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THE CRISIS OF HAROLD CRUSE AND ADOLPH REED: A PERSPECTIVE ON THE AMERICAN LETTER'S TRADITION

GLEN ANTHONY HARRIS, Ph.D.

History Department
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the issue for many black writers and intellectuals had not been whether they had specific responsibilities to their race but how best to fulfill them. Major ideological debates, during the post-Civil War period, on how best to integrate or assimilate millions of free blacks into America society riveted the black intellectual community. Some of these deliberations, on the merits of an industrial or a liberal arts education or minimizing the idea of social equality versus amplifying the idea of cultural dualism, were articulated in compelling essays by the formable black intellects Booker T. Washington (his 1895 Atlanta Exposition Address) and W.E.B. DuBois (his 1897 *Conservation of Races*). In between, there was the formidable 1896 Supreme Court Case, *Plessy v. Ferguson* that would initiate and sustain conversations and debates central to black life well into the first half of the 1900s. Black writers offered competing perspectives on the idea and meaning of social equity and racial prejudice, citizenship and the black middle class, intrinsic standards of beauty and aesthetic, and the more complex issues of Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism. A multitude of black journals and magazines, such as *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, the *Journal of Negro History*, *The Messenger*, *Negro Digest/Black World*, and *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, provided the platforms for these intricate debates.

In the period between the two World Wars, black newspaper editors, clergy, and leaders of community institutions attempted to articulate an awareness of the beauty of the black self. That is to say, these writers and intellects, like Alain LeRoy Locke, not only believed that black Americans had an important role to play in the general American culture but, by coherently documenting the abilities and successes of the growing black middle class, they could both guide black behavior and reformulate white attitudes towards blacks and black America. By the 1920s, there now existed a clear belief that the time had arrived for black Americans to become a race of free and self-assertive people. Indeed, it was Locke, who received his Ph.D. from Harvard University and was the first black American to be awarded a Rhodes scholarship, who had the foresight and insight to see this period as a New Negro Movement. This Movement, incorporating a new line of thought and method of approach, encompassed a society of mostly men, and women, of middle-class orientation, who sought to transform the stereotypical white image of black Americans by demanding their legal rights as citizens and asserting their own ideas in the cultural, political and civil rights arena of the United States.

Yet, some twenty years later, writers such as Ralph Waldo Ellison and E. Franklin Frazier began to articulate a different perspective of black America. Ellison, who was named after one of the preeminent scholars of the American Transcendentalist period, Ralph Waldo Emerson, felt that black writing should be rooted in American issues but should strive to transcend them and be international in style. Even more so, he stressed that black novelist and writers had to resist insularity and measure themselves against, what he perceived, as the greats of literature like Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and James Joyce. These arguments were supported and sustained in his fascinating 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*. Frazier was even direct.

Frazier asserted that the society of writers that comprised the New Negro Movement failed to develop an original radical philosophy of their own, and in so doing, led a directionless movement divorced from the politics and economics of black culture. Yet, it was the publication of his 1957 work, *The Black Bourgeoisie*, that set the standard for his challenging arguments. Attacking the foundational opinions of the New Negro Movement, Frazier set forth that not only was there no deeply shared spiritual or cultural essence among black Americans, but also that the development of racial pride kept black Americans from challenging segregation. There is an intellectual seriousness to the arguments put forward by Ellison and Frazier. Perhaps the primary purpose of these writers was to act as an invaluable mode of social and political critique.

Their views and ideas “appeared in the numerous black journals, cultural centers, and writer’s collectives” that evolved out of the need to situate black America within the intellectual fabric of white America.¹ However, by the mid-1960s, and beyond, there was a notable deficient central point or analysis of what black thinkers were saying and writing.

So, were black intellectuals in a crisis during the 1960s? This question, raised by Harold Cruse in his 1967 book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, was also addressed by Adolph Reed Jr. in a 1995 *Village Voice* article, “What Are the Drums Saying, Booker? The Current Crisis of the Black Intellectual.” The landscape of the American intellectual tradition—from John Winthrop’s most philosophical discourse on the Puritan vision, “A Model of Christian Clarity” (1630), to Samuel P. Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations” (1993) exposé on the importance of culture in delineating the future rather than economic interests or political ideologies—was based on arguments, disagreements, consensus, and analysis. The same can be said of the above question. Any response, it seems, would include arguments disagreements, consensus, analysis and further inquiry. What, for example, was the basis for the question? Possibly, for Cruse, the topics of debate chosen by black intellectuals. Whereas Reed questioned the quality of scholarship and the attempt by black intellectuals to straddle the academic and public sphere. Were Cruse and Reed attempting to incite a larger debate on the merits and methodology of black intellectual scholarship? Perhaps.

Cruse’s intention, in his book, was to offer an assessment and appraisal of conventional twentieth century black intellectual life, and parallel this critique with “a call to arms around a new approach to resolve the important unfinished business of black intellectuals.” Reed approached his question in a different manner. Reed argued that while black intellectuals used the American letter’s “prose to claim authority both as certified, world-class elite academics and as links to an extra—academic blackness,” they, in the process, evaded “the practical requirements of either role—to avoid both rigorous, careful intellectual work and protracted, committed political action.”² The ideology of American Letter’s was the connecting point that drove each writer to explore the foundation of black discourse during the 1960s and 1990s. So, it was conceivably that Cruse and Reed’s analytical perspective accentuate a crisis that was exclusive to black intellectuals.

Yet, if you listen to Russell Jacoby, in his 1987 book *The Last Intellectuals*, you may hear something different. He suggested that “if the western frontier closed in the 1890s, the cultural frontier closed in the 1950s.” Not just for black intellectuals, but all intellectuals. Nevertheless, during the cry for racial justice, in the 1960s and early 1970s, black scholars and intellectuals found themselves in a strong black mainstream. Often excluded from the culture of American life, the public was now interested in what blacks were thinking and doing. Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964), Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1967), the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School, and black studies programs, sold well and prompted vigorous debates in scholarly circles. But more to the point, the Brown decision in 1954, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and other legislation, “combined to create the conditions for a notion of African American citizenship that was a radical break from the past. Even in the face of brutal and persistent racism, to be black and American was now also legally empowered.”³

Does this answer the question, how did racial discrimination and prejudice shape the emergence and activities of black intellectuals during the 1960s and beyond? No. But it does provide an indication that racial discrimination and prejudice did influence the activities of black intellectuals during the 1960s and beyond. Modern black intellectuals came of age in a world fundamentally different from that of their parents. After the Brown decision, as historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. explained, black intellectuals operated in a “world whose increased opportunities they did not themselves have the burden of bringing into existence.” The decision was “something that would open up another world to us, a world our parents could never have known.” Adding to this point, Robert S. Boynton remarked in *The Atlantic Monthly*, “this is not to say that black intellectuals grew up, or are now entirely free of America’s racist legacy but only that they were spared the most brutal legally sanctioned impediments that their parents had taken for granted.”⁴

This brief insight of black intellectual life is significant. Though there are books that looked at, spoke about, or delineated American Letter’s—Merle Curti’s *The Growth of American Thought*, David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper’s *The American Intellectual Tradition*, V. P. Franklin’s *The Making of the African American Intellectual Tradition*, sociologist Jerry Gafio Watt’s *Heroism and the Black Intellectual*, and Kenneth Robert Janken’s *Rayford W. Logan and the Dilemma of the African American Intellectual*, there is a need for a sustained critical examination of black intellectuals. No historian, outside of Hortense J. Spiller, has attempted to provide a modern historical comparison of the crisis that black intellectuals face.⁵

What about the question raised by Cruse? What about the critique of black intellectuals by Reed? These questions, and those previously asked, were important to the role of black intellectuals in the mid-1960s and mid-1990s. Yet, before further analysis can be provided, there is a critical need to define the parameters of discourse for the following question: what is an intellectual and did the definition change over the thirty year period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s?

Edward Said

According to Edward Said, in his book *Representations of the Intellectual*, “the intellectual plays a role as an outsider, ‘amateur,’ and disturber of the status quo.” Using idealistic writing to define the intellectual and underline the intellectual’s role as outsider, Said explained that, “the true intellectual is a man or woman of the left, a dissident, forever. He is neither a pacifier or a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwillingly, but actively willing to say so in public.”⁶

Said’s argument for the role of the intellectual as an outsider was based on his belief that in the outputting of studies about American Letter’s “there has been far too much defining of the intellectual, and not enough stock taken of the image, the signature, the actual intervention and performance, all of which taken together constitute the very lifeblood of every real intellectual.” This was a confusing perspective because it contradicted the role of the true intellectual within American Letter’s. The challenge of intellectual life, as a disturber of the status quo, “is to be found in dissent against the status quo at a time when the struggle on behalf of underrepresented and disadvantage groups seem so unfairly weighted against them.”⁶

Said, himself a persuasive advocate of an autonomous role for scholars, recognized that intellectuals faced a choice of confronting or ignoring pressures outside the realm of the intellectual. There was the notion that “all intellectuals represent something to their audiences and in so doing represent themselves to themselves.” Do academic intellectuals “think of [themselves] as providing objective advice for pay, or do [they] teach [their] students” that ideas and arguments have true value. All intellectuals live in a society and are members of a nationality with its own language, tradition, and historical situation. But, “to what extent are intellectuals servants of these actualities...What of the intellectuals’ relationship with the academy, church, and professional organizations?” Said’s point was that the principal duty of the intellectual of American letter’s was the search for relative independence from such pressures.⁷

Although Said was not completely precise, accessible and economical in his representation of the intellectual, he, nonetheless, provided a case study involving the public role of the intellectual as outsider, ‘amateur,’ and disturber of the status quo. Still, did Said’s perspective apply to, generally speaking, black intellectuals during the mid-1960s and 1990s?

Most intellectuals, during the 1960s, were college professors who did not have a ‘public’ beyond the campus walls. Has this always been the case? Not during the mid-1990s. Intellectual work during this period was initiated by someone who was very much engaged in the public realm. That is, the fundamental definition of an intellectual “was that he was a writer, informed by a strong moral impulse, who addressed a general, educated audience in accessible language about the most important issues of the day,” reviewed books, wrote essays, and dealt with cultural criticism.⁸ Still, it should be questioned whether these definitions of the intellectual were all inclusive? Did black intellectuals, during the mid-1960s and mid-1990s fit within this tight context? They should.

Both the American and the African American letter’s tradition is, somewhat, based on the struggle for freedom. What is different was the method used to express this struggle. As mentioned, the discourse of American letter’s was based on, and expressed, in sermons, addresses, letters, treatises, and essays. Conversely, the discourse of the African American letter’s tradition, although based on similar variables, was most notably expressed through, both, black journalism and the autobiographical genre. The methodology of black journalism within black letter’s was two-fold: first, to establish a mode of communication among blacks with white American and to renovate the public mind; second, to build up a public sentiment and to unify and educate black America. The autobiographical tradition, the most important genre in the African American intellectual tradition, defined the nature of the relationship between ideology and personal experience and fulfilled the need to define the individual “black self” to a society that denied the existence of a black reality.

In addition, narratives, like *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N.C.* (1842) and *The Narrative of Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), “provided a personal account of what freedom meant and how it could be achieved. African-American intellectuals and artist in the...twentieth century wrote their autobiographies with the political and social circumstances for African Americans in mind, and used their personal experiences as a mirror to reflect that larger social context for Afro-Americans.”⁹ So, yes, the above definition of the intellectual did fit black intellectuals during the mid-1990s. But, what was the crisis expressed by Cruse and Reed?

Harold Cruse

Cruse, former professor emeritus of African American studies at the University of Michigan, was born in Petersburg, Virginia, 1916. After spending time in the military, he began a career as an activist and social critic in New York. His thinking about the roles of black intellectuals and the letter’s tradition in the United States was spelled out in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. An examination of the *Crisis* provides evidence that Cruse can be viewed as a ‘Sadist’ intellectual, not only because he used his voice to dissent against the topics of debate chosen by black intellectuals, but also, because he was someone whose whole being was staked on a critical sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, ready-clichés, or the smooth, every-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful of conventional have to say, and what they do. Cruse was not passively unwilling, but actively willing to say so in public.

The crisis, for Cruse, had several points, not the least of which was that twentieth-century black intellectuals were disillusioned to the point that they “failed to fashion a way of thinking and acting that fuses the ethnic sentiments of the black community and the individualism of American social life.” That is, black intellectuals who did not envision an sovereign ethnic vision in their work circumvented the important responsibility of forging their arguments in the larger scheme of American discourse. The void they left meant the “black aesthetic perspectives” could not be “represented in the battle that WASPs and other ethnic groups” were waging for American cultural influence.¹⁰ This failure to grasp the nature of American letter’s provided insight on the mythical doctrine of black intellectuals during the 1960s. Cruse agreed.

In a 1968 *Negro Digest* essay Cruse effectively demonstrated that “during the first half of the 1960s there were no events that mirrored the utter impoverishment of Negro creative intellectuals so much as those publicized glamorous meetings that go under the imposing title of ‘Negro Writers’ Conferences.” The reason for this was that “these literary conventions-in-black-and-tan,” as Cruse referred to them, were “the nearest thing imaginable to those congressional talkfests in Washington, D.C., where every representative knows it is his bounded duty to be present... This is another way of saying that Negro Writers’ Conferences settle nothing – not even a decent new literary review – which is the least any bunch of serious, self-respecting writers with a gripe ought to do.”¹¹

Specifically, Cruse was speaking of the Harlem Writers Guild conferences (1965), staged under the direction of the New School for Social Research. The two writers’ Conferences were The American Festival of Negro Arts (AFNA) and the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC). Cruse asserted that “the uniqueness of AFNA, and its readiness to deal with Negro-white cultural fundamentals, both ideologically and institutionally, was indicated by the fact that the AFNA affair was not just a ‘Negro writers’ conference. It attempted to deal also with painting, music, the philosophy of Negritude, literary criticism, and enlisted the participation of Africans interested in Negro cultural image. It represented a solid and substantial new direction, with intelligent, critical and probing, and educational discussions.”¹²

Contrasted by the AMSCA, which acted out, in vivid detail, “the crisis of the Negro intellectual, with true-to-life players mouthing lines, and speeches they had rehearsed for 20 years.” Although many papers were read, the deliberations around these various papers became emotional and intellectual bedlam. “Several of these papers posed problems and conceptions, raised questions and suggested directions which the panelist could neither debate nor pursue to any definite conclusions.”¹³ Cruse’s intellectual position, that black intellectuals failed to synthesize politics, economics, and culture, can be traced to when he was writing articles in the *Liberator*, from 1963-1964. In an article entitled “Rebellion or Revolution?” Cruse displayed the thought process that he would later develop in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*.

Using a intellectual perspective to challenge and critique the abbreviated ideas of mid-twentieth century black movements and their failure to embrace the idea of American letter’s, Cruse reasoned that the post-1950s black movement represented an oblique challenge to the capitalists status quo not because it was programmatically anti-capitalist,

“But because ‘full integration’ of the Negro in all levels of American society” was not possible within the present framework of the American system. Then, drawing a connection between American’s dilemma with race and its lofty institutions, and in the process erasing any notion of ambiguity as to where he stood on this point, Cruse remarked, “if this sounds categorically absolute one can only say that the time has come for blunt appraisals of reality: The United States cannot and never will solve the race problem unless Americans change the economic, political, cultural and administrative social organization of this country in various sectors.”¹⁴ Cruse’s point was that black intellectuals, from the 1960s on, neglected to formulate their discourse into a structured economic, political, and cultural ideology.

In a subsequent article, Cruse placed the cultural sector above those of politics and economics, and revealed where black intellectuals should have devoted their attention. While the black rebellion of the mid-1960s emerged out of the “semi-colonial social conditions of others it must have different objectives in order to be considered revolutionary.” In other words, Cruse remarked, we must locate and recognize “the weakest sector of the American capitalist ‘free enterprise’”—the cultural front—“that section of the American economic system that has to do with the ownership and administration of the cultural communications in America, that is devoted to the economics and aesthetic ideology involved in the cultural Arts of America...” and strike there. The intent here was “that the only observable way in which the Negro rebellion can become revolutionary in terms of American conditions is for the Negro movement to project the Concept of Cultural Revolution in America.”¹⁵

During the mid-1960s, a cultural revolution was the only kind of revolution black Americans could make because they represented the only ethnic group who had a political right to raise such a demand. Hence, the black revolution, from Cruse’s perspective, could “be economic, social, political or administrative or racial in form but it must be cultural in content.” If it was not cultural in content it would not be “revolutionary but a mere rebellion without ideas ‘to fit the world into a theoretic frame.’”¹⁶

For black Americans, the cultural spheres seemed distant and remote when compared to the practical aspects or race relations. Thus Cruse understood that it was only through a cultural analysis of the black approach to group politics that “error, weaknesses and goal failures can cogently be analyzed and positively worked out.” Furthermore, there was a problem with the origins of black intellectual politics. In the first half of the twentieth century, black intellectuals, although attempting to forge their own ideas, took their political schemes from whites and did not grasp the fact that “from the native American Negro point of view, neither politics, economics, nor culture took precedence over each other but were inseparable and had to function together.”¹⁷ This focus on politics, absent the logical connection to economics, provided an interesting perspective and foreshadowed the problem of cultural leadership.

Cultural leadership was not only a problem of the faculty orientation of black creative intellectuals; it was also “a problem of the reeducation of the black bourgeoisie, especially its new, younger strata.” Yet, Cruse’s position was somewhat problematic. Where Cruse was succinct on the tribulations of black intellectuals and their connection to the discourse of American letter’s, he failed, as James Haughton of *Science and Society*, related, to “explore in depth the cultural programs needed to full an identity vacuum.”¹⁸

The problem with the identity vacuum was that black intellectuals during the first decades of the twentieth century botched any attempt at a serious critique of the situation. That is, if the white intellectual’s discontent was an extension of the crisis in Western European cultural and spiritual values, then any number of “the Harlem Renaissance intellectuals should have pointed out,” in newspaper op-ed pieces, articles, and/or journal essays, that the black intellectual’s coming-of-age was not only a counter trend to white discontent, but a twentieth century harbinger of the African awakening in political and cultural terms. “Such an intellectual premise fully established in the 1920s, cultivated from 1930 to the 1950s” would not have permitted the growth of the identity vacuum in American letter’s that the black movement of the 1960s, including its involvement, or lack of, with Jewish Americans, encountered.¹⁹ Indeed, black and Jewish relations was another, though by no means the last, issue Cruse introduced to explain the crisis of Negro intellectuals. Did Cruse’s assessment contain, possibly, a hint of anti-Semitism or Jewish tension with black intellectual discourse?

The notion of identity was a central theme in the life of black and Jewish writers during the first half of the twentieth century because American Jews linked better treatment of blacks with better treatment for Jews. That is, the variables that black Americans found most problematic—black oppression and persecution, black achievement and black potential, the creativity of a distinct black culture—related to the Jewish quest for identity and were areas of concern to Jews about themselves.

Cruse's asserted that the great prevarication of black intellectuals, especially Richard Wright and James Baldwin, from the 1930s on, was that black American never achieved, or were not allowed to achieve, what other organized national groups achieved within the Communist Left—intellectual freedom and a venue into the American discourse on race relations—and never fought for the right to do so.

The Jewish dominated American Communist Left is essential to understanding Cruse's argument. A number of occurrences accounted for this. First, not only did the American Communist Left of the 1930s play a significant role in defending the rights of black Americans, by fighting racism within the American labor movement and Jim Crowism outside, but it also provided a 'letter's' venue for black intellectuals by appointing Wright to be the Harlem editor of their newspaper the *Daily Worker* and publishing his essays and articles in the Communist magazine *New Masses*. Indeed, the major event that influenced Wright's life, and most of his fiction, was his involvement with the Communist Left. It was in the Communist Left that Wright had considerable interaction with Jews and provided the foundation on which he constructed his characterization of black and Jewish relations, especially as depicted in his 1941 novel *Native Son*.

Second, the American Communist Left, along with black scholar Claude McKay, was instrumental in establishing the American Negro Labor Congress, which mobilized and coordinated black workers, fought to abolish lynching, industrial discrimination, and political disfranchisement, and worked for the segregation of the races. Yet, in a convoluted way, black intellectual, allowed Jewish leaders who came out of the Jewish Federation to dictate the discourse on the Negro problem in America.

This was very problematic for Cruse because, as he explained, not only did Jews dominate the Communist Left during the 1930s, but their dominance "culminated in the emergence of...assimilated Jewish Communists, who assumed the mantle of spokespersonship on Negro affairs, thus burying the Negro radical potential deeper and deeper in the slough of white intellectual paternalism." That is, the Communist Left "assumed that neither Negro Americans at large, nor his Negro brethren in the ranks of the Party, had any real cultural identity to defend, especially in cultural publications supported by Party funds. With Negroes in the People's Front," Cruse asserted, "everything went under the heading of Negro-white working-class unity." Second, "in the name of Negro-white unity (the Party's main interracial slogan), the Jewish Communists acted out the role of political surrogates for the white working class, and thereby gained the political whip of intellectual and theoretical domination of the Negro question."²⁰

Historians Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornel West recognized this historical tension between black intellectuals and Jews. Gates, writing in the *New York Times*, explained that "in the background of tensions between blacks and Jews is a pattern of shifting relations between blacks and liberalism, Jews and liberalism, liberalism and civil right." Gate's explanation furnished a clear connection between Jewish association with progressive political movements and nineteenth and twentieth century black intellectuals. He made clear that, "Jews pinned their hopes for integration into modern society on promoting the moral sense but also, in grand prophetic tradition, did blacks—from David Walker and Frederick Douglas in the 19th century to Martin Luther King Jr. and, yes Malcolm X [a bitter critic of liberalism's failings]." West believed that the stalemate in black-Jewish relations would be overcome only when "self-critical exchanges" took place within and across black and Jewish communities and American letter's, "not simply about their own groups interest but also, and more important about what being black or Jewish means in ethical terms,"²¹ including both current integrationist and separatist philosophies.

Still, the dynamics of integration were its social aims. As Cruse suggested, the integrationist philosophy saw black "ghettos as products of racial segregation that should not even exist. Hence nothing in the tradition of ghettos is worth preserving even when ghettos do exist in actuality." The idea here was that "black power seen as self-defeating from the other end and reduced to a game of dozens: I'm blacker than you, and so is my mama, so I'm purer than you and your mama. Therefore I am also more nationalistic than you, and more politically trustworthy than you and your mama, in the interests of Black Power."²²

So, for Cruse, the fundamental cause of the crisis of black intellectuals was twentieth century black and Jewish relations, the integrationist myth, the failure of black intellectuals to deal with ethnic group competition and to assert and develop cultural forms that would have a cohesive force that could have filled the 'identity vacuum' that the Negro movement of the 1960s has encountered are advanced. Cruse positions were not absolute and, as much as anything else, perpetuated the mid-1960s black scholar's search for space and identity in the American letter's intellectual circles.

Indeed, it could be suggested that black scholar's quest for identity during the 1960s, as an Afro-American, as a black, as an independent person, had placed him in a crisis situation. Cruse's inquiry was a historical review that merited reading not only by black intellectuals "but by all who will profit from these Negroes' work as they make their way."²³ Though not as strict and structured, Reed's position on black intellectual's connection (or disconnection) to white American's Letter's Tradition mirrored Cruse's.

Adolph Reed

Reed, who once remarked that Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* was the one book that stood "out as a seminal in its attempt to locate [black] efforts in the historical that we so desperately needed," was a worker in the student, anti-war, GI and poor people's movements during the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁴ Reed was best known, until the early 1990s, as the author of *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon: The Crisis of Purpose in Afro-American Politics*. He is the frequent contributor to *The Village Voice*, *The Nation*, and *The Progressive*, and a professor of political science and American studies at Northwestern University. Reed, similar to Cruse, can be viewed as a 'Saidian' intellectual because of his position as a dissenter and disturber of the status quo.

Reed's April 1995 essay, "What Are The Drums Saying Booker? The Current Crisis of the Black Intellectual," impacted the debate and discourse concerning black intellectuals in ways analogous to Cruse. What was his point in writing the article? The article, directed at the small audiences of five well-known black intellectuals (Henry Louis Gates Jr., Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, Bell Hooks, and Robin Kelly), took issue with both the quality of their scholarship and the way these intellectuals attempted to straddle the academic and public spheres. Indirectly, Reed, intending to ignite the powered keg of what he felt was low-grade discourse on the state and fate of black intellectual scholarship, was, like Cruse, frustrated with the general state of African American intellectual culture and society.

Reed's first point of contention with black intellectuals was one of perspective. He used the term 'public' intellectual to describe black thinkers. His use stemmed from the fact that "several youngish black professors with ties to the academic left began using it to refer to themselves and one another." Reed, aligning his commentary with Cruse's perspective on the black scholar's search for identity during the mid-1960s, believed that black intellectual's identity was not of their own making. Indeed, Reed felt their identity was "most clearly the product of the cultural wing of the left academy and its extra-mural offshoots." As he assailed white intellectuals, not for inventing the identity, but for "anointing it as a specific, notable status in upper-middle-brow American culture," Reed, in a manner similar to what Russell Jacoby argued in his book *The Last Intellectuals* (1987), attempted to "consider exactly with this phenomenon was, where it came from, and what it meant."²⁵

Jacoby, providing an examination of the 1950s New York Intellectual's Dwight MacDonald, Irving Howe, and Philip Rahv, among others, explained that as public intellectuals, they, unlike the cohort of black public intellectuals, whom, as Reed would suggest, articulated a communal racial voice, 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."²⁶

Reed paralleled his argument to Jacoby's explanation to suggest that we might see mid-1990s "black public intellectuals as lineal descendants of the authors of 19th century slave narratives... The major difference is that slave narrators—with the partial exception of Frederick Douglas—did not attain celebrity as individuals." Yet, similar to Cruse, Reed, by linking black public intellectual life with slave narrators, indirectly sketched an American letter's argument. Slave narrators, and their writings, comprised one of the most extensive and influential traditions in African American ideas and culture. Narratives, such as *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760), and *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave* (1831), evoked the national myth of the American individual's quest for freedom, and reveal the complexities of the dialogue between whites and blacks in this country. Still, Reed implied that the black public intellectual's more "direct progenitor was Booker T. Washington, whom more than Douglas ever had been, became [the] singular, trusted informant to communicate to whites what the Negro thought, felt, wanted, needed...[and] to that extent he originated a new model of generic Black leader—the racial voice accountable to no clearly identifiable constituency among the spoken for."²⁷ Reed was not altogether accurate. Washington, he of the conservative, self-help, industrial education, and racial accommodations idealism, embraced the American letter's notion of American idealism—lassie-fair capitalism, Christian morality, and middle-class values.

In this light, Washington's wholly identifiable constituency were upper-and-middle class white philanthropists and supporters whom embraced his written and spoken notions that avoided references to southern racial conflict. Indeed, through Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (now Tuskegee University) and his autobiography *Up From Slavery* (1901), Washington went as far as to display, write, and argue against the prevailing belief that racism was pervasive among southern whites while attempting to inspire white Americans with a sense of moral and social obligation. The overall issue here was that Reed allowed Washington, whom was anointed by a specific, notable status in upper-middle-brow American culture, to escape the intellectual criticism that he directed at mid-1990s black intellectuals.

Reed believed that black intellectuals, during the fifty years between Washington's death and the death of Jim Crow, did initiate discourse on the definition, status, and foundations of black literature and identity, and "topical critiques of ideological programs and tendencies in social affairs, and the character and obligations of Afro-Americanist intellectual activity itself." His point was not that this type intellectual debate sustained itself from the 1920s to the 1970s, but rather that "each of these discursive moments, [were] 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."²⁸ If Reed was correct in his assessment, this predicament raised specific complications for black public intellectuals address. Conceivably, this assessment can best be addressed by appraising the work of New Negro Movement scholar James Weldon Johnson.

Johnson, perhaps best known for authoring one of the most significant novels prior to the Harlem Renaissance, *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (1912), argued a point, similar to Reed's, in his December, 1928 *The American Mercury*, essay "the Dilemma of the Negro Author." Johnson discussed the problems of the black writer trying to deal with two distinct audiences—one black, the other white. Although Johnson's thesis focused on the black scholar's creative writing proficiency, this essay could be applied to the dilemma that confronted black public intellectuals. Johnson did not provide an apology for or ask any special allowances for the creative black writer, but he note that black intellectuals did "face more than a double audience; it is a divided audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view."²⁹ Johnson's, although he paralleled his argument on W.E.B. Dubois's well-discussed early twentieth century hypothesis of "double consciousness," advanced the idea, during this coming-of-age period, that black intellectuals were concerned with a not yet named, third audience.

Adding a third audience, what would later be defined as the "transracial community of Progressive activists," to this equation provided more depth to Reed's argument. He suggested that black intellectuals, who engaged this sort of defense psychology, undermined an "examination of the black experience by grounding Afro-Americanist inquiry in the narrow, other directed objective of demonstrating black people's equal humanity."³⁰

According to Reed, contemporary public intellectuals during the mid-1990s were "unique in that they exhibit little sense of debate or controversy among themselves as a cohort." His point was "not that controversy by itself makes for purity of legitimacy but that, in this instance at least, the absence of controversy betrays a lack of critical content and purpose." Continuing his Saidian perspective, Reed justified his harsh criticism. He questioned whether a reader, familiar with the work of any of these public intellectuals could "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?" Reed resolved, "I'd bet not, because in this arena prominence of author counts more than weight of utterance."³¹

Perhaps, by explaining the posture of black public intellectuals, it becomes possible to illustrate the position they should have taken. Black public intellectuals, in their assertion to "speak from the edges of convention," presented a twofold audience problem. First, for black audiences, "the focus of critical intellectual activity is—or should be—on careful, tough-minded examination of the multifarious dynamic shaping black social life." Second, to that extend, black intellectual's positioned themselves "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.³² This was an interesting and useful perspective because Reed used this argument to critique the limitations of black public intellectual identity.

Reed explained, in line with Washington's 1895 Atlanta Exposition public expression that whites American's should support black America's attempts to advance socially, that the public intellectuals' authenticity was "conferred by white opinion makers." First, one becomes recognized as black voice in the intellectual apparatus of the left [and] to qualify one need not even put forward a critique that seems leftist by usual stands: secular, rooted in political economy, focused on stimulating political mobilization. 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."³³ Was this the path that current black public intellectuals—Gates, West, Dyson—have taken? According to Reed, yes.

Reed's primary criticism of black public intellectuals was that they offered pretentious blather and their style had a malevolent effect on black American life. He offered that the black public intellectual was "by and large an excuse, the marker of a sterile, hybrid variant of 'bearing witness' that when all 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." Reed added that, "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." So, was there reason for concern? Yes; because as Reed underscored, "public intellectuals cohere around a more or less deceptively conservative politics that is particularly dangerous at this moment in our history."³⁴

Still, general, although constructive, questions, could be asked: Was Reed concealing an innate antagonism or covetousness directed at those intellectuals whom had attained a public following that he had yet to achieve? Did Reed's criticism fit within the contextual Saidian method? Moreover, did Reed derive excessive pleasure from the nullification of others, "especially those on the liberal left," as he is frequently accused? Not surprisingly, Reed's criticism, continued and sustained the American's letter's debate initiated by Cruse some thirty years earlier. Listen to Cornel West in *Linguafrance*. "In so many ways brother Adolph is a sad case of one who has squandered so much of his promise and talent primarily owing to the fact that there is so much hatred and contempt in his writing—and, I suspect, in his life, too. That's sad, because when you read his work in the journals of *Endarch* and *Telos*, you had some fascinating formulations at work." Continuing West suggested that "owing to whatever it is—insecurity, intellectual laziness—he just ended up doing this flat journalistic stuff." Again, not surprisingly, American letter's commentary, oftentimes refined, could also be exacting. Case in point would be Dyson's response to Reed's assertions that he was "playing 'Goebbels' the shrewd and perverted Nazi propagandist, to Farrakkan's Hitler." Dyson astutely offered Reed: "Yeah, that's pretty libelous, but the guy who wrote it is named Adolf—I guess it was a case of vicarious nostalgia, and he understands the problem"³⁵

Dyson was well aware of the intricate requirements of American letter's and true intellectual work. Indeed, he addressed Reed's analysis of the prominence of mid-1990s black public intellectuals by drawing a correlation between the black intellectual's position in American society and the discourse on race in America. He suggested the fact that race was "being bitterly debated as the national issue" had a lot to do with the rise of black public intellectuals. "Race has always been a deep, characteristic American problem. The refusal to face race, or our courageous confrontation with its complex meanings, defines our national identity." Still, Dyson acknowledged the legitimate criticism directed at public intellectuals by maintaining that "at some point, the claim that the work of black public intellectuals is simply not rigorous enough, that its intellectual predicates are too thin and can be legitimately made about all public intellectuals. The genre of public intellectual work is to itself indictable on that charge."³⁶

Nonetheless, a distinction could be made between an intellectual and a scholar, within American letter's, commenting on the responsibility of black public intellectuals. "True enough," Dyson remarked, "we can't equate an op-ed piece on the unfairness of sending blacks to jail in disproportionate numbers with a dense description of the ways criminality has functioned to stigmatize black folk in America. Black public intellectuals are leaders of a particular kind. We stir up trouble in broad daylight so that the pieties by which we live and principles for which we die, both as a people and a nation, are subject to critical conversation." This last point was of critical importance, for while Dyson was directly responding to Reed's criticism, he obliquely answered a question raised by Jerry Gafio Watts in the early 1990s. Watts, reflecting on what he suggested was the central point for black intellectuals, questioned how it was possible for black public intellectuals "to sustain artistically viable creative angst's and disciplines in the face of sometimes overwhelming debilitations and influences of racial subjugation."³⁷

Scholars Robert S. Boynton and Michael Hanchard, versed on the discourse of black intellectual accountability, addressed the question. Boynton, concurring with Dyson and referencing Jacoby, recognized that black public intellectuals, during the mid-1990s, redefined the role of a public intellectual. In chronicling the demise of a particular constellation of thinkers, Jacoby, in his book *The Last Intellectual*, was half right. He neglected the emergence of a new public and the new public intellectuals who speak to it. Boynton explained that black intellectuals were “important not only because they address an emerging set of public concerns but also because they provide a viable, if radically different, image of what a public intellectual can be.” Hanchard, writing in *The Nation*, envisioned a larger picture. He suggested that the domain of American intellectual discourse needed ideas that situated “an isolated speech or performance by a black public intellectual within a larger context: progressive black figures’ lack of access to mainstream media and political institutions—and, ultimately, the relative inability of these intellectuals to effect political change. Black progressives need to begin discussions on how to suture the bits and pieces of coalitions around common issues plaguing black middle-class and Working-class communities.”³⁸ Hanchard’s other concern, that Reed overlook, centered on the historically limited accessibility black intellectuals had to the larger domain of American discourse.

Hanchard’s voiced his trepidation in the journal *Social Text*. He asserted that “in keeping with the continued segregation of black public discourse from other national discussions, black intellectuals are rarely—if ever—situated within the broader analysis of the history of public intellectuals more generally, either in the United States or anywhere else.” Familiar with the many recent articles that compared “the recent proliferation of black public intellectuals to the generation of emergent Jewish intellectuals in the post-World War II period,” Hanchard understood that none of them attempted “to compare black public intellectuals to their counterparts in the rest of the Hemisphere, in Latin America or the Caribbean.”³⁹ Although Hanchard made a valid assessment, the following determination is required: Are Cruse and Reed dealing with the same issues? In one respect yes; when defining intellectuals and dealing with an identity vacuum of black intellectuals. But, Cruse and Reed may be asking different questions on the same issues.

Cruse asked what was the crisis of the Negro intellectual, and preceded to answer this question in terms of the topics of debate. As explained, the fundamental cause of the crisis of black intellectuals centered primarily on how to deal with ethnic group competition. But also of importance was the assertion and development of cultural forms that would have a cohesive force that could have filled the identity vacuum that the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s encountered. For Cruse, the debate on the crisis of the Negro intellectual revolved not on the limiting elements of the Black Arts Movement, which was perceived as the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept and envisioned an art that spoke directly to the needs and aspirations of black America. Whereas, black arts and Black Power related broadly to the black scholar and intellectual’s desire for self-determination and nationhood, by focusing on the nationalistic concepts of the relationship between art and politics and the art of politics, Cruse’s debate on the crisis of the black intellectual revolved around the political, economic, and cultural aspects not addressed completely by black intellectuals.

Reed’s argument, however, revolved around the issues of scholarship and the attempt, by black intellectuals, to straddle the academic and public sphere. Add, perhaps, a little academic jealousy, and you have cause and effect. Reed, in this light, suggested that black intellectuals desperately needed, in the American letter’s tradition, to stimulate “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 aim at crafting agendas that define and realize black interests accordingly.”⁴⁰ In this light, the tie-in between Cruse and the 1960s and Reed and the 1990s was that this debate revived the notion that rigorous dialogue is healthy within an intellectual community.

Endnotes

- [1] John Hope Franklin, forward in William Banks. *Black Intellectuals: Race Responsibility in American Life*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), ix.
- [2] Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership*. (William Morrow and Company, New York, 1967), ii; for a broadly condensed overview of Cruse’s ideology on black Americans within the context of cultural development and American identity see: *The Essential Harold Cruse*:

- A Reader. Edited by Stanley Crouch, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 3-27; Scott Sherman, "Fighting Words: Adolph Reed's Crusade Against The New Black Intellectuals," *Linguafrance*, March 1997, 7(3): 38.
- [3] Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1986), xii; Robert S. Boynton, "the New Intellectuals," *The Atlantic Monthly*. March 1995, Vol. 275, 61.
- [4] Henry Louis Gates Jr., in Robert Boynton's "the New Intellectuals," 62; Boynton, 62; for a insightful sociological study of black intellectual thought during the Harlem Renaissance, see, Robert E. Washington, *The Ideologies of African American Literature: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Nationalist Revolt* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 36-38, 317-318.
- [5] Hortense J. Spillers, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date," *Boundary Vol. 21*, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994), 65-116; An essay I would consider required reading; Spillers provides an insightful and credible, although non-comparative, perspective of the dilemma that black intellectuals faced during the early 1990s; for an perceptive and astute literary take on the usefulness of critical discourse in American Letter's, see, Tejumola Olaniyan, "African-American Discourse and the Invention of Cultural Identities," *African American Review Vol. 26*, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), 533-545.
- [6] Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*. (Pantheon Books, New York, 1994), xvi.
- [7] Said, xvii; xviii.
- [8] Said, 7.
- [9] Boynton, 53; for a more comprehensive examination of the methodology black writers and journalist constructed to participate in the discourse of the public sphere, see, Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 1-11, 157-173.
- [10] V.P. Franklin, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African-American Intellectual Tradition*. (New York: Scribner Press, 1995), 11; Banks, *Black Intellectuals*, vi.
- [11] Harold Cruse, "The Crisis of the Black Intellectual," *Negro Digest*. January 1968, Vol. 17, No. 3, 58.
- [12] Cruse, *Negro Digest*, 59-60.
- [13] Cruse, *Negro Digest*, 60-1.
- [14] Harold Cruse, "Rebellion or Revolution?" *Liberator*, Vol. 3, No. 10, 16.
- [15] Cruse, "Rebellion or Revolution?" *Liberator*, Vol. 3, No. 12, 10.
- [16] Cruse, *Liberator*, 15; Cruse was not the only scholar to critique the failure of black intellectuals to combine political and economic arguments with black cultural ideas. Indeed, E. Franklin Frazier argued that the literary and cultural revival that was the Harlem Renaissance was a directionless movement because it was divorced from the politics and economics of black culture as a group concept; see, E. Vol. V (1929), 78-84.
- [17] Cruse, *The Crisis*, 14; 42.
- [18] Cruse, *The Crisis*, 111; James Haughton, *Science and Society*. Fall 1968, Vol. 32, No. 4, 474; for an autobiographical expose on dilemmas black intellectuals faced outside of those critique for Harold Cruse, see, Kenneth Robert Jaken, *Rayford W. Logan and the Dilemma of the African American Intellectual* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 21-39.
- [19] Cruse, *The Crisis*, 62-3.
- [20] Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (New York: Quill, 1967), 147-149, 169-170.
- [21] Cruse, *The Crisis*, 57.
- [22] Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West, "Black Intellectuals, Jewish Tensions," *New York Times*, 14 April 1993, Vol. 142, A21; for an insightful look at black-Jewish intellectual life in New York city, see, Jim Sleeper, *The Closet of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990), 151-172; Seth Forman, *Blacks in the Jewish Mind: A Crisis of Liberalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 15-25; and V.P. Franklin, Nancy L. Grant, Harold M. Kletnick, and Genna Rae McNeil, *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century: Studies in Convergence and Conflict* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 27-39, 54-86, 193-207; see also, Richard Wright essay in *The God That Failed*, edited by Richard H. Crossman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 115-162 and James Baldwin, "Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White" in Nat Hentoff, editor *Black Semitism and Jewish Racism* (New York: Richard W. Baron Publishing Company, 1969), 1-13.

- [23] Cruse, *The Crisis*, 421; Arthur Tobier, "The Revolution Awaiting: To Democratize the Cultural Apparatus," *Commweal.* 29 March 1969, Vol. 89, No. 2, 52-3; for a constructive argument on the need to escape the ghost of Harold Cruse, see also, Jerry Gafio Watts, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 3-13, 14-23.
- [24] Adolph Reed, Jr., "What Are The Drums Saying, Booker? The Current Crisis of The Black Intellectual," *The Village Voice.* 11 April 1995, 31; 32; 33; 34.
- [25] Adolph Reed, Jr., "Paths to Critical Theory," *Social Text* (Spring 1984), 257; for additional commentary on Harold Cruse within the context of that discussed by Reed, see, Carl Jorgenson, "Blacks in the 60s: A Centennial Reprise," *Social Text* (Spring, 1984), 254-258.
- [26] Jacoby, 10; Reed, 32; 32.
- [27] Reed, 33; 34...
- [28] Reed, 34.
- [29] Gerald Early, *Speech and Power: The African American Essay and its Cultural Content From Polemics to Pulpit* (The ECCO Press, New Jersey, 1993), 93; Reed, 34; 33.
- [30] Reed, 34; for a concise expose of Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee Institute see, Jacqueline M. Moore, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplife* (Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2003), 15-36; see also, Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche: 1919-1941* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 1-16.
- [31] Reed, 33; 34; 34.
- [32] Reed, 35.
- [33] Reed, 34; for a useful examination on African American culture and the price they paid for modernization see, Richard King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals: 1940-1970* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 123-150.
- [34] Reed, 34.
- [35] Cornel West, in Scott Sherman's "Fighting Words," 41.
- [36] Michael Eric Dyson, "Hogging the SpotLight," *Emerge.* February 1997, Vol. 8, No. 4, 92.
- [37] Dyson, 94.
- [38] Boynton, 56. Michael Hanchard, "Intellectual Pursuit," *The Nation.* 19 February 1996, Vol. 262, No. 7, 24; Watt, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual*, 10.
- [39] Gates, 48; see also Richard King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals: 1940-1970* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 239-303.
- [40] Reed, 36.