

# **DILEMMAS OF BLACK INTELLECTUALS**

**What Role Should 'We Play?**

**T**he status of the Afro-American intellectual community has changed drastically during the last twenty years. As a result of the civil rights movement and the urban uprisings of the 1960s, predominantly white universities began to open their doors to black scholars. The hiring of black scholars occurred together with a substantial increase in the numbers of black students admitted into predominantly white colleges and universities. While not overstating the number, we must recognize that this crack in the door brought a new range of occupational options for the black academic elite.

The generation of black intellectuals who came of age during the 1930s (such as sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, political scientist Merze Tate, and education analyst Doxey Wilkerson) recognized that employment at white colleges was impossible for them. This restricted access to American academia did not stifle their intellectual ambitions, though it did, in some cases, hinder their intellectual productivity. The absurdity of the racist restrictions they had to face is highlighted in the fact that Frazier was granted his discipline's highest honor in 1948, the presidency of the American Sociological Association. Yet Frazier was never offered a position in a major, predominantly white university. The generation of black scholars immediately after Frazier's can be considered a "transitional" one. They began their careers while academic compartmentalization was strictly racist, only to have the doors of white academia open to them later on. Such figures include historian John Hope Franklin,

psychologist Kenneth Clark, political scientist John Aubrey Davis, and anthropologist St. Clair Drake.

Black scholars who entered graduate school during the late 1960s formed the first generation of black academics that saw employment in predominantly white universities as a viable option. Subsequent generations of black graduate students, particularly the products of elite white colleges, may not have even entertained the thought of teaching at a predominantly black college.

The impact of this recent influx to predominantly white universities has been devastating to the predominantly black college. Not only do black colleges no longer attract the elite of the black scholarly community, they don't usually attract the black student elite. This flight from predominantly black colleges does not generally stem from a simple desire to be with whites, though black academics and students can be attracted by the status that comes from being associated with the prestige of these predominantly white institutions. Of course, we cannot overlook the direct linkage between prestige and "whiteness." Nevertheless, the most important reason behind the choices of black academics is the better facilities at many predominantly white institutions and the greater access to research funding these provide. When this "brain drain" is coupled with the tenuous financial status of most black colleges (except, perhaps, for a few private colleges such as Spellman and Hampton Institute and some of those receiving

state funding) the crisis these colleges face is abundantly clear. Some of the black state-funded colleges, typically located in the South, are also under assault from legislatures precisely because they serve a black student body.

Exploiting the logic of racial integration, southern state legislatures are calling for the desegregation of black state colleges. This argument is particularly pernicious because in many of these states the white state-funded universities have substantially integrated only their athletic teams.

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### The New Role of Black Colleges

The decline of predominantly black colleges will have a devastating impact on the black community precisely because these colleges still produce the majority of college-educated blacks. Moreover, these institutions tend to attract a disproportionate number of ambitious but ill-educated black high school graduates. The quality of the education provided is often not actually of university caliber. Some of these colleges have attempted to deal with this situation by becoming, in effect, technocratic training schools. In many instances, students are specifically trained to assume administrative jobs at specific large corporations. Not only do some large corporations help to fund the costs of attending college; they provide the students with summer internships and guarantee them employment upon graduation. While such an education violates the traditional humanistic concerns of the liberal arts, it serves poor black students seeking upward mobility. We can empathize with and support the desire of these students for upward mobility, but we can only be frightened by how this corporate logic has penetrated our state educational institutions.

Due to the greater access of black graduates of white colleges to professional schools and upper-middle-class jobs, we have begun to see a schism within the black middle classes. This schism is linked to the racial identity of the institutions from which they were graduated. Black colleges have traditionally trained a disproportionate number of black school teachers, ministers, social workers, and middle-range civil servants. They will probably

continue to do so in the near future. By graduating ill-educated persons—persons who will ultimately serve local black communities—black colleges may unwittingly help to reproduce a “quality-lag” in black America. I make this statement with a great deal of fear at being misunderstood.

Contemporary graduates of black colleges seem to perform quite well throughout the American job structure. Because many of the jobs that require a college degree do not really require a college-level education, we must always be mindful of the ways in which higher education serves to rationalize economic hierarchy. One need never have read the *Iliad* to function competently as a manager at Macy's.

**T**he problem of a “quality lag” centers around an elite sector of black Americans who have not been encouraged to think critically about themselves and American society at large. The result is that a large black sector of college graduates appears to be too technocratic in outlook to provide the creative leadership that black American communities desperately need.

There are ways to alleviate this “negative” aspect of a black college education but, ultimately, it will take a quantity of funding that state and federal governments have not yet been willing to commit. Besides the obvious need for bettering the public schooling offered to blacks in the precollege years, state funding could help some black colleges to establish “experimental” five- or six-year B.A. programs. Such programs might provide the time necessary to bridge gaps in the education of poor black students.

Such qualitative problems facing black colleges are not openly discussed within black intellectual circles or the black middle class at large. While black educators and administrators recognize the need for increased financial support of black colleges (for instance, the United Negro College Fund and the Lou Rawls telethon) they often make the dubious claim that black colleges perform an “educational miracle” by taking ill-educated high school students and turning them into first-rate college graduates in four years. Until the black educated class overcomes its shame over the

state of affairs of many (not all) black colleges and recognizes this to be part of the overall problem of being black in a racially inequalitarian society, the crisis will persist.

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### Marginalization of Black Students

Although the plight of students in black colleges can lead one to despair at America's willingness to sacrifice a segment of our population, the plight of black students at white colleges is problematic for different reasons. Black students can be found throughout predominantly white universities, but the numbers remain relatively small. At Wesleyan University, where I teach, sizable numbers of black students have graduated regularly since the early 1970s. Though Wesleyan has a better record of admitting and graduating black students than most elite colleges, a relatively stable number of black students have also been graduating from the Harvards, Yales, and large state universities during the same period. But we should not overstate the black student presence on these campuses. The numbers have declined in recent years as the federal government's enthusiasm for affirmative action programs has declined. Nor do numbers tell the complete story. At the University of California, Davis, where I taught during the early 1980s, sizable numbers of black students would be admitted each year but few would ever graduate. The dropout rate was phenomenal, but it was not reflected in the overall enrollment numbers as the admissions office would annually recruit a new crop of first-year black students.

Meanwhile, questions related to the qualitative status of black students continue to require attention. For example, blatantly racist assaults on black students increased drastically during the Reagan era. One needs only to read the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to see how widespread this phenomenon is. A still more insidious problem—rarely discussed publicly—centers around the willingness of too many white faculty members to abdicate intellectual responsibilities when confronting black students. Even at a so-called liberal institution like Wesleyan, it is rare to witness a black student being “taken under the wing” by a white faculty

member. Although there is a popular notion that black students on white campuses often obtain a version of the “gentleman's C,” it appears equally true, if not more probable, that the best of the black students in these environments are not given the same intellectual support that the best of the white students are granted. (When we recognize the general tendency in many universities to devalue teaching we must also conclude that even the best white students are often shortchanged.)

One outcome of the marginalization of black students within university life is that many talented black students graduate with little understanding of their authentic talents and possibilities. White colleges have failed to encourage black students intellectually. Many white faculty members have low expectations of their black students, given the stigma attached to affirmative-action admissions. And even the best elite colleges do admit some black students who are incapable of functioning intellectually at the institutions' normal level. The presence of such students only helps to legitimate the indifference of those in the faculty unconcerned about the education of black students. And then, black and white faculty committed to engaging black students intellectually are sometimes overwhelmed by the immensity of their task.

The problem of the qualitative status of black students in the intellectual life of white universities is intensified by the nonintellectual subculture in which most black students are raised. While I would say that most Wesleyan students are more interested in grades than in engaging ideas, I also know that one will find a disproportionately small number of black students among those who are intellectually inclined.

Education in black America has historically been premised on a utilitarian ethos, centered around the quest for economic security and upward mobility. Given the history of black Americans, this is quite understandable. Yet it hinders the development of a black intellectual community. Despite the fact that black students often justly complain about the small number of black faculty on campuses like Wesleyan, few think about forgoing the monetary rewards of a professional education in order to pursue a

graduate education. This problem is getting worse despite the funding now available to black students seeking a graduate degree. Again, however, we must recognize that the small number of black academics does not explain why colleges like Wesleyan or, even, Harvard have so few black faculty members. These institutions can hardly claim they are restricted in the search for black faculty—given their ability to raid other universities should they so desire.

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### Parochial Black Intelligentsia

While the declining number of black students pursuing graduate school education bodes ill for the future of the black community, an equally ominous outlook is due to the parsimonious support of black intellectual activity by wealthy blacks. Though there have been several recent multimillion dollar gifts to black colleges by wealthy entertainers, rich blacks generally ignore the need for a black intellectual infrastructure.

At present we have no major black-funded think-tanks in the United States. Except for the narrowly focused *Black Scholar*, there exists no major black-funded and edited intellectual journal directed to a general learned black audience. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, John H. Johnson of *Ebony* funded such a journal, *Black World*. When he suspended publication, no black capitalists stepped forward to keep it alive. If *Black World* was often parochial, it was nonetheless an essential organ for young black intellectuals who came of age during the 1970s. Despite my strong disagreements with the nationalist ideology espoused by its editor, Hoyt Fuller, *Black World* provided a center of debate around which an entire generation of young black intellectuals coalesced.

**I**n December 1988 I attended the conference on Jewish intellectual/religious progressivism sponsored by *Tikkun*. Though I was one of the very few blacks, I was elated to be there not only because of the political optimism surrounding the conference but because of the quality of its dialogue. Throughout, I carried on a silent

dialogue with myself centering around moments of depression I felt at the thought that such a conference could not, at present, take place in the black community. It is not that the quality of thought displayed at the *Tikkun* conference could not have been reproduced at a black intellectual gathering. Instead, I was depressed at the realization that within the black community there was no generally recognized understanding of the *value* of such conferences. Blacks do sponsor academic conferences but we do not hold intellectual conferences that are directed to an interested, non-academic black audience.

Nor is there much reason to believe that such conferences would attract a sizable number of blacks from the nonacademic world. I have been to black conferences that included middle-class professionals—often organized by a civil rights group—but even these conferences rarely transcend a crass utilitarianism at best or cathartic ethnic cheerleading at worst. In the former instance, conferences are held to discuss ways to “solve,” for instance, the poverty problem in black America. Such conferences assume that the only valid role of the black intellectual is as “problem solver.” By definition such conferences exclude and by default invalidate the presence of black intellectuals working outside the arena of public policy analysis. On the other hand, one can easily mistake ethnic celebratory gatherings for social events, given their emphasis on fashion shows and high profile cabarets. It was precisely this latter phenomenon that Frazier so bitterly attacked in his *Black Bourgeoisie*.

It has long been baffling to me that an institution with the resources of Howard University in Washington D.C. has not taken an intellectual leadership role in developing a serious black intellectual infrastructure. The black community in the nation’s capital should be the most studied black community in the world. It could be a “laboratory” much as Chicago was for Robert Park and his colleagues from the 1920s through the 1940s (and New Haven for Robert Dahl and his Yale colleagues during the 1960s). Yet, it isn’t.

Much of the reason for Howard’s weak research profile vis-à-vis the black community in Washington lies with the mediocre, anti-

intellectual, autocratic leadership of its president, James Cheek. Yet, the responsibility for Howard's intellectual malaise ultimately lies with a university community that has tolerated a Cheek and with the United States Congress that oversees the only American university with its own line item in the federal budget. Howard is mentioned here only to show that the problems of a serious black intellectual community are not simply the result of an absence of resources. Even in those few instances where resources have been relatively plentiful, the black intellectual community has suffered from weak institutional leadership.

Finally, the contemporary weakness of the black intellectual infrastructure is particularly troubling given the fact that there have been moments in black history when black intellectual discourse did flourish. I am thinking now of Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s, when three major black intellectual organs were being published simultaneously. (The NAACP's *Crisis* edited by W.E.B. DuBois, the Urban League's *Opportunity*, edited by Charles Johnson, and the socialist *Messenger*, edited by Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph.) While the number of black intellectual, literary, and scholarly journals now being published probably exceeds the number published previously, it seems that the intended black audiences have become too specialized to sustain public intellectual discourse.

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### Impact of Parochial White Intellectuals

The reasons for the decline of black intellectual discourse directed to a generally sophisticated black audience are too numerous to discuss in a short essay. In many ways they are similar to those behind the decline in white male intellectual discourse chronicled by Russell Jacoby in *The Last Intellectuals*. Except for well-known black fiction writers, the black intellectual community has become disproportionately settled in the academy. With this comes a black intellectual community increasingly governed by the needs and mores of academic job mobility. Such intellectuals recognize that their economic existence depends less on an ability to generate critical dialogue in the black community than on their

acceptance by white and black academic peers. Black public intellectual discourse suffers from the absence of an intellectually engaged journalistic community.

Those black intellectuals and academics who desire to write for a general intellectual audience have tended not to publish in black intellectual journals directed at a general audience. The access that black intellectuals have to general intellectual organs edited by whites has drastically increased during the past three decades. This turn to predominantly white journals is quite understandable given their larger circulations and greater prestige. Perhaps the earlier generations of black intellectuals who wrote for journals directed to a black audience did so as much because of ethnic intellectual engagement as because they were excluded from more prestigious white-edited journals. Even today, many of the latter tend to exclude or limit black contributors. The *New York Review of Books* has a pathetic record in this regard, except for one in-house writer who functions as a sort of black reviewer at-large. The *Nation*, which markets itself as a progressive journal, has not a single black staff writer or regular contributor. The absence of a black intellectual presence can also be seen in the pages of *Raritan*, the *Partisan Review*, *Salmagundi*, *Grand Street*, *Dissent*, and numerous other journals.

It really should not matter who edits the journal in which one publishes. Yet, those relatively few white-edited intellectual journals that are committed to regularly including black contributors tend to channel their black writers into a racial corner. That is, black writers are published provided they comment on issues related to blacks. White contributors can comment on all subjects, including those related to blacks. The steering of black writers into "black subjects" mirrors the compartmentalization of black academics in marginalized black studies programs. The devaluation of black scholars occurs simultaneously with the devaluation of "black subjects."

Far too many black intellectuals willingly support the limited opportunities afforded them by remaining within these racially constricted sectors. They have tended to view racial parochialism within the intellectual community

as an aid to their efforts to cordon off a racially restricted job market. Black intellectuals with a more cosmopolitan self-definition, including some who write primarily about "black subjects," have had to walk an intellectual tightrope between the racial parochialisms of the black and white American intellectual communities.

My criticism of the racial parochialism of the American intellectual community does not imply that white-edited intellectual organs should publish any and every black writer who submits a manuscript. It is simply to point out that they should at least perceive the absence of black contributors as a matter worthy of concern. I realize that few general intellectual journals directed toward a broad learned American public can afford to commit the space and resources needed to intricately confront the myriad of issues facing black Americans. *Tikkun*, *Commentary*, *Midstream*, and *Present Tense* play a role in the American Jewish community that cannot be expected of the *Atlantic*, *American Scholar*, *Partisan Review*, or the *Public Interest*.

So the absence of a black version of *Commentary* or *Present Tense* means that black intellectuals who desire to reach a broader black public around issues of little concern to a white audience have no specific place in which to do so. The distance of the public-minded black intellectual from the larger black community is further heightened by the sheer demographics of black America. When we take into account the large number of blacks who are functionally illiterate, and add to this the sizable number with limited leisure time, the size of the potential black reading audience is severely reduced. If this is coupled with the anti-intellectual, consumerist ethic of substantial numbers of the black middle class, it is clear that the black public-minded intellectual has to devise alternative strategies for engaging in dialogue within the black community.

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### What Is To Be Done?

In response to the peculiar social status of black intellectuals, some black intellectuals, such as Cornel West, have followed the model of Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in attempt-

ing to use the black church as an intellectual setting. As a seminary professor at Union Theological Seminary, West was not only able to influence future black ministers but he frequently preached at black churches. Now that he is teaching philosophy at Princeton University, West's influence over the black ministry will undoubtedly decrease.

While the black church does not systematically foster a free intellectual dialogue, numerous black public intellectuals are now using the church to bring to black worshippers a range of ideas that they may not be exposed to otherwise. The problem here is that the black church does not facilitate feedback for the intellectual nor does it encourage the worshiper to critically enter into the dialogue. Nevertheless, some innovative things are being done. Under the direction of a black New Testament scholar, Professor Thomas Hoyt, Hartford Seminary, has established an outreach program in which undereducated and formally untrained black ministers are offered courses throughout the year. The goal is to increase black ministers' understanding of the Bible, Christian theology, and church administration. And the black ministers' desire for educational improvement has been surprisingly strong.

Other black intellectuals have attempted to graft themselves onto black political processes, particularly the two presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson. These intellectuals viewed Jackson's campaigns as indicators of an increased receptivity for black public dialogue. While this strategy may have worked during the actual Jackson campaigns, it appears quite difficult to sustain over time. For this reason, some black public intellectuals have been desperate for an institutionalization of the Rainbow Coalition.

Finally, many black public-minded intellectuals have decided that the only way effectively to reach the broader black populace lies in penetrating American mass culture and the mass media. They believe it is essential to appear on "public affairs" television shows directed to black audiences. They view the televised version of *The Women of Brewster Street* as being as significant, if not more so, than the publication of the book itself. The same can be said for the televised version of

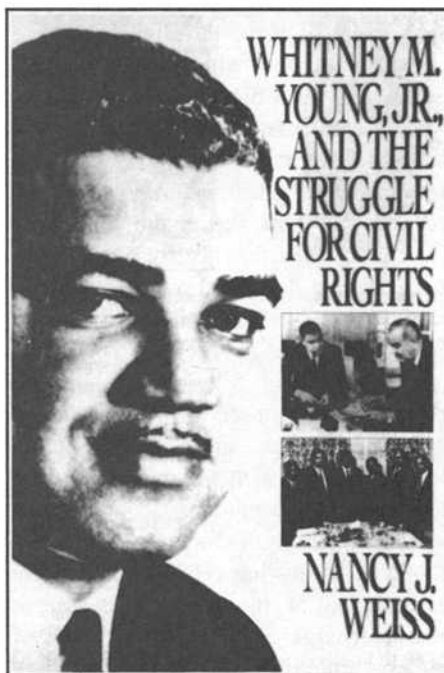
*Roots* and Steven Spielberg's production of *The Color Purple*.

**T**hese examples do not begin to exhaust the ways in which some black intellectuals have attempted to reach a broader black audience. It is an effort that carries some risk. Institutions that control public audiences can demand an unacceptable quid pro quo from those black intellectuals seeking to piggyback a ride. The cost of this ride might be too great for some intellectuals to bear precisely because it requires a redefinition (or abandonment) of their function as critics.

Finally, whatever anxiety I experience as a result of marginalization from the broader black community, I cannot become too self-

consumed at my plight. After all, my writings will not feed the numerous black babies suffering from malnutrition. I cannot house the numerous black homeless. I cannot alter the ravaging of black life, such as drug abuse and drug-related violence. I cannot stop the utter human destruction now occurring throughout urban America. While I have some contributions to make to the betterment of black life, I can easily understand the low priority that many blacks give to my situation as an anxiety-ridden bourgeois black academic intellectual. The ultimate problem confronting black intellectuals centers around justifying our existence during a time when many blacks' needs are immediate, desperate, and yet disregarded by the American system. □

## RACE, POWER, AND JUSTICE



### Whitney M. Young, Jr., and the Struggle for Civil Rights

Nancy J. Weiss

Whitney M. Young, Jr., the charismatic executive director of the National Urban League from 1961 to 1971, bridged the worlds of race and power. The "inside man" of the black revolution, he served as interpreter between black America and the businessmen, foundation executives, and public officials who constituted the white power structure. In this stimulating biography, Nancy J. Weiss shows how Young accomplished what Jesse Jackson called the toughest job in the black movement: selling civil rights to the nation's most powerful whites.

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