

## —“What Are the Drums Saying, Booker?”: The Curious Role of the Black Public Intellectual

In a typical episode of *Ramar of the Jungle*, an early television adventure series, the two heroes of the show spend most of their time on safari, attended to by a coterie of native bearers. Whenever they hear drums in the distance, the whites summon their head bearer. “Willie, what are the drums saying?” Willie, a Sancho Panza-like servant, steps forward. “Bwana, drums say simba come soon, much danger.” On noticing a furtive sullenness among the bearers, the hero again inquires: “Willie, what’s going on with the men?” Willie answers dutifully. “Men afraid. Say they don’t want to go into Leopard Men territory, afraid of evil spirits.”

In these vignettes, Willie was enacting the definitive role of the black public intellectual—interpreting the opaquely black heart of darkness for whites. Of course, this connection couldn’t be observed at the time because the category “black public intellectual” didn’t yet exist. It wasn’t invented until nearly four decades later when several youngish black professors with ties to and visibility within the cultural studies/cultural politics precincts of the academic left began using it to refer to themselves and one another. This group includes most prominently Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Gloria Watkins (bell hooks), Michael Dyson, and Robin Kelley, though others in that world no doubt feel comfortable wearing the label. And people with varying professional and political affiliations—like Stanley Crouch, Stephen Carter, and Shelby Steele—increasingly turn up under the black public intellectual rubric, as the Warholian imperatives of fame send it rippling through the culture. But this identity is most clearly the product of the cultural wing of the left academy and its extramural offshoots.

In the last months of 1994 and early 1995, the notion gained

greater currency. It has been addressed in successive articles by Michael Alan Bérubé in *The New Yorker* and Robert Boynton in *The Atlantic*, while Leon Wieseltier's right-for-the-wrong-reasons attack on Cornel West in *The New Republic* spawned commentary by James Ledbetter and Ellen Willis in the *Voice*. Although these white writers obviously didn't invent the black public intellectual identity, they certainly anointed it as a specific, notable status in upper-middle-brow American culture. Despite gestures in the direction of serious critical analysis, the Bérubé and Boynton essays are really press releases. Their explorations of their subjects' substantive output are thin and breezy. And I'm certain that not all of the individuals on Boynton's rather ecumenical list—the criterion for which seems to be “black people who write social commentary and are known to white elite institutions”—would embrace the black public intellectual label. But now that the concept has been formalized as a social type, it is useful to consider exactly what this phenomenon is, where it came from, and what it means.

The “public intellectual” notion emerged in 1987, when Russell Jacoby published *The Last Intellectuals*, which was in part a nostalgic exaltation of a previous cohort of politically engaged writers and critics. Jacoby contended that public intellectuals such as Dwight MacDonald, Irving Howe, Philip Rahv, and others were only marginally tied to the academy, and that their freedom from institutional constraint enabled them to fashion an autonomous, macroscopic view of American society and culture. The cohort of black people who call themselves black public intellectuals seem to suggest that they constitute a new social and political identity. But on closer examination, the role is all too familiar.

We might see today's black public intellectuals as lineal descendants of the authors of nineteenth-century slave narratives, if we understand those narratives as attempts to articulate a collective racial voice. The major difference is that slave narrators—with the partial exception of Frederick Douglass—did not attain celebrity as individuals. Rather, their public significance lay in embodying black people's collective capabilities.

The role of cellular representative reflected the prevailing view that a race's ideals are carried by its exceptional members. Personal attainment was less meaningful as a statement about the worth or prowess of the narrator than as a vindication of black humanity. Even the most accomplished authors or those whose odysseys had been most arduous or led to the greatest triumphs did not develop intensely *personal* followings. They remained primarily data points attesting to black possibility, and cogs in a larger abolitionist conversation.

The black public intellectual's more direct progenitor is Booker T. Washington, who turned the slave narrative into a saga of personal triumph befitting his era. In *Up From Slavery* (1901) Washington constructed a program and a rhetoric that promised group progress through acquiescence to white supremacy. He crafted it in the idiom of the gospel of personal enrichment then popular in both religious and secular (and often overlapping) forms. In presenting his tale of individual and group success through strength of character and perseverance, he simultaneously presented himself as a Horatio Alger figure and an Andrew Carnegie dipped in chocolate.

More than Douglass ever had been, Washington became the singular, trusted informant to communicate to whites what the Negro thought, felt, wanted, needed. Washington's stature derived from skill at soothing white liberals' *retreat* from the Reconstruction era's relatively progressive racial politics. He became the first purely freelance race spokesman; his status depended on designation by white elites rather than by any black electorate or social movement. To that extent he originated a new model of the generic Black Leader—the Racial Voice accountable to no clearly identifiable constituency among the spoken for.

What made this possible, and credible, was black Americans' expulsion from civic life. The role was unthinkable, even for a figure as prominent and respected as Douglass, during the first three decades after the Civil War because a culture of broad, democratic political participation flourished among black citizens. The obvious multiplicity of articulate black voices, from the local Union Leagues and Loyal Leagues to the United States Congress, would

have immediately exposed as absurd the suggestion that any individual carried—or should carry—a blanket racial proxy. The idea of the free-floating race spokesman was a pathological effect of the disfranchisement specific to the segregation era, the condition to which Washington contributed.

Washington's paramourcy as bearer of the race's interests was always contested by other blacks, and no one claimed the mantle after him. In fact the fifty years between his death in 1915 and the final defeat of the Jim Crow regime were punctuated by periods of intense, politically engaged debate among black intellectuals. In addition to the famously vibrant discursive community of the 1920s, a lively current of engaged scholarship and commentary ran through the 1930s and 1940s, centered institutionally in the *Journal of Negro History*, the *Journal of Negro Education*, and Du Bois's *Phylon*. Participants in this community—which included humanists such as Sterling Brown, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, and John S. Lash, as well as such social scientists as Abram Harris, Charles S. Johnson, and Joseph Sandy Himes (novelist Chester's brother)—converged on such questions as the definition, status, and functions of black literature, the foundation of black identity, topical critiques of ideological programs and tendencies in social affairs, and the character and obligations of Afro-Americanist intellectual activity itself. Many, such as Ralph Bunche, E. Franklin Frazier, Doxey Wilkerson, and Oliver Cox, operated simultaneously in academic and activist domains. Others, like James Ford, A. Philip Randolph, and George Schuyler, functioned entirely outside the academy.

Cold War antiradicalism and the apparent successes of an atheoretical, desegregationist politics narrowed the scope and blunted the critical edge of black intellectual discourse in the 1950s, although Baldwin and Ellison pushed against the boundaries of convention. And civil rights activism soon created its own eddies of debate and commentary. From the mid 1960s to the late 1970s another wave of engaged political and cultural critique defined black intellectual life; this movement was sustained most visibly in the *Negro Digest* (later *Black World*) and *The Black Scholar*, but it was

propelled as much through ephemeral, samizdat-like writing (for example, Amiri Baraka's paper, "Why I Changed My Ideology"). More directly tied to activist politics, this pattern of debate was more sharply contentious and aggressively oppositional (and perhaps less sophisticated) than that of the interwar years.

Each of these discursive moments, however, was haunted by the problem of speaking for the race—how to delineate the characteristics and warrants of black leadership, how to authenticate it, the difficulties associated with assuming the racial voice, the conundrum of undertaking social or cultural criticism without accepting the role of race spokesperson. Bunche and Cox tried to generate a rigorous critique of prevailing styles of political leadership. Baldwin and Ellison strained mightily to comment on topical issues in a racially conscious way while rejecting designation as black spokesmen. All these concerns are responses to the conventional presumption—Washington's unacknowledged legacy in the modern era—that any black individual's participation in public life always strives to express the will of the racial collectivity.

This presumption in turn reflects an important complication facing black intellectuals; they need to address both black and white audiences, and those different acts of communication proceed from objectives that are distinct and often incompatible. James Weldon Johnson identified this peculiar burden in a 1928 essay "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," noting that black writers face "more than a double audience; it is a divided audience made up of two elements with differing and often quite opposite and antagonistic points of view." Although Johnson focused primarily on creative writing, his observation that the white audience's biases dispose black authors toward a "defensive and exculpatory literature" applies more generally. Historian Lawrence D. Reddick and the philosopher William T. Fontaine in the '30s and '40s similarly complained of the "defense psychology" of black scholars, maintaining that it undermines examination of the black experience by grounding Afro-Americanist inquiry in the narrow, other-directed objective of demonstrating black people's equal humanity.

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Those who now describe themselves as black public intellectuals diverge significantly from the rich history of black commentary. Their differences speak to the character of our time and the changes in black intellectual life ensuing from the passage of the segregation era. The contemporary public intellectuals are unique in that they exhibit little sense of debate or controversy among themselves as a cohort. To the contrary, they seem rather to come together as a publicist's delight, a hyperbolically log-rolling lovefest. Watkins and West gush over each other's nonpareil brilliance; Gates proclaims West "the preeminent African-American intellectual of our generation"; and Gates, West, and Kelley lavish world-historical superlatives on Dyson, who, naturally enough, expresses comparable judgments about them. Their anthologies and conferences feature no sharp disagreements. Instead, they function as a kind of Tuskegee Machine by committee. Their political utterances exude pro forma moralism, not passion. Their critiques are only easy pronouncements against racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism or equally easy dissent from a lame Afrocentricity that has no adherents among their audience anyway.

The point is not that controversy by itself makes for purity or legitimacy but that in this instance at least, the absence of controversy betrays a lack of critical content and purpose. The stance of these black public intellectuals is by and large just that—not a stand but a posture. Can the reader familiar with their work recall without hesitation a specific critique, a concrete formulation—an extended argument that is neither airily abstract nor cozily compatible with what passes for common sense at the moment? I'd bet not, because in this arena prominence of author counts more than weight of utterance.

The posture of the black public intellectual is a claim to speak from the edges of convention, to infuse mainstream discourse with a particular "counterhegemonic" perspective at least implicitly linked to one's connectedness to identifiably black sensibilities or interests. It is also therefore, again at least implicitly, a claim to immersion in a strategic conversation among black Americans about

politics, culture, and social affairs. The posture is flimflam that elides the dual audience problem.

To expand on Johnson's initial formulation, for the black audience the focus of critical intellectual activity is—or should be—on careful, tough-minded examination of the multifarious dynamics shaping black social life. To that extent, the black intellectual positions herself metaphorically at the boundary of the black experience and faces in, establishing enough distance to get a broad perspective but intent on contributing to a conversation that presumes not only intricate knowledge but also an interpretive orientation filtered through shared, racially inflected assumptions that inform strategic thinking. The racially and politically attentive black intellectual is in this sense engaged in a discourse of group self-examination.

In addressing the white audience, the task remains all too much explaining the mysteries of black America. For that project one still positions oneself on the metaphorical boundary of the Bantustan, but facing outward. This is why there isn't much attention to flux, differentiation, contingency, or even analysis of social process in our public intellectuals' accounts of black life; you don't see nuances with your back turned, and besides that sort of messy texture doesn't count for much because the white audience mainly just wants the executive summary anyway. Why do they act that way? How can I keep from gratuitously offending my coworkers or housekeeper? What do the drums say, Cornel?

The different objectives involved in addressing the two audiences become more important in the post-Jim Crow world. The demise of *Black World* and atrophy of *The Black Scholar* both fuel and reflect the shriveling of an autonomous domain for black debate. At the same time, the opening up of employment opportunities at elite academic institutions has increased the likelihood that black intellectuals operate in multiracial discursive networks and has greatly enhanced the visibility of a lucky few. Therefore, white forums, particularly those associated with the left, have become the primary arenas for elaboration of black commentary and critical public discourse, which makes a principled self-consciousness in negotiating the two audiences all the more essential. But the discursive space constructed by the black public intellectuals either con-

flates the audiences into an unhelpful least common denominator or undertakes a misdirection in combining an insider's "it's a black thang" posture with a superficial, other-directed analysis explaining or defending the Negro. The result is an all-purpose message, equally suitable for corporate boards, rarefied academic conferences, White House dinners, and common folk. And, unsurprisingly, the white audience overwhelms and sets the terms for the black, repeating an ironic pattern begun with Washington.

Traditionally, engaged black intellectuals have also addressed a third audience—a transracial community of progressive activists. This is a pattern that can be seen from the abolitionist Douglass through the middle-aged and elderly Du Bois, the young Bunche and others in his cohort, down to Lani Guinier, Julian Bond, and hosts of others less well known. They haven't functioned as interpreters of an esoteric black experience or bearers of a "black position" or as itinerant Moral Voices, but as participants in a common debate aimed at stimulating, directing, and taking political action.

Where Baldwin and Ellison bristled at the Black Voice designation, today's public intellectuals accept it gladly. And they have to, because maintaining credibility with their real, white audience requires that they be authentically black, that their reports on the heart of darkness ring with verisimilitude. ("Drums say nihilism, moral breakdown. Need politics of conversion, love ethic.") This underscores the extent to which—beneath all the over-heated academic trendiness—the black public intellectual stance merely updates Booker T. Washington's role, but without the institutional trappings and, for the moment at least, without the power.

As with Washington, the public intellectual's authenticity is conferred by white opinion makers. The typical trajectory of stardom is instructive. First, one becomes recognized as a Black Voice in the intellectual apparatus of the left, which—out of a combination of good intentions and bad faith—stands ever ready to confer prominence on any reasonable articulate black person willing to associate with it. To qualify, one need not even put forward a critique that seems leftist by usual standards: secular, rooted in political economy, focused on stimulating political mobilization. After all,



the "black community" is different, has different needs, etc. Reputation spreads, and eventually opportunities present themselves to cross over from the left intellectual ghetto to the status of Black Voice for the mainstream. All it takes is the courage to square off in the white public sphere against black anti-Semitism on the Anti-Defamation League's terms, or to join the chorus lamenting the putative social pathology of the inner city. Not to mention a knack for packaging the center-right wisdom of the moment as well-considered, yet bold and personally risky challenge to convention. This is the path blazed so far by Gates and West, and Dyson, as usual, is bringing his best Pigmeat-Markham-Meets-Baudrillard act along behind.

The consummate irony of the puffery is that it is misdirected all the way through. Jacoby's archetype is only weakly connected to the bureaucratized intellectual life of the academy. His public intellectual figures in a critique of the politically corrosive effects of the left's having settled into the university after the collapse of extramural radicalism. But those now wearing the black public intellectual tag as a red, black, and green badge of courage are not only deeply embedded in the higher reaches of the academic celebrity system, they are also its unalloyed products. This brute fact is obscured by another flimflam—what we might call the Proudhon Scam. Marx quipped that the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon represented himself in Germany, where they didn't know much political economy, as a political economist, and in France, where they didn't know much philosophy, as a philosopher. West, Dyson, et al., use the public intellectual pose to claim authority both as certified, world-class elite academics and as links to an extra-academic blackness, thus splitting the difference between being insiders and outsiders. In the process, they are able to skirt the practical requirements of either role—to avoid both rigorous, careful intellectual work *and* protracted, committed political action.

Gates is the most complicated, most intellectually probing, and most consistent of the group. Unlike the others, he makes no pretense of being a conduit to some sort of grassroots black authenticity. He has publicly criticized the notion that there are leaders who

are singular representatives of the race. His position is perhaps most like that of Bayard Rustin, as a freelance advocate for black political centrism. Like Rustin, Gates has without equivocation chosen as the forum for his advocacy the largely white circles of elite opinion, most conspicuously as a staff writer for *The New Yorker*. A significant difference is that Rustin in his last years was primarily an arbiter of the boundaries of "responsible" black spokespersonship for the right wing of the Democratic Party coalition. Gates also sometimes functions as an arbiter of black political etiquette, but he is more actively concerned with articulating the voice of an autonomously black, self-consciously petit-bourgeois centrism.

West's program is less coherent and less concrete than Gates's. He has postured as a link to black activist authenticity, holding an honorary leadership position in the Democratic Socialists of America and referring frequently to associations with supposed grassroots leaders and organizations. At the same time, he has no particular history of concrete political practice or affiliation and has shown no reticence about operating as a freelance race relations consultant and Moral Voice for white elites. Most of all, the substance of his public commentary—when it descends from sonorous platitudes and well-hedged abstractions—is, to resuscitate an old slogan, "left in form, right in essence." As Stephen Steinberg has demonstrated in a thorough and powerful critique in the summer 1994 issue of *New Politics*, West's interpretation of contemporary social and political life derives directly and definitively from Daniel Patrick Moynihan's scurrilous arguments about black pathology.

Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe* (1990), about black communists in 1930s Alabama, is a credible piece of scholarship. But too often with Kelley, politics reduces to the academic pose, the combined stance of acting out flamboyantly crafted rituals of "blackness" in conventional settings and spinning narratives that ultimately demean concerted political action by claiming to find it everywhere. Dyson and Watkins/hooks are little more than hustlers, blending bombast, clichés, psychobabble, and lame guilt tripping in service to the "pay me" principle. Dyson, for instance, has managed to say absolutely nothing in a string of *New York Times* op-ed pieces.

"Public intellectual" is by and large an excuse, the marker of a sterile, hybrid variant of "bearing witness" that, when all is said and done, is a justification for an aversion to intellectual or political heavy lifting—a pretentious name for highfalutin babble about the movie you just saw or the rhyme you just heard on the radio. In its intimations of always being from and on the way to the other place, the label is an admission and exaltation of *disconnectdness*, a notion of the critical intellectual as Galahad or High Plains Drifter that is the opposite of rootedness in a discourse community. That is why this cohort's discussion of themselves and others seem so much like attempts to create all-star lineups—the greatest this, the most brilliant that, the preeminent other. They're more like the Super Friends than the Frankfurt School or the Howard University social scientists of the 1930s.

There's a lot about his charade that is distasteful, but one feature makes it especially hard to take. The dialectics of authentication trades on elaborate displays of what sociolinguists call code switching—in this case, going back and forth from rarefied theoreticism to slivers of one or another version of black vernacular expression. In academic lectures and scholarly writing, Kelley can "send a shout out" in the *Journal of American History* while dragging Gramsci to the root doctor and holy roller church. Dyson finds Michael Jackson's "postmodern spirituality" and in lectures lacks only for cork; West loads up on Continental theory to explain why the music he listened to in his undergraduate dorm is the apotheosis of black culture and why poor people need moral rearmament. When we consider that these performances are directed to white audiences, their minstrel quality stands out as especially distasteful because it masquerades as being in touch with the latest wrinkles of refined black hipness. This, admittedly, puts off those affronted by coon shows.

More significantly, the public intellectuals' style has baleful effects on the scholarly examination of black American life. In rejecting all considerations of standards of evidence and argument as expressions of naïve positivism, the cultural politicians get to make the story up as they go along. Graduate students can figure out that

this gambit has two very attractive features: it drastically reduces the quantity of digging and thinking one has to do, and it clears the path to public visibility and academic recognition. Of course, it's not as if black public intellectuals were the only hustlers in an academic world largely defined by the politics of reputation; and all in all it's good that black people are getting paid, too. So why should anyone be concerned? The answer is that the public intellectuals cohere around a more or less deceptively conservative politics that is particularly dangerous at this moment in our history.

Political conservatism is fundamental to the Black Voice business now no less than in 1895, and Stanley Crouch and Shelby Steele have shown that it is sometimes the sole requirement. One can qualify for the job only by giving white opinion makers a heavy dose of what they want to hear. Gates didn't get to be a world-class Black Voice until he denounced the bogey of "black anti-Semitism" all over the op-ed page of *The New York Times* and went on to reassure *Forbes's* readership, that "yes, there is a culture of poverty," calling up the image of a "sixteen-year-old mother, a thirty-two-year-old grandmother and a forty-eight-year-old great-grandmother," noting for good measure that "It's also true that not everyone in any society wants to work, that not all people are equally motivated. There! Was that so hard to say?" He has since secured his public intellectuality in a series of essays in *The New Republic* and elsewhere whose main point is to endorse the "vital center," and he extols the lost Jim Crow world in *Colored People*, a memoir that could have been titled *Up From Slavery on Lake Wobegon*. West's conservative moralism and victim blaming has made him Bill Bradley's favorite conduit to the Mind of the Negro and a hit on the business school lecture circuit.

Most insidious, though, is the retrograde sham that masquerades as a leftist "cultural politics." Rather than an alternative, deep structural "infra" politics, as Kelley and others contend, the cultural politics focus is a quietistic alternative to real political analysis. It boils down to nothing more than an insistence that authentic, meaningful political engagement for black Americans is expressed

not in relation to the institutions of public authority—the state—or the workplace—but in the clandestine significance assigned to apparently apolitical rituals. Black people, according to this logic, don't mobilize through overt collective action. They do it surreptitiously when they look like they're just dancing, or as a colleague of mine ironically described it, "dressing for resistance." In a *Journal of American History* article, supposedly about black working-class opposition, Kelley asks rhetorically: "If a worker turns to a root doctor or prayer rather than to a labor union to make an employer less evil, is that 'false consciousness'?" He compares a conjuror's power favorably to that of the CIO, the Populists, and the NAACP.

This is don't-worry, be-happy politics. Resistance flows from life by definition. There is no need to try to create it because it's all around us; all we have to do is change the way we define things. Then we can just celebrate the people's spontaneous infrapolitics and show white people how to find it and point out to them that Gramscianism is an African survival. We can make radical politics by climbing the tenure ladder and feeling good about our collective black selves through the pride of vicarious identification with the embedded theoretical sophistication of the folk.

Worst of all, though, the black public intellectual stance derives from and presumes a condition of political demobilization. And for good reason. The posture of the Racial Voice requires—and, as the centennial of Washington's perfidy should remind us, helps to produce—a black population that is disfranchised and incapable of articulating its own agendas as a citizenry. Thus the black intellectuals' insistence on defining politics centered in the exercise of state power as inauthentic, which in turn underwrites all the Aesopian interpretive twaddle in black cultural studies. (Interestingly, in chastising proponents of codes prohibiting hate speech, Gates has complained self-righteously about an identity politics that pays no attention to public policy. His point would go down better if it came with a little self-criticism from one whose scholarly reputation—supposedly the source of his prominence—is based on precisely the view that he disparages.)

Before disfranchisement in the South black people didn't have to express their politics surreptitiously; they crafted and fought to realize their agendas through public policy, and after disfranchisement they fought for sixty years to be reenfranchised so they could do it again. And the record of overt black political action outside the South is unbroken. What the current environment demands from black intellectuals who would comment on public affairs is not more whining about disparagement of the "black body" in Western culture (as if that were news) or examination of representations of representations or noodling about how, if we apply the right spin, everything black people do is resistance to oppression. And most of all there is no need for interpretations that presume an uncomplicated, conveniently mute black reality; there's already a surfeit of analysis propelled by the collective black subject—"black people want, feel, etc." As is true on the left generally, what is desperately called for is stimulation of informed discussion among black Americans, and between blacks and others, that presumes proprietorship of the institutions of governance and policy processes on an identical basis with other citizens and aims at crafting agendas that define and realize black interests accordingly. We should be in the forefront of the fight against ratification of the balanced budget amendment, crafting responses to so-called tort reform, fighting corporate globalization, and finding ways to counter the assault on the Bill of Rights.

The cultural politicians' fixation on youth definitively illustrates their bankruptcy. Not only are young people the least connected, the most alienated, and the least politically attentive cohort of the black population, they're also the ones whites are most interested in. "Willie, why do they have those welfare babies? What must we do so that they won't take my car stereo?" What a felicitous coincidence.