



TRANSCENDING the TALENTED TENTH

BLACK LEADERS and
AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS

JOY JAMES

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It is not the kings and the generals that make history but the masses of the people.
—Nelson Mandela



Photo courtesy of Committees of Correspondence

Charlene Mitchell, Nelson Mandela, and Angela Davis at African National Congress Headquarters, South Africa, 1991.

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Foreword

Lewis R. Gordon

An ongoing presumption in American politics is that African Americans are objects who, by virtue of their pariah status, have persistent need for translators and representatives. There are leaders, and then there are black leaders. Thus black leaders whatever their self-perception, have suffered the insult of the herd-ascriptions that have come to bear on the nation's misrepresentations of black communities. To be a black leader is regarded, for the most part, as a relegation to the status of sheep dog—to keep the flock in line until they are available for Master consumption. (National elections are times at which this analogy usually transcends the realm of metaphor.)

The most progressive, radical assessment of the leadership question, though, inevitably came from one of its most active voices: “Strong people,” declared Ella Baker, “don’t need strong leaders.”

You hold before you more than a theoretical work on questions of leadership in African communities in the United States. You also hold a *testament* to a story whose telling has been impeded by many political obstacles. Joy James’s *Transcending the Talented Tenth* is an activist scholar’s intervention at a moment of full-scale historical revision of black political reality. Her task is significant and twofold: to issue a critical statement on how leadership has been articulated in and for black communities and to make sure that her testimony

serves as a contradiction to contemporary ideological, counter-revolutionary predilections toward “selective memory.” Her first goal is no mean task, indeed, for as James demonstrates so well in her inimical way, the Present Age is marked by admonitions against radical progressive thinking and the subjects of such thought. James’s second goal comes to the fore through both the ancestral voices that she so carefully evokes—not as interesting relics from our past but as living ideas with which to grapple and from which to learn—and the contemporary voices who need to be challenged as they attempt to erase and misrepresent, so beguilingly, their past. Her task is formidable. For the context of her discussion has seeds in one century and consequences in another.

The first two decades of the twentieth century were marked by a classic prophecy in Africana thought and an epoch-making accomplishment in revolutionary praxis, both of which have their genesis in the nineteenth century: W. E. B. Du Bois’s declaration of the infamous problem of the color line on the one hand, and the Bolshevik revolution on the other. These two moments were both classic diagnoses of and prescriptions against twentieth-century antisocial realities. As the twentieth century comes to its close, there is ironically the arrogant globalization of a counterrevolutionary reconstruction of material resources and an antirevolutionary *ethos*, as well as a continued resilience of the Du Boisian diagnosis, in the face of sustained denial to the contrary. Although the point may have been to change the world, inheritors of the challenge are now facing the quandary not only over what is to be done, but also whether they are willing to do anything at all.

The Du Boisian diagnosis is both literal and metaphorical. It pertains literally to the realities of racism that have wreaked havoc on the life forces, blood, and spiritual resistance of multitudes. It is metaphorical in that its recognition of misanthropy and evasion demands an understanding of its significance in all facets of human-evading projects.

An added dimension of the task set forth in *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, then, is to address the contemporary denial of two persistent realities in a world that has managed to dominate its environment sufficiently to become *the world*. In spite of great struggles, struggles that have thrown many individuals

into the oblivion of denied significance and brought forth others into the chicanery and folly of “acceptable” representation, struggles with regard to which national memories are short and selective, the problem of the color line is now denied in the midst of its status of leitmotif in political affairs. The response has been to hate, with renewed vigor, the people who demand a change that moves forward. With counterrevolution also comes the appropriation of revolutionary language for the sake of moving backward. Progressive radical history is being rewritten into the obscenity of right-wing “revolution” and the occlusion of the very notion of institutional oppression. At the heart of this development are a number of ironies.

Race is big business, a major first-world knowledge-producing commodity. The struggle against racism, on the other hand, is not.

Gender and sexual orientation sell knowledge productions and make careers for ingratiated individuals. The struggle against sexism and fear of ambiguous sexual identity does not.

Class is a respected appeal to explain social evil. The struggle against class exploitation is not.

The proverbial conjunction of “theory and practice” has been severed. In practice, theory now explores only itself to the point, ironically, of no longer having a reference point from which to be either theoretical or practical. Another god has died, and we find our age coming to a close with an idealism so pervasive that it generally fails to see itself.

The effort to gain self-reflection, what is at times known as “consciousness,” has been an arduous journey of a struggle between critical action and bad-faith reaction. It is the nature of the proverbial beast to sustain itself through denying alternatives. In the midst of this struggle are the entire human species in general and those among it whose vocation and commitment are supposed to be the critical dimension of this divide. Du Bois realized this when he adopted the American Baptist Home Missionary Society’s strategy of developing a talented tenth, and he himself underwent some self-critical evaluations as he transformed his positions, dialectically, to an understanding of an elite *who needs to be led* by mass, working-class movements instead of an elite that leads. The very framework of both the intellectual and the political needed to be

reconfigured.

Du Bois was not alone with this insight. It was the insight of Claudia Jones and Ella Baker. It was the insight of Frantz Fanon. It was the insight of Almirar Cabral. It was also the insight of forgotten voices of a century ago.

The occlusion of black radical voices is rooted in a complex history of narrowing the scope and understanding of political reality in the United States. Politics can be understood as activity whose objective is to have an impact on a specified community or the institutions by which conventional resources of power are administered. One type of activity is *consensus-building*. Its concerns are with matters of speech and agreement, and the heart of its values is a commitment to democracy. Another type is *instrumental*. Its concerns are primarily functional and administrative. In American politics, these two types of political activity have undergone a schism from which there seems to be no hope of building any bridges. What is lost by this circumstance is recognition of the obvious interdependence of the two, for activity geared toward building up institutions and responding to social problems can foster an environment conducive to building coalitions and consensus. Yet, we find quite often that political activities are usually governed by the model of consensus building. With consensus building as our objective, a peculiar model of both leadership and intellectuals emerges: the public intellectual.

We should differentiate a public intellectual from a *popular* intellectual. Toward the close of the twentieth century, the popular intellectual has become the primary model of the public intellectual in the United States. Although a popular intellectual is obviously a public figure, it does not follow that one will be popular by virtue of being public. There are many intellectuals who will never find themselves at the center of popular attention because of the unpopularity of their political beliefs. For these intellectuals, however, what marks them as public is the nature of their work, which addresses issues that have an impact on the communities in which they live and conditions these intellectuals' roles in such communities.

Given our two conceptions of political activity, we can see straightaway how, in the struggle against race, gender, and class oppression, this distinction emerges in the difference

between the classical sociological model of the charismatic leader-intellectual and the leader-intellectual who is guided by a sense of vocation and public responsibility.

While W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson have become well-known as charismatic leaders and consensus builders, Ella Baker's and Claudia Jones's many hours of instrumental organizing and institution building have been rendered nearly invisible. Baker played substantial roles in the NAACP and the organizing of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Jones was a major Harlem organizer in the Communist Party USA. Similarly, political activity and leadership in black churches tend to be sought among the male ministers, in spite of the fact that day-to-day administering and developing of those institutions stand in the rarely seen but essential boards and officers and key congregation members, members who are predominantly women.

The distinction between the charismatic leader and the instrumental question of facilitating responses to community needs comes to the fore on the question of a demonstrated track record. Cornel West, one of the most prominent contemporary public intellectuals, has complained about the general distrust that black communities seem to harbor toward black academics—a major focus of West's political concerns. We may wonder, however, why black communities should not be suspicious of such intellectuals. It is vital for all communities to test the political integrity and competence of their intellectuals, to see evidence of demonstrated performance. The consensus-building model requires a charitable relationship of presumed membership, whereas the instrumental model requires earning the community's trust and thereby earning membership.

The current, popular intellectual environment for Africana intellectuals is one of demonstrated hostility to models of earned membership. The divide is striking in *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, where James takes on the overdue and ironic task of undoing the erasure of praxis intellectuals in contemporary African-American political thought. The collapse of theorizing practice into *theory as practice* has provided some contemporary intellectuals with an imaginary access to political achievement. What more can be done beyond what they

have said, when the world has become the transcendental reality of the written word?

We find, then, among the contemporary progressive public intellectual's many tasks—of subverting oppressive institutions and building liberating ones, of articulating possibilities for imprisoned souls and nurturing healthy, fighting ones, of speaking as truthfully as possible—the apocalyptic *Geist* War, the War of the Spirit, that has been waged on every front since the moment humanity discovered that it can speak across many generations. We have now gone from interrogating the souls of black folk to the struggle over and for those souls. In the midst of this struggle, the messages from the past are being scrambled, and they run the risk of being lost as we are now asked to forget about our past and dance to the rhythms of a deceptive tune. We need the decoding voices of integrity made manifest in testaments like James's now, proverbially, more than ever.

Lewis R. Gordon,
Providence, Rhode Island
Summer, 1996



Photo courtesy of Mary Bloom

Toni Morrison delivering a eulogy at the 1987 memorial service for James Baldwin, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York City.

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Preface

The American crisis, which is part of a global, historical crisis, [is not] likely to resolve itself soon. An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born. This birth will not be easy, and many of us are doomed to discover that we are exceedingly clumsy midwives. No matter, so long as we accept that our responsibility is to the newborn: the acceptance of responsibility contains the key to the necessarily evolving skill.

—James Baldwin,
No Name in the Street

James Baldwin describes his attempts to write *No Name in the Street*¹ from 1967 to 1971—the years in which Martin Luther King Jr., was assassinated, Jonathan and George Jackson killed, and Angela Davis incarcerated as a political prisoner—noting in the book’s epilogue that the work was “much delayed by trials, assassinations, funerals, and despair.”² As a gay African-American writer deeply committed to social justice, Baldwin persevered in demanding and organizing for human rights. His 1987 memorial service at New York City’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine—with its procession of African drummers, testimonials from Amiri Baraka, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison, and immense love filling the cavernous hall—was one of many tributes to a great American intellectual.

In the last decade, the crossing over of Baldwin and so many other progressive and gifted intellectuals—including Audre Lorde, Marlon Riggs, Toni Cade Bambara, Essex Hemphill, Haywood Burns—has had a sobering effect on those who remain on this side, facing the dehumanizing realities of a society undermined by racial-sexual violence and economic exploitation, as well as the disappointing performances of celebrated leaders

who often seem to lack the necessary skills or commitments for transforming society.

What constitutes a black leadership capable of building on the legacy of historical radical intellectuals in order to promote a future free of economic and racial misery as well as sexual bigotry and violence is highly debated. *Transcending the Talented Tenth* examines the political thought of historical and contemporary black elites advocating social justice. It furthers contemporary debates by black intellectuals to argue that the erasure of black radical praxis from the continuum of American intellectualism allows contemporary elites and rhetoricians the *appearance* of radical progressivism. This appearance masks the elite acceptance of conventional theories of political leadership and activism that acquiesce to rather than challenge structural oppression.

Beginning with "Our Past: Historiography, Erasure, and Race Leadership," this book counters the elision of militant African Americans, particularly female leaders, in American thought. Chapter one reviews W. E. B. Du Bois's early advocacy and later repudiation of an elite, educated black vanguard that shepherds black masses toward racial uplift; Du Bois's gradual rejection of the Talented Tenth as race leaders has influenced contemporary black elites and academics such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., Cornel West, and Angela Davis. Chapter two raises questions about male-biased intellectualism and Du Bois's profeminist politics, focusing on his tendency to masculinize the black intellectual and erase the agency of his influential contemporaries Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Black feminist narratives that reconstruct black women's antilynching radicalism, represented by Wells-Barnett, as gender-regressive also diminish the historical significance of radical female race leadership. Chapter three reviews representations of the anti-lynching crusader's sexual politics in writings by Alice Walker and Valerie Smith. Building on feminist scholarship that works as a corrective to male and elite biased historiography, chapter four discusses the "disappearance" of radical civil rights women in literature on the movement that minimizes the significance of leaders such as Ella Baker.

Since the end of the civil rights and black power movements of the previous decades, struggles for human rights have

continuously mutated as have antiblack racism and antiradicalism. In, "The Present Future: Contemporary Crises and Black Intellectuals," chapter five addresses the persistence of racial violence in U.S. democracy. The search for a common program among black Americans, one that recognizes and synthesizes struggles to dismantle sexism, heterosexism, and elitism alongside the battles for racial and economic justice, is the quandary for American intellectuals and the subject of chapter six. How African-American intellectuals—as the postmodern Talented Tenth straddling the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries (much as their predecessors bridged the nineteenth and twentieth centuries)—will manifest or falter as effective black leadership is the focus of the remaining chapters. Chapter seven, on women, caretaking, and academic intellectualism, critiques the theorizing of bell hooks, Pat Hill Collins, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Bernice Johnson Reagon on intellectual leadership and community. Chapter eight critically examines male elite educators' constructions of political agency and "the heroic intellectual," citing the work of Cornel West, Jerry Gaio Watts, and Derrick Bell, while exploring the model of the heroic intellectual as a nonelite, nonacademic writer such as African-American activist Charlene Mitchell. *Transcending the Talented Tenth* concludes by reflecting on radicalism and black intellectual life.

Reading this work, some may consider its critical assessments regarding the liberalism or antiradicalism of black elites too harsh. Echoing throughout this critique of black elites and American intellectuals, however, is recognition of their contributions. Acknowledging the limitations of progressive black intellectualism (limitations that are often obscured by radical rhetoric) seems a necessary skill to develop given the apparent clumsiness of our political and intellectual midwifery; the acquisition of such skill though is a Pyrrhic victory if it is unaccompanied by the desire to shoulder and share responsibility for democratic praxes with nonelites and black radicals.

We need an "act of faith," writes Baldwin, such as the one that sustained the movement, demonstrations, and protests before King's assassination. Yet, our postmodern post-movement times seem to have little faith in radical praxis, particularly when the most progressive work to transcend antidemocratic

policies often takes place beyond the range of television cameras and outside the ken of intellectual elites. Despite or because of our liabilities, committed thinkers do employ Baldwin's council to work for birthing a new world. A quarter of a century ago, Baldwin wrote:

One could scarcely be deluded by Americans anymore, one scarcely dared expect anything from the great, vast, blank generality; and yet one was compelled to demand of Americans—and for their sakes, after all—a generosity, a clarity, and a nobility which they did not dream of demanding themselves.³

Today, we could ask no more or less of the contemporary Talented Tenth—or of ourselves as we evolve beyond the constrictions of elite race leadership.

Introduction

I may be able to speak the languages of men and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell.

—1 Corinthians 13:1

When our fears have all been serialized, our creativity censured, our ideas “market-placed,” our rights sold, our intelligence sloganized, our strength downsized, our privacy auctioned; when the theatricality, the entertainment value, the marketing of life is complete, we will find ourselves living not in a nation but in a consortium of industries, and wholly unintelligible to ourselves except for what we see as through a screen darkly.

—Toni Morrison

While on university leave in the fall of 1995, I worked at the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.¹ During my late-afternoon walks home from the library, I usually browsed through the book tables of Harlem street vendors. My route down Lenox Avenue (renamed Malcolm X Boulevard) also took me past Liberation Books on 131st Street. Seeking a copy of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, one day I entered the bookstore. Inside, several middle-aged African-American women stood or sat reading and talking among the stacks. I made my request noting that I was the only customer in the store. After searching for a few minutes, one woman found a copy of *The Wretched of the Earth*, which turned out to cost more money than I had with me. Liberation Books does not accept credit cards or checks. The nearest bank was blocks away. Explaining that I would have to return, I rummaged in my backpack to find one subway token (value \$1.50) and change, which I added to my last dollar bill on the counter. The older black woman who held the book

refused my nickles, quarters, and token. "Now," she said, as she presented Fanon to me, "you can go to the head of your class."

Even in times rankling with grim observations about the failures of American intellectualism and the limits of black intellectuals, the generosity of progressive community educators reassures. The work of nonelite black intellectuals is largely unknown to those outside their communities, and many within them; yet, it promises pragmatic examples of progressivism and democratic politics that tend to be elusive for American elites. Activist intellectuals in Harlem and other working-class and poor communities continue to instill a passion for the liberation legacy and agency of historical race leaders.

Intellectuals in poorer communities face conditions unfamiliar to, ignored, or forgotten by most elites. As a reminder, a few select academic publications routinely call our attention to social devastation structured by racism. For instance, *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* features a regular column, "Vital Signs: Statistics that Measure Racial Inequality," that outlines social crises as well as academic intellectuals' responses. Vital signs survey not only the breadth of racial and economic inequality; they also suggest the standard for a critical black intellectual intervention in crises. In 1994, *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* cited a host of disturbing signs. It noted that the U.S. Bureau of the Census documented that while the ratio of whites infected with the HIV virus was 1:1,873, the ratio of blacks infected was 1:552. The journal also listed a *New York Newsday* report that, in the history of the New York Police Department, the number of black officers shot by fellow white members is eighteen, while the number of white police officers shot by black police is zero. According to "Vital Signs," the Centers for Disease Control document that for the year 1990, the number of white infants dying in their first year per 1,000 live births was 7.3; the number of black infants dying was 17.6. Also that year, the ratio of black infant mortality to white was 2.4:1, an increase from the 1980 ratio of two black infant deaths to every one white infant death. Another vital race demographic is taken from the House Judiciary Committee: although 75 percent of all federal drug prosecutions involved white defendants, the number of federal death penalty prosecu-