



University of Richmond UR Scholarship Repository

History Faculty Publications

History

1996

Black American Intellectuals in the 1990s

Edward L. Ayers

University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/history-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Comparative Politics Commons](#), and the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. "Black Intellectuals in the 1990s." In *Social and Secure? Politics and Culture of the Welfare State: A Comparative Inquiry*, edited by Hans Bak, Frits van Holthoon, and Hans Krabbendam, 301-311. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1996.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the History at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

BLACK AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS IN THE 1990s

Edward L. Ayers, University of Virginia¹

Introduction

As everyone who has followed the leading American periodicals in 1995 can tell you, a group of black academics has been much on the country's mind recently. Rather breathless articles have several times announced the arrival of America's New Public Intellectuals. One commentator argues that the recent burst of publishing and attention signals nothing less than the arrival of the Third Black Intellectual Renaissance, fit to be compared with those of the 1920s and the civil rights era. And the surge of black writing shows no sign of slowing; in fact, every indication is that we are at the beginning rather than the end of this period of productivity and publicity.²

Conservative black intellectuals have received much attention, including Thomas Sowell, Shelby Steele, Glenn Loury, and Stephen Carter, but lately the magazines have focused mostly on thinkers from the left. Cornel West has come in for the highest praise and the most withering criticism; often featured, too, is Henry Louis Gates, Jr., West's colleague at Harvard, who has been a visible public figure since the 1980s. Others that have elicited praise and damnation include bell hooks, Michael Eric Dyson, Derrick Bell, Michele Wallace, Patricia Williams, Robin Kelley, and Randall Kennedy.

This is a remarkably diverse group of writers, at odds with one another on many issues. But they have one thing in common besides being black Americans: they express little faith in the welfare state. The new black intellectuals, whatever their private actions, write little about interest-group politics and policy making. They are impatient with the language of everyday politics in the United States, the stereotypes, accusations, and solutions that they hear on talk radio and television discussion shows, that they read on op-ed pages.³

At the very outset of his most recent book, for example, Cornel West rejects the terms in which most Americans conceive the debate over the welfare state, the dichotomy of "Great Society Democrats" vs. "self-help Republicans." West has little use for those who talk only about the content of black character, not surprisingly, but he also criticizes those who put forward a more active welfare state as the answer. These "liberal structuralists," he argues, focus on structures of

- 1 I would like to thank Brian Balogh, Kate Delaney, and Scot French for their advice and help with this essay.
- 2 Jervis Anderson, "The Public Intellectual," *New Yorker*, 17 January 1994, 39-46; Robert S. Boynton, "The New Intellectuals," *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1995): 53-70; Michael Bérubé, "Public Academy," *New Yorker*, 9 January 1995, 73-80; Sam Fulwood III, "An Identity of Their Own," *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 9 April 1995, 10-14, 29-32.
- 3 Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990; HarperPerennial ed, 1991), ix-x.

economic power and political inequality at the expense of structures of culture. "They hesitate to talk honestly about culture, the realm of meanings and values," he says, "because doing so seems to lend itself too readily to conservative conclusions in the narrow way Americans discuss race. If there is a hidden taboo among liberals, it is to resist talking *too much* about values because such discussions remove the focus from structures and especially because they obscure the positive role of government."⁴

So here is the apparent problem I want to address: Americans of all political persuasions acknowledge that the debate over the welfare state in the United States is often about race, even when it claims not to be and even though most people on welfare are white. Yet the current discussion of race by the new black intellectuals seems to be about everything *but* the welfare state. They argue, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, that the welfare state and the electoral politics in which it is embedded are inadequate to the problems facing black Americans. Accordingly, critics on the left bitterly attack the prominent black thinkers for aiding the enemy, even though critics on the right remain wary, suspicious about where such new directions might lead. The widespread interest in the new black intellectuals, I would argue, grows in large part from this refusal to fit other people's expectations.

A Longer View

I think it may help to take a longer view than most commentators have taken so far. Journalists have been struck by the parallels between the new black intellectuals and the so-called "public intellectuals" of the 1940s such as Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson, and Philip Rahv. From the viewpoint of the historian of the nineteenth century, on the other hand, this phenomenon - indeed, much of the problem of the welfare state in the contemporary United States - is a subset of *the* American problem: making room in the nation's polity, economy, and culture for a large minority of people explicitly denied a place for many generations. That problem touches not merely resource allocation, party struggle, electoral alignments, and the like - each enormously complicated and contested in their own right - but is entangled in white and black understandings of sex, psychology, gender, violence, memory, religion, the work ethic, American nationalism, black nationalism, and guilt. The writings of the new black intellectuals struggle with that larger tangle of issues. That is both their strength and their point of vulnerability.

The positions of influence held by the new black intellectuals in the nation's leading universities and in prominent publishing houses, magazines, and television shows add weight to their opinions, but they also arouse doubt and suspicion.

4 Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993; Vintage ed., 1994), 4, 20, 59.

Have the real movers and shakers taken politics and left "values" and "culture" to the professors? Do black academics discuss these topics by default? Do the white-controlled media pay attention to black thinkers because they say what whites want to hear? Daryl Scott, a historian who has been included among the new black intellectuals but is skeptical of the label, argues that, like the first two black renaissances, this one is wrapped up with the needs, desires, and expectations of whites. "This Third Renaissance has to do with a body of literature that is heavily laced with black self-criticism, which is what white people are wanting to hear more and more nowadays to convince themselves they need not do anything more for black people. These new black intellectuals are helping that, saying that black folks in one form or fashion have shortcomings that need to be corrected by black people, not by [white] society at large."⁵

White readers do indeed seem to crave both titillation and reassurance from black public figures, eagerly lumping black writers into conventional "conservative" or "liberal" camps. The white "discovery" of these "new" "public" intellectuals ignores and devalues vital work done by black American intellectuals for the last thirty years. Magazines and newspapers of opinion, thriving on controversy and extreme opinions, have no sooner announced the exciting black intellectuals than they eagerly chronicle the divisions among them. The backlash has come fast and it has come hard. The literary editor of *The New Republic* announced that, curious, he sat down to read all of Cornel West's books. To his professed surprise and disappointment, he found them "almost completely worthless," ruined by self-indulgence and self-delusion. In a charged essay in the *Village Voice* Adolph Reed, himself black, offered a biting parallel from a different perspective. He portrayed the new black intellectuals as African porters accompanying white men on safari, "interpreting the opaquely black heart of darkness." "What do the drums say, Cornel?.... ('Drums say nihilism, moral breakdown. Need politics of conversion, love ethic.')" Reed denounces other of the new black intellectuals as "little more than hustlers, blending bombast, clichés, psychobabble, and lame guilt tripping." Henry Louis Gates's autobiographical *Colored People*, Reed quips, "could have been titled *Up from Slavery on Lake Wobegon*."⁶

Booker T. Washington

That last jibe, of course, refers to Booker T. Washington's autobiography, *Up from Slavery*. Indeed, Reed argues that Washington is the "direct progenitor" of today's

5 Scott quoted in Fulwood, "An Identity of Their Own", 32.

6 Leon Wieseltier, "The Unreal World of Cornel West: All and Nothing at All," *New Republic*, 6 March 1995, 212; "What Are the Drums Saying, Booker? The Current Crisis of the Black Intellectual," *Village Voice*, 11 April 1995, 31-36. It might be noted that West had criticized Reed by name in *Race Matters* as "mean-spirited."(65)

black public intellectuals, "the singular, trusted informant to communicate to whites what the Negro thought, felt, wanted, needed.... 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." Today's black public intellectuals, Reed charges, work with such chummy and mutually aggrandizing consensus that they function "as a kind of Tuskegee machine by committee."⁷

How could so much have happened in black Americans' lives over the last century and yet likening someone to Booker T. Washington remain the worst insult one black intellectual can say to another? One can perhaps see how writers such as Shelby Steele, who places his faith in individual effort and achievement, could be likened to Washington, but what about intellectuals who make no secret of their aversion to the market and its values? After a century in which progressives, New Dealers, Cold Warriors, and Great Society advocates expanded the role of the state in American society, we seem to have ended up remarkably close to where we began the debate a century ago.

One reason may be that there are such deep resonances between 1995 and 1895, when Washington gave his famous speech in Atlanta, the speech that catapulted him to national prominence. Consider the situation. It is late in a century that has seen enormous changes in the place of blacks in American society, changes brought by war, by political struggle, and by black activism and determination. The Democratic president in the White House seems unable to lead the country in a forceful way. The Republicans are threatening to take over the presidency in the coming elections. Party lines seem unstable, partisan loyalties weakening, and people talk of a third-party challenge. The world situation is uncertain and shifting, too, with a new international economic order rapidly taking shape and foreign markets playing an increasingly important role in American life.

Black people are caught in an especially precarious position. Recent declines in wages and earning power have hit them harder than anyone else in the country. The political gains they made a quarter of a century ago have been steadily eroded. White pundits speak boldly of inherent differences between white and black Americans, differences that cannot be overcome by governmental interference, differences that explain the place of black people at the bottom of the social order. The marketplace is praised as the ultimate arbiter, the only way to guarantee that the worthy get what they deserve. Violence against blacks has reached an all-time high and black families are under enormous pressure. Black faith in politics has plummeted, partly because black leaders seem to have wielded what power they

7 West, perhaps feeling the sting of earlier charges of this sort, has gone out of his way to renounce the Booker T. Washington model: "one point is beyond dispute," he announced in the introduction to *Race Matters*. "The time is past for black political and intellectual leaders to pose as *the* voice for black America.... The days of brokering for the black turf - of posing as the Head Negro in Charge (H.N.I.C.) - are over." West, *Race Matters*, 70.

had ineffectively and partly because of white efforts at gerrymandering, making registration more difficult, and playing blacks and poorer whites against one another.

Americans of all colors listen to hear what black people have to say about this desperate state of affairs. Some black spokesmen gain considerable attention and approval by calling on blacks to focus on the content of their characters, on education and hard work. Other black spokesmen, drawing on black traditions of racial solidarity, spirituality, and insistence on their rights as Americans, denounce such appeals for playing to white stereotypes.

There are obviously big differences between the political situation of blacks in the South in 1895, when disfranchisement was clamping down, and that of 1995, when the legal barriers to black participation have been removed. But the new black intellectuals have been writing in a time when the gains of the Second Reconstruction have been consolidated to much less effect than most Americans had expected. The increases in black voting and office holding after the 1960s have done little to change the sense of many black Americans that politics offers few solutions to their problems, and the conservative assault on the federal government that began in the 1980s has created a widespread sense of despair and apathy. Despite the very real opportunities offered to black Americans by the military and the federal bureaucracy, the state has been an undependable ally, of concerted assistance to black Americans for only a relatively brief period of the nation's history, and even then mainly in response to overwhelming black pressure. Moreover, a backlash began within a few years - little more than a decade. Blacks continue to believe in American ideals but, understandably, have little faith that the political machinery will be made to work as it should.

The sense of disfranchisement has gone even farther than that. For black intellectuals of all philosophies, the state has become associated with black poverty, dependence, and cooptation, with grudging and demeaning white assistance. The state has become associated with paternalist policies, with white people doing something *for* black people, when all the impulses among the new intellectuals, whatever their politics, run in the other direction.

Critics argue that the new black intellectuals should be using their influence to steer fellow blacks into political action, to, as one put it, "presume proprietorship of the institutions of governance and policy processes on an identical basis with other citizens." Martin Carnoy, in a recent and eloquent book, argues that Americans, if they want to change the racial situation in the United States, need to focus again on politics rather than on the three dominant visions of today. The first vision is that of pure individual responsibility working in a colorblind market, the vision of black intellectuals such as Steele, Sowell, and Loury. The second vision is of a racism so pervasive in American institutions - including the market - that little short of some kind of revolution can be done to overcome it, the vision of black intellectuals such as Derrick Bell. The third vision is of a changing international economy that indiscriminately strips away the jobs of all working-class Americans, regardless of race, the vision of black intellectuals

such as William Julius Wilson. Carnoy wants to substitute a fourth vision, that of pragmatic political action, of shrewder voting and renewed governmental involvement.⁸

Instead, the new black intellectuals talk about culture, about religion and history, about the strength to be had from collective memory or from popular music. Some critics write off the cultural slant of the new black intellectuals as so much leftover sixties nonsense, as pathetic attempts by academics to pretend that they are one with the people in the streets. This "cultural politics," Adolph Reed charges, "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 work place - but in the clandestine significance assigned to apparently apolitical rituals" such as worship and dance. When Cornel West left Princeton for Harvard a couple of years ago, the student newspaper at Princeton printed a cartoon that prompted a public apology. It showed West before a class saying "Today's Lecture is Entitled, 'Rhythm - Why None of You Have It, and How You Can Get it.'"⁹

I think we might grant the new black intellectuals more self-awareness than their critics permit, asking what other motivations they may have and what other sources they may be drawing on. It seems to me that they are trying to find a way to connect cultural concerns and political goals in a time and place where that connection has been broken, when Americans as a whole seem to have lost faith in any kind of efficacious welfare state. It seems to me that their work takes the shape it does because there seems to be so little faith in the sort of mainstream political action Reed and Carnoy want, especially among young black Americans. Reed sneers at what he calls the new black intellectuals' "fixation" on youth, who are "the least connected, the most alienated, and the least politically attentive cohort of the black population." This argument, one might think, could just as well be used to demonstrate the importance of what the new black intellectuals are trying to do.

The new black intellectuals are trying to make the best of a bad situation. Culture is indeed the strongest resource of black Americans, the source of their strength in the market place, their moral leverage with the rest of the country, their most potent political language. And in making this connection, black intellectuals look much more like W.E.B. Du Bois than they do like Booker T. Washington.

W.E.B. Du Bois

Just as 1995 looks a lot like 1895, so do the similarities between Du Bois and his present-day counterparts run deep, both in the situations they face and the solutions

8 Martin Carnoy, *Faded Dreams: The Politics and Economics of Race in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

9 *New York Times*, 1 May 1994, 1:5.

they offer. Du Bois has long been portrayed as the foil for Washington, his 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folk* contrasted with *Up From Slavery*, his supposed focus on political action played off against economic action, his radicalism against acquiescence (just as people insist on playing Martin Luther King off Malcolm X, or Richard Wright off Ralph Ellison). But things were not nearly that simple a century ago; we tend to make both Washington and Du Bois stand for both more and less than they actually embodied with their work and lives. By complicating that dichotomy at its source, we might help avoid the dichotomizing of black intellectuals in our own time.

First of all, Booker T. Washington was by no means apolitical. He spoke out against disfranchisement, segregation, and the closing of black schools in the late 1890s, using his considerable influence, and his own money, to fight behind the scenes. It could be argued, in fact, that Washington did more damage to the cause of black equality by the political power he wielded than by any failure to do so. He was the broker for white political power among blacks, deciding who would get what. It was not out of affection for an Uncle Tom that Theodore Roosevelt had Washington to dinner in the White House, but out of political calculation. Washington engaged himself, too, in the culture wars of the turn of the century; *Up From Slavery* was one of the first mainstream books in America to insist on capitalizing "Negro." Booker T. Washington may have given away too much in his bidding for white power and money, and he certainly broke the careers of black people who crossed him, but apolitical he was not.¹⁰

We are now beginning to understand, too, that W.E.B. Du Bois was more complicated than the anthologists would portray him. A superb new biography of Du Bois by David Levering Lewis helps us see things more fully. It is now clear that Du Bois has left a more complex legacy than we may have thought, one that helps explain the shape of some of today's debates. Du Bois foreshadowed invented - the current mode of black discourse: an essayistic, autobiographical, often ambivalent, sometimes mystical style that calls for deep-seated, rather undefined, change in political economy, black pride, and cultural politics. The new black intellectuals, like Du Bois before them, combine various academic disciplines, public and private roles, religious and secular, populist and elitist. Their books, like his, are elaborately, precariously, balanced.

Like most of today's black intellectuals, Du Bois came from a relatively comfortable background, knew white people while he was growing up, and was trained in elite institutions. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the complexity of the black social order proved a recurring theme in Du Bois's work. "The forward movement of a social group is not the compact march of an army," he argued, "where the distance covered is practically the same for all, but is rather the straggling of a crowd, where some of whom hasten, some linger, some turn back,

10 David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 384-385.

some reach far-off goals before others even start, and yet the crowd moves on." Until white people understood that diversity, Du Bois thought, they would be unable to see black Americans clearly. That diversity is a prevailing theme in the writings of today's intellectuals as well, a starting point, they insist, for any fresh insights.

Du Bois found himself distanced from other black Americans by his education, his tastes, and his manner. Much of his career was devoted to lessening that distance, establishing connections. He went into the Deep South to teach, though he was never to feel comfortable there, blaming the blood red country for the death of his beloved son. The black intellectuals of today often speak of building bridges between themselves and other black Americans. They make a point of speaking in churches and community forums, even as critics comment on their salaries, clothes, and cars.

Just as today's intellectuals were generally too young to have been very active participants in the civil rights movement but see it as the source of their moral energy, so was Du Bois too young to have participated in the Civil War and Reconstruction. That chronological distance did not prevent a strong identification of either generation with the events of a few decades earlier. A significant part of *Souls of Black Folk* (and Du Bois's subsequent career) was devoted to the uphill battle of defending Reconstruction, setting the record straight and finding a usable past.

Several of today's black intellectuals pride themselves on staying in touch with black popular culture, with rap and movies. They have been ridiculed for that interest, which commentators see as beside the point at best, delusional and dishonest at worst. But Du Bois, a secular man and a lover of European music, put the sorrow songs, the spirituals - the very origin of popular music in America - at the heart of his understanding of black America. Passages from the songs appeared at the beginning of each chapter, often juxtaposed to a stanza from a German poem. The African American, Du Bois insisted, could have the best of both Africa and America, could enjoy a complexity and depth of vision a white person would not. And black culture was a crucial part of that vision.

The famous rift between Du Bois and Washington did not originally grow out of the political divisions commonly attributed to them. For Du Bois and the rest of what he considered the Talented Tenth, education and self-cultivation were not merely means to a political or economic end but a major goal of the struggle in and of itself. When Booker T. Washington "derided Latin and philosophy and French on platforms across the country," Lewis has written, "Du Bois felt mocked in the very center of his considerable self-significance." Du Bois originally broke with Washington not so much because they differed on politics, but because Washington ridiculed Du Bois's cultural focus, his affection for languages, philosophies, and theories from the Continent.¹¹

11 Ibid., 261.

Washington, desperately involved in the *Realpolitik* of the turn-of-the-century South, had little understanding of or appreciation for what Du Bois was pursuing, a sort of metaphysics of race in America that made room for considerably more complexity than the dichotomized vision Washington offered. It was in the late 1890s that Du Bois articulated his vision of the "twoness" of African Americans, the way they were privileged and doomed to see everything from both the perspective of Americans and of blacks. "The destiny of the race could be conceived as leading neither to assimilation nor separatism but to proud, enduring hyphenation," Lewis has shrewdly observed. In *Souls* "the divided self would not remain flawed, compromised, unstable, or tragic. It would become in time and struggle stronger for being doubled, not undermined - the sum of its parts, not the dividend." Du Bois, in other words, made the first move away from racial essentialism. Like him, the thinkers of today recognize the power (and even appeal) of race while trying to deny its biological determinacy or total definition of their identities.¹²

Here's the irony: in his background and in his immediate concerns, Booker T. Washington had more in common with working-class black people than any black intellectual who has followed him, yet he has become synonymous with selling out. W.E.B. Du Bois, on the other hand, dressed in gloves and carrying a cane, had to work to understand poor black people - and, truth be told, to overcome his distaste for some of them. That effort proved to be the key to his greatness.

The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual

Today, too, the distance between academics and the people to whom and for whom they hope to speak is a recurring theme in discussions of black intellectuals. It provides much of the energy behind the writing, much of the anxiety that drives the enterprise. Listen to what Cornel West described in 1987 as "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual": "the minimal immediate impact of black intellectual activity on the black community and American society reinforces common perceptions of the impotence, even uselessness, of black intellectuals." While black Americans admired artists and activists, "the life of the mind is viewed as neither possessing intrinsic virtues nor harbouring emancipatory possibilities - solely short-term political gain and social status." "Successful" black intellectuals tended to shun the black side, he charged, while unsuccessful ones avoided the white world altogether and lapsed into silence or mediocrity.¹³

West argued back then, eight years ago, that the black intellectual must establish connection with the community, must draw on the power of tradition,

12 Ibid., 281-283.

13 Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," *Critical Quarterly* 29 (Winter 1987): 40-52.

must constantly question himself or herself, and refuse to fit too comfortably into the space created for black intellectuals by the white academy. West was trying to give intellectual life the same kind of engagement and excitement as jazz, as the church. Judging from the testimony of those who attend his public lectures, he does just that. Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, in their fiction and their nonfiction, wrestled with profound and knotty issues by personalizing them, embodying them. But West and other black intellectuals are trying to find voices that speak in more abstract ways, ways that move academic disciplines. They try to write not only out of twoness, but out of identities multiplied who knows how many times by the complexity of our age.

It is no accident that the black intellectuals who have been most visibly engaged in policy discussion and implementation in recent decades are those on the right. They speak in simpler, more familiar, even reassuring terms. They have also had party vehicles of considerably more power than those of the left. It may be, too, that workaday politics seems dull and compromised for people from the left who grew up with the civil rights movement as the measure of what really efficacious politics looked like. Moreover, they have worked in cultural studies rather than in political science. "Any self-respecting progressive intellectual will tell you (repeatedly) that intellectual work is 'political' work," a sympathetic Michael Bérubé writes in *The New Yorker*. "But not every kind of 'political' work has political effects, and at times it seems that you can redraw the map of cultural politics without touching the practical-political map of precincts, districts, policymakers, and appropriations committees."¹⁴

This is a powerful critique. Without power of the sort commonly meant by the word "political," any discussions of pride, culture, rights, economy, and even love will remain less meaningful than they should. But I think we need to be careful that we do not write off the "merely" intellectual and cultural work the new black intellectuals are doing. The anxiety of marginality and irrelevance that afflicted Cornel West in 1987 might well afflict any American intellectual of 1995. It is remarkable that the pride of place in the Third Renaissance belongs to philosophers, theologians, and literary professors, the very people notorious in the larger world for being irrelevant in the 1990s. If we are too quick to dismiss discussions of philosophy, literature, religion, music, and popular culture as irrelevant to the real work at hand, we devalue all intellectual work.

We need only recall, too, the disdain with which the "practical" Booker T. Washington is considered today to realize that the search for efficacy can backfire. We need only recall the respect with which the disconnected, elitist, intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois is held today to recognize that writing about history, popular culture, autobiography, and philosophy might also not be without consequence. It seems likely that new black leaders will be, like Du Bois, people who contain any number of identities. The civil rights movement was fought in part to create a

14 Bérubé, "Public Academy," 79.

country where black intellectuals could work in our best universities. But now that they are here, people wonder whether those positions of influence must not corrupt them. If they play purely academic roles, they are criticized for complacency and quiescence; if they speak to a general audience, they are criticized for selling out or dumbing down. Americans of all ethnicities need to get over their obsession with authenticity, with populist voices supposedly unpolluted by knowledge of anything beyond the background of their births.

One Final Lesson from History

One final lesson from history. If W.E.B. Du Bois had died in 1904 and left us merely *The Souls of Black Folk* we might be more struck by its similarities to *Up From Slavery* than we are by its elitism and its ambivalence about politics. It was the growth and struggle of the sixty years after *Souls* that showed us just what Du Bois had in mind, that showed him moving beyond the limitations of a somewhat arrogant thirty-five year old. The new black intellectuals are young and their best work may well lay before them. They seem to be trying to create a new grammar, a new language, to talk about race more deeply and honestly rather than to discuss immediate issues at hand in the same language that has left black people so despairing. They seem to be trying to find, or create, new forms of unity in a society in which radical pluralism may have run its course. Critics are right to say that the blurbs and reviews have been out of proportion to the actual accomplishments of the new black intellectuals. But maybe it is early yet.