

Threading the Needle: Will the Real Black Intellectual Please Stand Up?

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Abstract

The author is indebted to her son, Henry D. Rose, for the title of this article and significant parts of the analysis. A similar work was delivered by Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose in a paper presented at the Association of Social and Behavioral Scientists in 2001 entitled "Black Intellectualism at the Dawn of a New Millennium: Threading the Needle." This article focuses on the Black intellectual, whose work necessitates having a fine eye to see through the lies of our conquerors—making this work comparable to the difficult task of threading a needle. Black intellectuals must have the ability to describe reality in ways that push people to act in their own behalf. Rodgers-Rose explains how the Black intellectual must have an ongoing interest in the people, while grounded in their location, history, and culture. They must function as self-conscious agents for their people, and not agents of the oppressors. Key is the ability to break down difficult ideas, thoughts, and theories in a way that makes them easily understood, as well as viable in practice and thought. They attempt to bring order to the madness faced by Black people since being taken from Africa. The Black intellectual makes a special contribution to the development of their people, meeting a need, while having the courage to tell the truth again and again. They must speak a truth so clear, so structured, so devastating and penetrating that even our most lost members will heed the call. At the same time, they must avoid oppressing the oppressed by forcing ideas and ideals upon them that do not resonate as true and necessary. The Black intellectual must deconstruct reality and then reconstruct reality in the interest of our people, while not motivated to merely attain and expand their personal freedom; instead, there is concern for the masses. Terminology used should inspire, uplift, and clarify—and not alienate. Words without deeds are worthless, and the goal is to bring thoughts into practice among those who are most in need. For Dr. Rodgers-Rose, it is not about representing just one Black reality, but several—at least those that intersect gender, class, age, and sexual orientation—among others. The challenges faced include being unwanted in the land of our birth, in an era of growing despair, while maintaining a focus on the battle to get back a freedom lost so long ago that we almost can't remember that freedom. Yet, to name that freedom could well be the most important thing we do in the 21st century. We must remember that our Ancestors' vision of freedom was a collective freedom—all of us being free. Their vision was a Pan-African freedom that included all African people. Their vision was re-establishing Maat in the land—living by the principles of truth, justice, righteousness, and reciprocity. Dr. Rodgers-Rose completes the analysis by providing a synopsis of the life and contribution of 11 Black intellectuals within African American history, while demonstrating how they thread the needle. Finally, Dr. Rodgers-Rose ends with her signature line slightly modified to align with the focus of her talk: "The time is now, the hour is late, and our Ancestors are calling us to thread the needle."

Keywords: intellectualism, Black culture, African American history, color line, liberation

Introduction

A discussion of Black intellectualism must take place within the context of struggle, knowledge, and the tension that emerges from this ever-changing awareness. My aim is to define intellectualism and refine the analysis. Finally, we need to know what intellectuals, through a synthesis of theory and practice, tell us we must do to maintain ourselves and work for change. That is, how do they thread the needle? The historian Wilfred Cartey (1968) tells us "*All you can do is work within your history as vitally as possible. We must fight, struggle and enjoy.*"

The Dialectic of Black Intellectualism

First, we must define intellectualism. It cannot be the mere spouting of statements so obscure as to seem profound, yet do little to bring forth a clear picture of reality. Rather intellectualism must be able to describe reality in ways that push people to act on their own behalf. An

intellectual must be grounded in the location, history, culture, and ongoing interest of the people. If intellectuals are not based in their own reality, rather than being a self-conscious agent for their people's liberation, they become agents for who's ever realities they are based.

Du Bois (1939) says, "I do not for a moment doubt that my Negro descent and narrow group culture have in many cases predisposed me to interpret my facts too favorably for my race; but there is little danger of long misleading here, for the champions of white folks are legion." (*Black Folk Then and Now*, 1939, p. xxxii).

An intellectual must be able to take difficult ideas, thoughts, and theories and break them down in a way

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that is easily understood. Put another way, intellectuals must be in such close touch with the people that they can take a basic thought of the people that is not structured, or perception of reality and expand, explain, and structure that perception into workable and viable practice and thought. As such, the greatest intellectuals we have had as a people attempted to bring an order to the madness we have faced since we were forcibly taken from Africa. Karenga tells us that “The intellectual must be a conscious, capable, and committed representative of his/her people; they have a special contribution to make to the development of the people; they represent the cultural values of their society mobilized against oppression” (Karenga, 1990: 97).

Various scholars have recognized that it has not been an easy task for intellectuals to carry out their mission. Harold Cruse, writing in 1967 tells us that there is a *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. Much of the crisis centers around the dilemma of which way should Blacks proceed in the country. Do we move toward integration or separation? That is, Cruse (1967) maintains, “Black leadership generally functions, even during protest with one foot out and the other foot inside the Establishment.” (p. 371) E. Franklin Frazier (1973), in his article “The Failure of the Black Intellectuals,” says that “Black intellectuals have failed to achieve an intellectual freedom. In fact, with the few exceptions it appears that the Black intellectual is unconscious of the extent to which his thinking is restricted to sterile repletion of the safe and conventional ideas current in American society.” (p.58). These comments relate directly to Carter G. Woodson’s (1936) discussion on *The Miseducation of the Negro*—a class of African Americans whose education supports the status quo. They gain their sense of intellectual respect when validated by Europeans. They continue to write for them, use their vision of reality. Fanon (1968), in *Wretched of the Earth*, says, “It so happens that the unpreparedness of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between them and the mass of people, their laziness, and, let it be said, their cowardice at the decisive moment of the struggle will give rise to tragic mishaps.” (p. 148).

What is being suggested is that there is a built-in tension between the intellectual and his/her commitment to the group. In “The African Intellectual and the Problem of Class Suicide: Ideological and Political Dimensions,” Karenga (1990) maintains that the “process of creating intellectuals is long, difficult, full of contradictions, advances and retreats, and regrouping, in which the loyalty of the masses is often sorely tried.” (p.104). One must constantly struggle with questions: Is the sacrifice worth it? What do I get out of life for myself? Who really appreciates what I do? For Ella Baker the question was easily answered: “In my organizational work, I have never thought of myself in terms of making a contribution. I just

thought of myself as functioning where there is a need. And if I have made a contribution, I think it may be that I had some influence on a large number of people” (James, 1997, p. 85). This is why Wilfred Carty’s (1968) statement is so important to those who would be intellectuals/leaders for the oppressed. He said we must “fight, struggle and enjoy.” For ultimately the intellectual must have the desire to tell the truth and the courage to do so over and over again.

Evolving Issues of Black Identity

What is the ever-evolving reality of African Americans? How do we facilitate the process of seeing the larger picture? This is a picture that must be seen and comprehended by the individual, since only “individuals are capable of self-clarification (there is no such thing as a ‘folk-mind’ and groups as wholes are as incapable of self-clarification as they are of thinking)” (Mannheim, 1936, p. 48). Aaron Gresson (1982) in *The Dialectics of Betrayal* tells us that we do not want to be guilty of being “the liberation leader who oppresses by the very act of forcing upon the oppressed a set of ideas and ideals which they have not themselves existentially come to accept as true and necessary, thus betraying a stance of firstness” (p. 112). When firstness (my sense of self as centrally known) is betrayed, real or perceived, a closed system develops. Gresson calls this the “paradox of liberation.”

Du Bois in his 1948 revisit of “The Talented Tenth,” says, “I realized that it was quite possible that my plan of training a talented tenth might put in control and power, a group of selfish, self-indulgent, well-to-do men whose basic interest in solving the Negro problem was personal; personal freedom and unhampered enjoyment and use of the world, without any real care, or certainly no arousing care, as to what became of the mass of American Negroes or of the mass of any people.” (Du Bois, *Boule’ Journal*, 15, October 1948)

There is not one Black reality, but several—at least those that intersect gender, class, age, and sexual orientation—among others.

To explain the reality of Black people it takes a fine eye to see through the lies of our conquerors. It is difficult to thread the needle.

Are we really in a position so very different from the first time we came to this land? While some of our people have made material gains, having an African American president of the United States (Barack Obama), they yet serve a purpose extremely close to our traditional role in American society. Our supposed freedom would be hard to verify. Du Bois in 1953 said that “The bar may bend and loosen. Rich Negroes may travel with less annoyance; they may stop in

the higher-priced hotels and eat in the more costly restaurants; the theaters and movie houses in the North, and Border States may let down the bars. Beyond that, because of constitutional law and mounting costs, the walls of segregation in education may be breached. But with all this, what results? The color bar in this nation will not soon be broken. Even as it yields in places, the insult of what remains will be more deeply felt by the still half-free" ("Negroes and the Crisis of Capitalism in the United States". *Monthly Review*, April 1953). We still live under a government that does not now nor never has had any social policies to benefit, support, or develop us as a people. We are still for the most part unwanted in the land of our birth.

The last twenty years has seen a decrease in the income level of our families with a significant gap between the upper middle class and others. Much of the homeless population includes our relatives—with the fastest growing being women and their children. We don't seem to be holding on to our relatives through thick and thin. In twenty years, we have become familiar with the word AIDS. More than fifty percent of all women and children with AIDS are Black. The CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) finally told us in 1995 that AIDS is a race specific disease. Drugs are rampant in our communities, although we are not the manufacturers. It is unsafe to drive while being Black. Prisons have become big business on the backs of young Black men. Police are killing our children and walking away free. We seem to be overwhelmed by our circumstances. This is not the first time that we have felt the full blunt of racism. Our Ancestors suffered through three hundred years of inhuman enslavement and oppression. We have seen worst times than we currently face; yet the greatest problem we face is lack of vision and faith. The growing despair of African America is greater than any time in the last hundred years, and comes close to equaling our despair after the fall of Reconstruction. We have lost faith in our collective selves.

For the most part we do not control where we live, our economics, culture artifacts, or politics. On the political level we look like we control certain governmental position, mayors of cities, yet the power in those positions eludes us. Because of our lack of financial power, or an independent political force, the people we elect continue to serve an absent master. Du Bois (1935), however, tells us that "The Negroes in America needed leadership so that, when change and crisis came they could guide themselves to safety. The educated group among American Negroes is still small, but it is large enough to begin planning for preservation" (Du Bois, "A Negro Nation within the Nation" *Current History*, 42, June 1935). Further he said, "To sit down and await the salvation of a white god is idiotic." Cruse (1967) says, "The black intellectual should explain the economic

and institutional causes of this American cultural depravity. He should tell black America how and why blacks are trapped in this cultural degeneracy, and how it has dehumanized their essential identity, squeezed the lifeblood of their inherited cultural ingredients out of them, and then relegated them to the cultural slums" (Cruse, 1967, p. 455).

We must not let others speak for us, define our realities. It was our voices that dared to dream that Blacks could eat wherever they wanted, dared to dream that they could sit anywhere on a bus. With their voices, often time singing, they started the Montgomery Bus Boycott, SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), the sit-ins, desegregated schools, and dared to register to vote. Vincent Harding (1975) says that "The Black struggle in America continually inspired non-white people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, encouraged them in their own struggle for justice and liberation." He goes on to say, "Because we (the intellectuals) did not see clearly enough the potentials of our movement, we did not understand the nature of the opposition it was eliciting from the ruling forces of America, we did not move in those days of heightened power to set out a clear sense of political goals, to plan carefully for the long, grueling struggle ahead" (p.38).

If "black" is to have a symbolic and redemptive meaning, its definition must extend to a collective shared group experience in a specific historical and social era in American society; black, as an African people, whose history, self-creating activities, labor, knowledge of self-rule, and culture was violently, and abruptly interrupted; black, as an African people who are unjustly ruled by the descendants and beneficiaries of kidnappers; black as the most progressive force for justice in this country; black, as a people who though continually pronounced dead, called finished, have risen again and again from the ashes to shake not just this country, but as the Black National Anthem states "*earth and heaven rings*" in our push for freedom.

Threading the Needle

As a group, Blacks must become conscious of who they are, committed to changing their structural position, and be culturally grounded in the history and world historical struggle of their people. For Black intellectuals to take their proper place in the ongoing struggle of African people for liberation and a higher level of human life, it is necessary to deconstruct that reality and then reconstruct reality in the interest of our people. Intellectuals must strive against illusion and ignorance. Du Bois (1933) said, "The American Negro problem is and must be at the center of the Negro University." There is no use pretending you are teaching Chinese or that you are teaching white Americans or that you're teaching citizens of the world. You are teaching American Negroes in 1933, and they are subjects of a caste

system in the Republic of the United States and their life problem is primarily this problem of caste. Upon these foundations, therefore, your university must start and build” (Du Bois, “The Negro College,” *The Crisis*, August 1933).

Too often we produce works that could be beneficial to our people, but we use terminology that instead of inspiring, uplifting, and clarifying, alienates. It is of little use to produce ideas that our people never hear, never read, never feel and never understand. Donna Richards (1989b) tells us that “Our task must be to recognize the validity of alternative worldviews, capable of inspiring a different, more humanistic methodology and then to suggest some principles for that methodology. This task is formidable, but intellectually and philosophically necessary if we are to contribute to a new vision of the world” (Richards, 1989b, p. 23).

We must make it a point to bring our thoughts into practice among those who are most in need. Words without deeds are worthless, and there is no such thing as theory for theory’s sake, rather theory must be for the sake of our people, and our struggle.

To do constant battle against illusion we must struggle to tell the truth as we see it and stand ready to be corrected. We must strive towards truth, justice, and righteousness. We must reaffirm to ourselves and to the world that our battle is a good and just one; that we are on the side of human freedom. We must speak a truth so clear, so structured, so devastating and penetrating that even our most lost members will heed the call.

In “*Let The Circle Be Unbroken*” Donna Richards (1989a) says that we must use unifying principles, the common threads and themes that bind and identify us all as “Africans.” The threads that bind us are our history, our humanism, our spirituality, shared cultural experience, and what Gwaltney (1980) calls “core culture:” the importance of affective rituals; a belief in praising the family which includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins; and the spiritual as more important than the material aspect of culture.

We must realize that our battle has been a long one meant to get back a freedom lost so long ago that we almost can’t remember that freedom—a freedom that gave us the time to create math, religion, medicine; that let us build for eternity. To name that freedom could well be the most important thing we do in the 21st century, because in naming that freedom we lost it gives us a rod to measure all current and past gains against.

If we could have realized and affirmed the freedom we were attempting to recapture, much of the fallacies of the civil rights movement and Black power movement could have been averted. We must rescue and bring into being the vision of the first of our Ancestors who came to this land. What did they describe as freedom? I believe that their actions and deeds give us a clear concept of what they considered freedom. Those who were the first to attempt to reclaim their freedom, those who knew freedom, give us a guide to freedom. A guide to the description, to the meaning, and to the method to attain freedom, and let us not fool ourselves, freedom is still the word, still the thrust, still the end and the beginning. Rescuing these visions, these thoughts, and practices will allow us to recapture our tradition, allow us to see clearly our legacy, and allow us a new clarity of vision that could inform and shape our struggle for the future.

We must remember that our Ancestors’ vision of freedom was a collective freedom—all of us being free. Their vision was a Pan-African freedom. It included all African people.

Their vision and practice was ruling ourselves again; and controlling our own space, labor, resources, and land. Their vision and practice was of man and woman together.

Their vision was re-establishing Maat in the land—living by the principles of truth, justice, righteousness, and reciprocity.

Black Intellectualism: A Legacy of Commitment

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (1982) tells us that “much of the unity within an oppressed community is socially constructed within.” How can we see the reconstruction of unity in these intellectuals, described below, many who came before us? What do they tell us we must do?

How did they thread the needle—see the larger picture and pass that knowledge to the masses through their words and deeds? We cannot discuss all of them, but a brief journey into the history of African Americans will show us that we have always had intellectuals who understood the realities of African American life and who knew how to thread the needle.

Nannie Helen Burrough (1883-1961). Her motto was: *“We specialize in the wholly impossible.”* She believed in racial purity (race pride), which predated Marcus Garvey. It is evident in a 1904 article where she said, “What every woman, who bleaches and straightens out need, is not her appearance changed, but her mind.” In her school’s paper in 1915 she compared the race struggle in the United States with that in Africa. At her school for girls, one course in Afro-American history was mandatory. *To her, the goal of economic self-reliance was the only guarantee for racial uplift and independence. She said, “The Negro must serve notice on the world that he/she is ready to die for justice.”*

Henry Highland Garnet (1815-1882). He fled slavery in Maryland while he was still a child and made his way to New York City. He was educated at the African Free School. He graduated from Onieda Institute and began his career as a minister. In 1881, the US government appointed him representative to Liberia. Addressing enslaved people, he said: *“Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this and the days of slavery are numbered. Rather die freemen than to be slaves.”*

Harriett Tubman (1820-1913). She was one of eleven children. Her parents were field hands in Maryland. While trying to save another enslaved African from being punished at age 13, Harriet was hit on the head. She suffered from that blow for the rest of her life—never knowing when she would fall asleep. At 20, her owner married her to John Tubman. In 1849 she escaped, saying *“I had reasoned this out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not*

have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive.” She made 19 trips to the South, armed with a gun and freed more than 300 people to the North.

David Walker (1785-1830). The son of a freed mother and enslaved father who died when he was young, he was born in North Carolina. In 1827 he went to Boston and opened a clothing store. He taught himself to read and write. He wrote articles for the *Freedom’s Journal*. In September 1829 he published the *“Walker’s Appeal,”* which was so profound that it was banned in the South. It was a militant antislavery document. *It described hypocrisy, repudiated injustice, and called for resistance. He said, “the Lord shall raise up colored historians in succeeding generations, to present the crimes of this nation to the then gazing world.”* A year after the publication of the Appeal, Walker was found dead near the doorway of his shop.

Ida B. Wells Barnett (1862-1931). Born in Holly Spring, Mississippi, she was educated at Rust College. She wrote a hard-hitting column in her newspaper, *The Free Speech*, urging blacks to resist discrimination. *In 1892, after three Black men, all successful businessmen, were lynched in Memphis, she exposed the crime. Her newspaper was destroyed. Barnett began her one-woman crusade against lynching—lecturing, writing, and organizing.* She toured England in 1893. She was a founding member of the NAACP, but later withdrew because she advocated more militantly race conscious leadership. *All her life she was critical of and in conflict with Negro leaders who accommodated themselves to whites.*

Martin Robinson Delany (1812-1885). He was born in Charlestown, West Virginia to parents who were proud of their African heritage. He emphasized his pride in his heritage. He lived in Pittsburgh, and was a Harvard trained medical doctor. *In response to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law he said: “Sir, my house is my castle...if any man approaches that house in search of a slave—I care not who he may be, whether constable or sheriff, magistrate or even judge of the Supreme Court—nay let it be he who sanctioned this act to become law (President Milliard Fillmore), and I do not lay him a lifeless corpse at my feet, I hope the grave may refuse my body a resting place and righteous heaven my spirit a home.” He said “Africa for the African.”*

Ann Julia Cooper (1858-1964). She was 104 years old when she died in 1964. She was born in Raleigh, North Carolina; her parents were enslaved. She married Rev. George Cooper in 1877 at the age of 22. He died two years later. She graduated from Oberlin College in 1884. She taught at Dunbar High School in Washington, DC for 40 years. She felt that Black women were truer to principles of

the Black race than some Black males, who for various reasons seemed to forsake the cause of the race. *Ann Julia Cooper maintained that a woman should be in the forefront of the fight for Black rights. She said, "The black woman is always sound and orthodox in questions affecting the well-being of the race, and you do not find her selling her birthright for a mess of pottage."* At the age of 65 she received a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne. She spoke before the Pan-African Conference in London in 1900. *She said, "it isn't what we say about ourselves, it's what our lives stand for."*

Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887-1940). Born in Jamaica, he left school at age 14 to help support his family. At age 25 he worked his way to London and met up with the Pan-Africanists. *In 1914 he started the United Negro Improvement Association. By 1919, it had become the largest mass Black movement in history. He appealed to the masses, and believed that Black people should be proud of their blackness—and rely on themselves. He offered pride, pageants and uplifting messages.* Between 1910 and 1921, he raised more than \$10 million. *He said, "Up you mighty race, you can accomplish what you will."* He started the Black Star Line and Negro Factories Corporation. Jailed in 1925, he was deported in 1927.

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955). Born in Mayersville, South Carolina, she was the 15th of the McLeod's 17 children and the one chosen to go to school. She attended Scotia Seminary and the Moody Bible Institute, and moved to Florida. She often expressed pride that pure African blood flowed in her veins and that her mother had come from a matriarchal group and royal African ancestry. *With \$1.50 and faith, she started a school on a former garbage dump that became Bethune Cookman College. She was founder of the National Council of Negro Women, Inc. (NCNW) and a great leader of the race. Bethune believed that "Black women were to carry the steady, uplifting and cleansing influences to the struggle."*

Malcolm X (1925-1965). Born in Nebraska and raised in Michigan, Malcolm had the ability of David Walker some 130 years later to analyze and articulate the theoretical and practical position of African Americans. His was an appeal to the grassroots. He lived a life after coming into consciousness of committed struggle—and taught us lessons of morality, courage, as well as lifting the ideological level of the struggle. He told us to always speak to the world and the creator. In 1964, Malcolm X founded the Pan-Africanist organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). *Malcolm X said, the OAAU "has decided to elevate our freedom struggle above the domestic level of civil rights. We intend to*

internationalize it by placing it at the level of human rights... We beseech the independent African states to help us bring our problem before the United Nations, on the grounds that the United States government is morally incapable of protecting the lives and the property of 22 million African Americans. And on the grounds that our deteriorating plight is definitely becoming a threat to world peace."

Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977). One of 20 children of a sharecropper family, she was severely beaten in 1963 and jailed for sitting-in at a restaurant. She was under constant attack, and her home was bombed. She was the Field Secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in 1964—and challenged the all-white delegation. She ran for Congress in 1964, and was a dynamic speaker and grassroots leader. *She said, "I work for the liberation of all people, because when I liberate myself, I'm liberating other people." She believed in standing on the truth. She said, "we have a job as black women, to support whatever is right, and to bring in justice where we've had so much injustice."*

Conclusion

Armed with intellectual leaders who knew the importance of merging theory with practice, who respect, understand and hear the different voices that make up the diverse Black community, we come to the 21st century asking the question:

How do we rekindle the fervor for freedom of the 1960's and, once kindled, where do we go?

The entire African diaspora journey in the Americas may be seen as a recovery project. As such, the sojourn in the Americas has been a matter of both a mundane daily survival struggle and a larger struggle toward 'survival with style'—involving the recovery of the original, cultural visions of God, the universe and the "black human's place within the scheme of things" (Gresson, 1995, p. 286). This also entails regaining control of the rhetoric of liberation and coalitional communication.

Finally, Vincent Harding (1975), says: "Recognize where the tired, courageous marches have led us. That history has pressed us forward into a position in which there are no certainties (scientific or otherwise), no comforting answers... No familiar solutions—at least not for those who insist on maintaining the tension between their own personal integrity and their sense of social responsibility" (Harding, 1975, p. 45). The problem in the 21st century will

continue to be the color line (Du Bois, 1903).

All you can do is work within your history as vitally as possible. The time is now, the hour is late, and our Ancestors are calling us to thread the needle.



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