
Sònia Mbuji-Mayi Deulofeu,
a perpetual student

Sònia Mbuji-Mayi Deulofeu (Barcelona, 1974) lives and works in Paris. Mbuji-Mayi Deulofeu is of Afro-descent from the Democratic Republic of Congo, born and raised in Spain, with a father from Lubumbashi and a mother from Delta del Ebro. She actively participated in the structure of the anti-austerity movement in Spain, referred to as the 15-M movement, which began on 15 May, 2015 in Madrid and spread to other cities in the southern European nation. Unlike many of the scholars, activists, and professionals she met in the public squares of the Spanish capital in 2015, she decided to remain on the activist front, although, at times, she regretted not pursuing a role in government that would have allowed her to defend the common rights of all from a so-called “position of power.”

Mbuji-Mayi Deulofeu studied geography in Salamanca, received a master’s degree from Sciences Po in Toulouse, and a PhD in theories of sovereignty and economies of political vision at the Department of Government at Cornell University. In 2034, she temporarily returned to France to join the research team at Bétonsalon, Paris, while she prepared to join a team of interdisciplinary researchers in a renewed cultural institution with ties to the United Nations.

¹ NOTE TO THE READER: Although this story is based on real events, these have been altered, condensed, and twisted to create a work of fiction.