

BLACK INTELLECTUALS,
BLACK COGNITION, AND
A BLACK AESTHETIC

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*For my mother,
Harriet Elizabeth Wright,
and my father,
Charles Noble Wright,
who both widened the boundary
of goodness in this world,
before going on ahead.*

*And to my sister,
Virginia May Wright,
who wrote her own pages
in the book of heroism
before passing to the
other side.*

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Preface

E. Franklin Frazier asserted in an article from the early 1960s that Black intellectuals had failed as intellectuals and had failed Black people.¹ Their failure was that they had not dealt adequately or at all with such intellectual matters as culture, personality, and human destiny or the impact of Western history and civilization and American history and civilization on Black people. Frazier also said that Black intellectuals had failed to adequately explain the Black community's relationship to the larger American society and the appropriate pathways this interaction should follow to benefit Blacks and America. Toward the end of the 1960s, Harold Cruse blasted Black intellectuals for being too dependent in their thinking, for not paying more attention to the cultural issues of Black life and of America, and for not helping Black people develop more cultural power and leadership in the country.²

Nearly three decades have passed, and it can be said that Black intellectuals have in the interim dealt with some of the matters that Frazier and Cruse thought were so crucial, although it would still be argued by them, as it is by this writer, that Black intellectuals have not provided the scope and depth of political and social analysis and commentary that they are capable of providing, either about Black life, or about the larger America. For instance, Black intellectuals still have not clarified, in a definitive manner, for Black people or for other

Americans such matters as assimilation, integration, segregation, and separation. Invariably, in their writings on these subjects, they confuse the first two terms with each other and use them interchangeably, as they do the other two terms. But then, it also has to be said that this kind of confusion and interchangeability can be found in the writings of white intellectuals. So it is a cultural thing in America, a lack of term and/or concept integrity, rather than a special deficiency of Black intellectuals.

But that does not get Black intellectuals off the hook. They consider themselves to be voices of Black people, some of their representatives, and have assigned themselves a role to help Blacks develop and to achieve full freedom in America—the obligations that Black history and social life have conferred upon them. But when Black intellectuals are confused and are too dependent on others for their own thought, their credibility is diminished and there are negative consequences for Black leaders, Black politicians, and other Black people. So, while Black intellectuals have come a long way in America, they still have more to do as individuals, as a group, for Blacks—and for America.

And the burden of Black intellectuals has increased. America itself is in a state of intellectual, moral, and spiritual crisis. The country has become incredibly profane, vulgar, and violent. The worst of American culture, social life, and personal life is paraded in a variety of media, as new ideals, as new standards, as a new realism, as *adult* behavior, and with all of it having great commercial value. Words like *perverted*, *debased*, or *degeneracy* or phrases like *intellectual decline*, *moral decline*, or *spiritual decline* are no longer in the public nor even in many individual vocabularies. There are the so-called conservatives in America who see America hitting the intellectual, moral, cultural, and social skids; these people have of course voiced their objections publicly. But their voices have almost no credence, because it is no secret to anyone, except to themselves, that their historical and current social behavior have helped significantly to put America in its present crisis.

It is not just America's crisis. It is also the crisis of Western civilization itself, where the latter, despite its last half century of economic prosperity and abundance, still shows the intellectual, moral, and spiritual malignancies that produced Hitler and the Nazis, the communists, an enormous inhumanity, and which are vividly revealed as ongoing by the horrors in the former Yugoslavia, the resurrection of

malevolent politics in various countries of Europe, and by the threat that the continuing malaise presents to the aspirations for a greater and unified European Community.

The problems of Europe are the problems of America and vice versa. They are, combined, the problems of Western history and civilization. Black intellectuals still show an incredible indifference to Western history and civilization, of which they and Black people are a part, and which has significantly shaped both. They also do not deal satisfactorily, intellectually, with *American* history and *American* culture. All of these things inevitably impact Black people, but they also inescapably affect the ability of Black intellectuals to fulfill their self-images, of spokespeople, representatives, and helpers of Black people.

The whole blame cannot be laid on Black intellectuals. The long and continuous racist history of America has been very anti-Black intellectual, even investing white Americans with a belief that Blacks and intellectuals, or Blacks and intelligence, are contradictions in terms. White intellectuals, in the main, have never taken Black intellectuals seriously, and this arrogant and blighted behavior continues. It also has to be said that Black intellectuals have taken a beating from other Black intellectuals when they have tried to write on subjects that did not pertain directly to Blacks or Black life in America, even though they might have thought that indirectly they did, and in a serious manner. Such individuals have been accused of trying to be "White" or trying to gain White approval, or trying to attain White largesse, or of betraying Black people and Black interests. So there has been historical and social pressure on Black intellectuals in America to stay at home and also to limit their intellectual range.

But Black intellectuals can no longer let these matters act as inhibitors for them. The general crisis of Western civilization, and its specific manifestation in America, calls for Black intellectuals to come forward and provide some intellectual and moral leadership. This has become an imperative because so many white intellectuals are caught up in what is called *postmodern* thinking, in which they show acute hostility to any thought that seeks to provide a broad or narrative explanation or which seeks to promote a consensus or social morality, such as philosophies of history or general political or social theories. These intellectuals are part of the malaise of Western civilization, but they are incapable of perceiving this, believing that they are precisely the intellectuals, with precisely the modes of thought that Western civilization and America desperately need at the present moment.

These intellectuals will be the first to rip Black intellectuals who seek to come forward with some intellectual offerings to America or to Western civilization that are directional or that have consensual or moral orientations. The situation is not disconnected from racism. Most postmodern thinkers are white, especially white men, who have only in the rarest instances been willing to accept intellectual fare from Black people, even Black intellectuals—and they do not wish to become innovative now.

So another element has been added to the burden. But Black intellectuals have to shoulder it; they really have no choice in the matter if they see themselves as spokespeople for and representatives of Black people and see themselves as having a messianic role to help Blacks in America. But to help them in the most propitious manner, they have, of necessity, to relate intellectually and critically to Western civilization and America itself, because the problems and needs of both affect Black people and their future in America. It is the thesis of this book that Western history and civilization and America itself are calling upon Black intellectuals to play a new and critical intellectual and moral role in regard to both, for the purpose of trying to aid both and also Black people in America.

Black intellectuals will have to demonstrate their capabilities in many subject areas. One area that beckons them to make a display of their capabilities is in the area of cultural thought. Black intellectuals have taken only small steps in this direction. Black cultural thought lags far behind the aesthetic cultural capabilities of Black people, which are second to none in America and which may be preeminent in the country by the way so many different Americans go to this aesthetic trough for inspiration and nourishment. Black intellectuals and artists in the 1920s began their efforts to develop a Black Aesthetic to help guide the development and performance of Black art—broadly conceived—and the Aesthetic's relationship to the development of Black people in America and their quest for full freedom in the country. A stronger effort was made in the 1970s, and it is one that continues, although without making giant strides forward. Aesthetic culture is the strength of Black people. If Black aesthetic thinking could ever match this strength, it would be proof enough that Black intellectuals were capable of taking on the horrendous historical assignments that have been handed to them.

I wish for Black intellectuals to take up this challenge of constructing a Black Aesthetic philosophy or theory, or several of each, to show

their intellectual capabilities and their ability to be intellectual leaders. Hindrances are strewn in the pathway, in the form of intellectual and cultural problems that Black intellectuals have to resolve through historical knowledge and also through analysis and discussion, such as the reality of racism and the difference between racism and race, the identity of Black people, the cognitive methods of Blacks, the relationship between Black thought and postmodern thought, the relationship between Black art and African art, and the relationship of a Black Aesthetic to a Black American Aesthetic. All this is necessary before they can move vigorously and successfully to the larger aesthetic intellectual efforts. I have dealt with these issues and others in this book, mainly to identify them in a clear fashion and to suggest the direction that might be pursued to achieve resolution, as a personal effort to try to help Black intellectuals get on with their aesthetic and intellectual objectives and demonstrations, preparatory to engaging the new and large demands of history.

I have also done one other thing in writing this book and in my personal effort to stimulate Black intellectuals into action. I have tried in this work to provide some coherence to the spelling of the words *black* and *white* and also to invest the words with a better understanding and meaning, which I believe is necessary and which I feel will be helpful to Black intellectuals as they take up their new intellectual and leadership tasks. When the word *black* is spelled in the lower case in this book, it will be a reference to color or race. When the word *black* is spelled in the higher case, as *Black*, it will be a reference to ethnic group, ethnic status, ethnicity, or community, that is, Black ethnic group, ethnic status, ethnicity, or community, that is, Black ethnic community. The Black ethnic group and the Black ethnic community are descendants of the Africans brought to this country as slaves between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, and their slave descendants. An individual designated as *Black* in this work will be a reference to an individual who is a member of the Black ethnic group or the Black ethnic community. The word *Blacks* will be a reference to a few, many, or all Black people who are members of the Black ethnic group or the Black ethnic community. The phrase *black* ethnic group or *black community* will be references to the color and racial attributes of the ethnic group or the ethnic community, but not references to culture or social life.

The word *white* receives similar treatment in this book. When that word is spelled in the lower case it will be a reference to color or race. When it is spelled in the higher case, as *White*, this will be a

reference to ethnic group, ethnic status, ethnicity, or community, that is, White ethnic community. White people form a large White ethnic group and ethnic community in America forged over the course of their history in the country. An individual designated *White* will be a reference to an individual who is a member of the White ethnic group or White ethnic community. The word *Whites* will be a reference to a few, many, or all White people who are members of the White ethnic group or White ethnic community. The phrase *white ethnic group* or *white community* will be references to the color or racial attributes of the ethnic group or the community, but not references to culture or social life. White people in the Western world are part of Western civilization and, therefore, are part of a civilizational group and have a civilizational status. In this context, and in this book, the word *White* will be a reference to an individual who is a member of this civilizational group. The word *Whites* will be a reference to a few, many, or all White people who are members of this civilizational group.

As can be seen from the above discussion, the spelling of names and identities is not just grammatical activity. Such spellings can have historical, cultural, social, and political significance, which requires that the spelling of words or names and identities be done with great care.

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1.

The Reality of Black Intellectuals

The Black Liberation Movement of the 1950s and 1960s had many successes. One of these was the ending of the public, blatant, and violent racism of Whites in the United States as a normal and acceptable way for them to relate to Black people in the country. A second success was the restoration of the national citizenship and national political and civil rights of Black people that had been gained in the 1860s and 1870s, but which had been taken away between the 1880s and early 1900s by Supreme Court decisions, national government enforcement of the decisions, state statutes, and by national and local racist practices. A third success was the firm establishment of the Black middle class as the leadership class of Black people, and as the class that would, and that had to, carry out the vigilance to see that Whites did not restore the openly blatant and violent racism that had been strongly eclipsed, as well as to remain vigilant about and to attack the subtle White racism that had, in the late 1960s, emerged as the new dominant form of White racism in America, and that has continued ever since. A fourth success of the liberation movement was to publicly catapult Black intellectuals as a sizable, knowledgeable, capable, and permanent critical group in Black America and in the larger American society.

The last success may not seem all that outstanding and, indeed, might be regarded as some kind of normal attainment or normal

reality. After all, there are white intellectuals in America; why shouldn't there be Black ones? But the apparent normalcy or expectancy of the whole matter actually hides reality; namely, the reality of the resistance to having Black intellectuals in the United States.

In the seventeenth century, white people and black people came together in North America. Unfortunately, they did not come together on a strong basis of individuality or equality. By the 1640s, Whites were passing laws enslaving black people. By the late seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century, Blacks were nailed down by racist beliefs, slave laws, and political, individual, or group violence to a condition and reality of perpetual slavery that carried over from the colonial into the early national period of American history. Slave laws were passed determining that black slaves were not to be taught how to read and write. And those Blacks who were not slaves were discouraged from pursuing education, with the discouragement taking many forms.

Consciously making Blacks slaves and consciously removing them from formal education makes it clear that white slaveholders and other Whites were determined to suppress the mental and intellectual capabilities of black people. And at this time, the latter seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries, and even more so thereafter, there was a belief—a racist belief—that black people were naturally, or innately, incapable of significant cerebral functioning or attainment. During the colonial period of American history, there were Whites who thought Blacks were anatomically and cerebrally akin to apes. There were Whites less mephitic in their racism, such as Thomas Jefferson, who accepted and argued the view that Blacks did not have the innate capacity for intellectual activity but showed a great ability to employ the senses. Jefferson was not willing to say that Blacks were apes, or akin to them, but he left no doubt that he did not think that they were fully human either.

Thus, Whites joined racism and slavery together to carry out a double assault against Black humanity, and particularly, Blacks' human capacity to think and reason, or to be rational. This facilitated maintaining slavery, but it also became a rationale to justify exclusion, segregation, and the denial of human as well as political and civil rights to Blacks in America. Indeed, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, white men, especially, the ones who were most insistent that Blacks were incapable of significant intellectual activity, developed theories to prove their contentions. One of these theories was

phrenology.¹ Phrenologists argued that the shape of a head determined brain size and cerebral capacity. Human races had different head shapes. The white race had the best-shaped head; therefore, white people had the largest brain size and the greatest capacity for intelligence. The black race had the worst-shaped head of all racial groups, and, thus, had the smallest brain size and virtually no capacity for intelligence. Another racist theory at the time was the “Two-Creation” theory. This one stated that God engaged in two acts of Creation. He created the white race and white people and endowed them with great innate intellectual ability. In a second Creation, he created the black race and black people and endowed them with very little intellectual ability. In the latter nineteenth century, Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution (variation), natural selection, and the survival of the fittest (which was actually taken from Herbert Spencer) were invested with racism and were used to prove that the white race evolved into the highest type of humans, with a commensurate high capacity for intelligence and that the black race was arrested in its anatomical and cerebral development, leaving it at the level of apes in both physical and cerebral attributes. In the latter nineteenth century, there was the theory of craniology. This was actually a different version of the phrenological theory that had passed out of existence by the 1850s. Physical scientists, as well as medical doctors, resurrected the deceased theory, giving a new name to it: craniology. This theory argued that a large skull denoted elaborate brain organization and a great capacity for intelligence, while a small skull denoted little brain organization and very little capacity for intelligence. As the racist argument went, using science as a handmaiden to validate it, the white race had a larger skull than the black race and, therefore, had a much larger capacity for intelligence. A special theory regarding the intelligence of the black race, and aimed specifically at Blacks in the United States, was advanced by the southern-born Harvard University biologist, Nathaniel Shaler, from whom W. E. B. Du Bois took a class and who, Du Bois said, treated him very well. Indeed, as Du Bois said in his *Autobiography*, “Shaler invited a Southerner, who objected to sitting beside me, out of his class.”² Shaler obviously found Du Bois to be a Black “exception.” But Shaler’s general view of Blacks, as he expressed it in his “regression theory,” first made public in 1884, was that they were arrested in both their physical and intellectual development. They survived in America only because slavery had kept them in close association with Whites, whom they had

enough brain capacity to imitate in various ways. By imitating Whites, Blacks became “Whitelike” and were able to survive with White help, which was provided throughout slavery. But now that slavery was over and Blacks were on their own, Shaler argued, they were quickly reverting back to their original African savagery. And this would only get worse unless Whites intervened in this situation and offered some kind of help, because Blacks did not have much innate ability for intellectual and creative efforts. They were, and could be, good imitators, but this was not a “racial trait” that could carry Blacks very far on their own. He writes “Here, as in the Old World, the Negroes have not only failed to exhibit a capacity for indigenous development, but when uplifted from without have shown an obvious tendency to fall back into their primitive estate as soon as the internal support was withdrawn.”³

As can be seen in these comments, white men, especially, have been *obsessed*, with believing and trying to prove that Black people in America are naturally or innately intellectually inferior to them. In the early twentieth century, craniology finally succumbed to its own ineptness and unscientific character. It could no longer withstand the main criticism that some animals had larger skulls than humans, and that, therefore, logically, these animals should be more intelligent than humans, including white men. Moreover, craniologists had a difficult time trying to explain why white women had smaller skulls than white men, and even more troubling for them was trying to explain how small-skulled people gave birth to large-skulled people. At a point where there was some despair about not being able to prove, in a scientific way, that black people were innately intellectually inferior to white people, along came intelligence tests, which became the new so-called scientific device that continued the white male obsession of trying to prove the intellectual superiority of Whites—especially of white men—and the intellectual inferiority of all black people.

I have mentioned several reasons why white men have been preoccupied with their great obsession. But there is another. White men also did not want a Black middle class in America. The only Blacks who were welcomed were slaves, or Blacks who would not resist a subordinate, lowly status and condition in America. Black middle-class people were considered to be a problem. This was what was initially meant by the *Negro Problem* or the *Negro Question*—the problem of the Black middle class and the question of what to do with it.