



CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON BLACK HISTORY

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W.D. Wright

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wright, W.D. (William D.), 1936–

Critical reflections on Black history/W.D. Wright

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-275-97443-X (alk. paper)

1. African Americans—Historiography. 2. African Americans—History—Philosophy. I. Title.

E184.65.W77 2002

973'.0496073'0072—dc21 2001051358

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2001051358

ISBN: 0-275-97443-X

First published in 2002

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

www.praeger.com

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48–1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

Recent years have seen the publication of numerous books and articles that have offered evaluations of the state of Black history. Those writings are a response to the expansive development of Black history and its recognition and acceptance as an important area of study in American history. Those who have provided evaluations have done so not only to offer critical commentary about scholarship and the field, but also to suggest ways in which they think that the scholarship and area of study can be embellished and improved. The evaluation, for the most part, has been favorable, and I concur. But I must also hasten to add that I do not think that Black historical writing is as critical as it could be and, in my view, should be.

This is actually a criticism that could be leveled against any historical writing in America. White American historians have always found it difficult to plunge into the great depths of American history and deal with its deep irrationalities, pathologies, and tragedies. For many years white male historians wrote American history as if only white men lived in America and made history here. They said or implied that neither white women nor Black people nor other people of dark hue made history in the country. It wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s, many decades after the establishment of professional historical writing in America, that the generality of white male historians were convinced otherwise, owing to the plethora of historical studies on the people in America that white male historians had consistently excluded or obscured.

There were a number of historians of older vintages who did not like the new historiographies, feeling that they were “unnecessarily” critical of America, that they displaced white men or belittled their achievements and standing in American history and gave too much credit to others who they regarded as not being “mainliners” or as worthy as the people dislodged or denuded. Thomas Bailey, C.Vann Woodward, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and others, including Louis Harlan, who had written a two-volume biography on Booker T. Washington, expressed these kinds of sentiments. Historians of the older vintages felt that “objectivity” in historical writing had been sacrificed by the new and younger historians and their writings, and what they regarded as their strong “ideological” and “subjective” writing stances. Given that the older historians wrote history that emphasized white men as America’s only or most important history-makers and ignored or played down the historical roles and contributions of others in the country, the criticism has a strong risible character, and some of the younger historians have flung this criticism at them.

American historiography has been characterized by strong expressions of ideology and subjectivity since the early nineteenth century, when the lay nationalist historians wrote, glorifying white men and American history while excluding, diminishing, or vilifying others. When the history profession became fully professional between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it went through consecutive ideological and subjective junctures of writing: “conservative” history, “progressive” history, “consensus” history, “radical/social” history, and now, to some extent, “postmodern” history. All these historiographical stances were against the declared canonical position of the history profession and subculture, which emphasized “ideology-free” historiography and the principles of scholarly “detachment,” “disinterest,” “balance,” “objectivity,” and so on. What was also against the canon was that each of these historiographical approaches was a political orientation, reflecting or aligned with politics occurring at the time in American society.

Black historians, educated and trained mainly by white historians and as members of the history profession and subculture, show their absorption in this milieu, including cleaving to the paradox of adhering to the canon while at the same time diminishing it by ideological and subjective historical writing. Much of Black historical writing since the establishment of Black history as an important field in American history is characterized by a strong romanticism. This showed up initially in the 1960s and 1970s with the studies on Black chattel slavery, where the emphasis was on glorifying Black slave cultural and social development and achievements and

doing less to delineate the dictatorial, oppressive, and tragic character of Black slavery. A number of Black historians regard themselves as Black nationalist historians, who write Black history as if Black people were not only Africans, but as if they, as a people, constituted a country—a “nation” as it is often put, directly or indirectly—which obscures that Black people are an ethnic group and an ethnic community in the American nation-state.

Of course, writing ideological or subjective history is not incompatible with adducing some historical knowledge and truth, but it is clear that both will be shortchanged by such limited approaches. I myself have learned a great deal about Black history from reading many of the works that have appeared since the 1960s. I have been encouraged in my own scholarship by these writings. I wish to see Black history continue to develop and be vital in America, which, in my view, will be assured by Black history becoming a more critical academic discipline. And this is not simply with respect to formal methodology, but also to the subject matter discussed and the way it is discussed. Critical scholarship is about exposing things, not hiding or obscuring things. In short, it is about pursuing and adducing historical knowledge and truths, even if they emerge in unexpected forms or land with harsh impacts.

The six chapters offered in this volume represent an effort to augment the critical capacity of Black history. There are three primary ways in which the reflections of the chapters are critical: with respect to scholarship or commentary, analysis, and use of language. These chapters are not presented to chastise other scholars, nor to imply that they have not written and said worthy things. As I have said, I have learned much Black history from the scholarship that has been produced over the last four decades, but I feel there are things very inadequately stated in Black history and that there is more to be exposed and revealed about that subject. I have always been impressed by something that Sigmund Freud once said: that ideas or intellectual positions should be presented “more or less dogmatically,” to make sure that they are clear, unambiguous, and readily understood. This invests writings or other presentations with tonality. There are people who dislike this strident approach, preferring a softer more nuanced articulation. But the truth is that critical scholarship or exposition of any kind is tonal, and inescapably so. If what one says as a historian (in my case, a historical sociologist) is predicated on evidence, is truthful (to the best of one’s understanding), and is of a necessary character, then maybe the tone of the scholarship will seem less shrill to readers. This is the hope I hold out for this collection.

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Chapter 1

What Is Black History?

This question may seem irrelevant, even ridiculous, because it seems such an obvious reference to Black history in the United States. But the question is not so spurious and the answer is not so obvious. As seen, I spelled Black history with a capital *B*. I could have spelled it with a small *b*, as black history. A capital *B* and a small *b* denote two different kinds of spellings with two different meanings. Capitalized *B* is nominative, while a small *b* is adjectival. The capitalized word Black is a reference to ethnicity, a Black ethnic identity and the Black ethnic group. The lower-case spelling, black, is a descriptive adjective, in the case of Black people a reference to their color or other biological or racial features, and thus to the black race. A race is made up of ethnic groups, groups within the same race that are historical, have a separate identity, culture, and social life, and often have a separate language. Although of the same race, ethnic groups can vary in their racial features, which indicates that race is not a pure reality. The only pure race that has ever existed was the original human race, which originated in Africa hundreds of thousands of years ago. This race was the black race, which existed in Africa for scores of millennia before migrating to other parts of the world and differentiating into different races.

Black ethnic history in the United States would not be the same as black racial history or the history of the black race in the country. There are Black people in this country and there are black people. The former is part of the latter, but the latter does not constitute the former. Black people in America, the Black ethnic group, are descendants of the black African slaves that were brought to North America between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and their progeny and immediate Black descendants, indicating that an ethnic group had been forged from the original black ancestors. A multitude of black ethnic groups were brought from Africa to the Western Hemisphere. They were made slaves of colonies, and after slavery ended, became black citizens of different countries, some of them predominantly black countries (namely, in the West Indies), and assumed national names and identities. When these black people came to the United States and became American citizens, their national identities were converted into ethnic identities, such as Jamaican, Barbadian, or Trinidadian. When black people came from Africa to the United States, such as Nigerians, Ghanians, and Liberians, and became American citizens, and those national identities were converted to ethnic identities.

There are numerous black ethnic groups in America, but there is only one Black ethnic group. This matter would be permanently clarified if the other black people in the country referred to themselves, in most instances, as Jamaicans, Barbadians, or Nigerians. But that is usually not the case and all these different black people in the country are usually regarded as black people, and often as Black people, or Blacks, when the latter, strictly speaking, is a reference to Black people and them only. Black historians and other kinds of Black or black academics or intellectuals could have and should have clarified these realities, but they have not done so. A primary reason for this failure is that such people do not seem to realize that Black people in the United States are an ethnic group, and that there are numerous black ethnic groups in the country, even though they know there are different kinds of black people in America. It is a case of seeing but not seeing, of understanding but not understanding, of knowing the truth but not knowing it. In 1997, in *Black Intellectuals, Black Cognition, and a Black Aesthetic*, I distinguished between Black people and black people and pointed out that there were multiple black ethnic groups in the country.¹ Manning Marable made this observation in passing in one of his books.² But in this particular work (as in his numerous others), he still mainly lumped all domestic black people together.

On top of the difficulties already alluded to with respect to defining and writing Black history is the widespread contention among

Black and black intellectuals and a number of white intellectuals in the country that race—biological race—does not exist; that race is a “social construction,” not an embodied reality. Black historian Barbara Fields³ has exhibited this point of view, as has the Black philosopher Naomi Zack, who wrote,

There is no set of necessary, sufficient, or necessary and sufficient traits that all members of any one race have in common. There is no general chromosomal marker for Blackness or whiteness like there is for maleness or femaleness, for example. The phenotypical traits that are used to define racial membership vary tremendously over time and from place to place.⁴

Men and women around the world exhibit considerable variation (i.e., a lack of *purity*) in each case. My use of the word Black is a reference to ethnicity and ethnic culture and social life, but also to race, the black race and black racial features, or blackness, as I would spell it. The word white spelled in the lower case, in my usage, is a reference to the white race, while the capitalized White is a reference to the large White ethnic group in the country or to an even larger White Western civilizational group. Naomi Zack, as can be discerned from her comments, predicated her understanding of race on the presumption that a race had to be pure to be a race, which occurred only once in human history, although lasting as such for a lengthy period. Biologists and anthropologists who seek to be scientific about race deny that it has to be a pure reality to be so. They recognize and assert that a given race exhibits traits across the race, but that these traits also exhibit racial variation. The Black biologist Richard Goldsby (at Yale at the time) made this observation in the early 1970s: “Members of the same race have more of their hereditary components in common with each other than with members of different breeding populations. This does not mean that all members of the same race are alike. There is enormous diversity within as well as between racial groups.”⁵

When race is denied as something that is real and that exists, and that people belong to a race, then it becomes impossible to write a history of a race or about aspects of a race’s history. On this premise, the history of the black race could not be written, or black racial history could not be authored. And if the black race did not exist, and black racial history could not be written, then the Black ethnic history of the United States could not be written with any clarity or understanding or meaning, because the Black ethnic group exhibits racial traits. But then all other black ethnic groups in America exhibit racial traits as well: the Barbadians, the Jamai-

cans, the Ghanaians, and so on. This means trying to write their history as ethnic groups would be plagued with confusion, misrepresentations, and misunderstandings.

But that is not the end of the difficulties in defining or writing Black history. Another bundle of difficulties comes from referring to Black people in this country as Africans or African Americans. As said, there are Africans in this country, but they are not all black (or blackish-brown, or brownish-black, or brown). There are white Africans in the United States as well: some Egyptians, Tunisians, and Moroccans. There is a common assumption made by Black and black people in this country, including most intellectuals, that all Africans are black people. Most of them are, but there are many white people on that continent, and there is extensive racial mixture there. Arabs are the dominant population of northern Africa, and the Arabs are white, several variations of black, and of black-white, or brown-white, racial mixture.

While there are Black historians, such as Rhett Jones, and some other kinds of Black and black intellectuals in America, such as Ivan Van Sertima, who acknowledge the different races and the cross-racial mixture in Africa, this is far from common practice by most Black scholars and other kinds of black intellectuals in the country. Writings and discussions by such people usually project the absolutist view that an African is not only black racially, but is an African south of the Sahara Desert. The common understanding projected (which is a common misunderstanding) is that African culture is the culture of black Africans south of the great desert. There is the Arab/Islamic culture in Africa, and there is Islamic culture among black Africans who are not Arabs, as in Kenya or Nigeria. There are Indians in Africa, from India, and they display their culture on the continent. These various cultural displays are reflected to some extent in the United States. A number of the black African slaves brought to this country during the centuries of the black African slave trade were Muslims, as Sylviane Diouf has indicated in *Servants of Allah*.⁶ The failure of Black historians and the range of black intellectuals generally, in each instance, not to recognize, acknowledge, or understand the racial and cultural variations of Africans on the continent or in America is a failure of scholarship, to say nothing about a failure of vision and observation, and also a reflection of inadequacy if not chaos with respect to Black political thinking about Africans in Africa or elsewhere.

Similar failures also exist in Africa. Black African intellectuals there usually do not extend the continental African identity to other people who live on the continent, including the Arabs. In 1963 Kenyan political scientist Ali Mazrui wrote critically of those black

African national leaders who sought to promote the concept of “African Unity,” but who also consciously excluded Arabs and Arab countries from the designation. Mazrui was also critical of Kwame Nkrumah’s concept of “African Personality,” which applied only to black Africans south of the Sahara, and which was conceived to promote political unity among them.⁷ Even if Nkrumah’s concept had been “black African Personality,” it would not have been as universal as it appeared, because it would have excluded black Arabs on the continent. When the multitalented Senegalese intellectual Cheikh Anta Diop talked about “African Cultural Unity,” which was the subject of one of his books, his reference was to the cultural unity of black Africans south of the Sahara, which he linked to the culture of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia.⁸ Today, there are black African philosophers who are endeavoring to construct what they call “African Philosophy.” They invariably ignore Arabic philosophy. In a recent anthology entitled *African Philosophy*, there was only one reference out of fifty-six to Arabic philosophy.⁹ Black American philosopher Lucius Outlaw, Jr. had a writing in the work that was reprinted from his book *Race and Philosophy*, regarding what he called “Africana Philosophy.”¹⁰ This concept referred to the philosophical thinking of black Africans and that of black people of black African descent in the Western Hemisphere, and was fully exclusionary of African Arabic philosophers or philosophic thought. Molefi Asante, a Black American who is a communications specialist, heads up the Africana Studies department at Temple University (which grants the Ph.D. degree), and founded the Africology methodology, regards all black people in America and throughout the Western Hemisphere to be Africans, usually not saying black Africans, but with that being his designation. He thinks of all black people in the Western Hemisphere as Africans in a different time and place. This is also true of the Black historian Maulana Karenga and the Black political scientist Jacob Carruthers, who are both members of the Association of African Historians and the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations. Such Black intellectuals and those who are their followers or members of the same organizations or other kinds of organizations do not recognize the concept of black African descent, only the identity and designation African. They regard Black history in the United States as African history, and also regard the history of other black people in the Western Hemisphere as African history, in another time and place.

And there are those Black historians, and a host of other Black and black intellectuals, who refer to Black people in America as African Americans and Black history as African American history. In the 1980s it seemed that a number of Black leaders and intellec-

tuals, in formal and informal settings, decided collectively and individually to try to persuade the American public that Black people in America were Africans; African Americans, as they said. And they were going to do that by emphasizing that name in various public media. This determination and essentially silent and nonconfrontational campaign was launched at a time when Blacks were calling themselves Black people and chanting that “Black is beautiful.” It continued in the 1990s when polls taken of Blacks showed that they overwhelmingly wished to be called Black and black, and also Black Americans.¹¹ This thinking and conception of identities is rooted deeply in Black history and life in this country. The agents for the African American identity ignored the mass of Blacks, and also Black history. Their position was based strictly on ideology, although they argued it was based on history.

The African identity and the African American identity, for Blacks in America, leads to the view that Black history is African history or African American history, and destroys the very concept of and possibility for Black history, because Black people in the United States are not Africans, but rather Black people of black African descent. This used to be a widespread understanding among Black historians, other kinds of intellectuals, and the mass of Black people in the United States. But in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s there was an effort on the part of a few Black people to override most Black people, and to use ideology to erase Black history.

What is so headstrong about all this, so acrimonious, and so hurtful to Black people is that the people insisting on calling Black people Africans or African Americans, or Black history African history or African American history, do not know that the name African itself is not the name that the millennial black people of that continent called themselves. They also did not refer to the landmass they lived on as Africa. Indeed, the twentieth-century descendants of those people did not really hear the words African and Africa, for the most part, until after World War II, and mainly from the 1950s and early 1960s on. These were not indigenous names or identities. They came from outside the massive island continent. I made this observation in my book *Black Intellectuals*, pointing out that the word African was an ancient Greek word, fully rendered *he afrike*. The word *afrike* was a compound word, with *frike* meaning “shuddering,” and *a* meaning “without.” Together, the word meant “without shuddering” or “without shuddering cold,” which would apply to Africa. But the Greeks did not call the large continent south of them Africa. They called it Libya. Indeed, the ancient Greeks thought the world was divided into three large landmasses: Europe, Libya, and Asia. In the fifth century B.C. Herodotus wrote in

The Histories, “Libya, Asia, and Europe.... The three continents do, in fact, differ greatly in size. Europe is as long as the other two put together, and for breadth is not, in my opinion, even to compare to them. As for Libya, we know that it is washed on all sides by the sea except where it joins Asia.”¹²

The Romans were the first to call the continent Africa, which was not realized by Yosef ben-Joehanan, who claimed that the Greeks named the continent. In a speech subsequently published in *New Dimensions in African History* (which also contained published speeches by John Henrik Clarke, another prominent believer in black people of the Western Hemisphere being black Africans), ben-Jochanan wrote that the word Africa

comes from the Greek language, “Afrik,” and it was the Greek “ae” really and then you had “ida,” so you had two Greek words that [were] compounded in[to] one word to become “Africa.” “Afriaeka” was the Greek way of saying “the land to the south” and it was to the south of Greece, so they called it Afriaeka and then it became Africa.¹³

One can agree with ben-Jochanan about Africa being an ancient Greek word, and thus a word that comes from outside of Africa, although there would be disagreement about its construction. There would also be disagreement about the meaning of the word, because it is the word Libya that means southwesterly. But ben-Jochanan makes no reference to the Carthaginians who were critical to not of naming the continent south of Europe Africa. According to an ancient Greek and Latin dictionary, it might have been the Carthaginians who constructed the word Africa; that is, who made the compound word.¹⁴ The reference indicates that the compounded word might have been made by the Carthaginians as a pun on the word *frike* by adding the letter *a*. In their own Phoenician language, the Carthaginians rendered the word Africa, as the Black religious scholar Robert Hood indicated, *Aourigha* (pronounced *Afarika*).¹⁵ When the Romans conquered Carthage in the third century, the latter, according to the ancient dictionary, seemed to have told the Romans that their country was called Africa, either saying that it was *he afrike* or *Afarika*. The Romans seemed to have called it Africa, and also used that name from time to time to refer to other colonies they had on that southern landmass, which they also called Africa. It was they who popularized the names Africa and African, which other people in Europe, including Greeks, came to use, and which ultimately spread around the world. But they did not circulate in Africa in any significant way. When the Whites/Europeans conquered and colonized Africa in the nineteenth century, they sel-

dom used the words Africa or Africans, afraid of their potential for stimulating rebellion or shouts for “black unity” or “African unity.” The Arab and Middle Eastern Historian Bernard Lewis wrote,

Needless to say, the inhabitants of Asia and Africa did not share this perception, and as far as the evidence goes, they were unaware of being Asians and Africans as the inhabitants of pre-Columbian America were unaware of being Americans. They first became aware of this classification when it was brought to them—and at some times and in some places imposed on them by Europeans.¹⁶

When black Africans and Asians visited Europe or the Western Hemisphere, and especially the former, they might hear the names Africa and Africans, Asia or Asians, which might be the first time they had heard them. But it was pointless for black Africans to return home using the words they had learned, as they would mean nothing to the indigenous black people, and the European conquerors might well frown upon the behavior. When black people were brought to the Western Hemisphere as slaves, they seldom heard the words Africa and African, and most never did. Slaves or former slaves who wanted to return to their homeland did not know where it was, and did not know if the word Africa, when they heard it, was a reference to a country or a continent. For example, a former slave in America in the nineteenth century thanked the white abolitionist Lewis Tappan for helping him and others escape slavery, and for providing them an opportunity to return to their homeland. He also thanked, presumably, the Christian God as well: “Great God he makes us free and he will Send us to the African country.”¹⁷ A former slave in the nineteenth century who had returned to Africa wrote the following to his former mistress who had manumitted him: “People speaking about this country tell them to hush their mouths if they are speaking anything disrespectful of it. If any man be a lazy man, he will not prosper in any country, but if you work, you will live like a gentleman and Africa is the very country for the coloured man.”¹⁸ Finally, a former expatriated slave in the nineteenth century wrote to a former mistress, “I have now been living in Africa for a little more than five years; you will doubtless allow that to be sufficient time for one to form an opinion. . . . Persons coming to Africa should remember that it is a new country, and everything has to be created.”¹⁹ This former slave wrote his letter from Liberia, recognizing that the latter was a country (actually a colony at the time), but also viewed Africa as a country. The first significant Black historian in the United States, George Washington Williams, in the late nineteenth century wrote in the first volume of his *History*