

Black Intellectuals in America: A Conversation with Cornel West

Jonathan Judaken and Jennifer L. Geddes

JJ: In the 1960s Richard Hofstadter published the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, and about thirty years later, the so-called “black public intellectual” came into being. What happened in those three decades that laid the groundwork for black intellectuals emerging as one of the most important cadre of intellectuals in the national landscape today, and how do you see your role in that?

What happened between 1963 and 1993 was certainly structural transformations that had to do with de-industrialization and with the capitalist economy being restructured in such a way that communities became scattered and dispersed. You no longer had the basis for the older kind of public intellectuals, and you had new public intellectuals who were good at communicating orally, as well as literately, because of television, radio, C-Span.

It's a whole different world. Can you imagine listening to Lionel Trilling lecture on Jane Austen on C-Span? So, on the one hand, you've got some structural transformation that

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certainly Russell Jacoby and others have talked about, but, on the other hand, you've got the question of how you preserve effective forms of communication.

To put it in highbrow terms, Hofstadter was an eloquent writer. I don't care what he wrote—*Age of Reform*, we can go right across the board. He was conscious about that. David Hume writes an essay on the decline of eloquence way back in the eighteenth century, meaning what? He understands eloquence the way Cicero and Quintilian understood it—wisdom speaking, *ars topica*, a sense of the whole, a synoptic view that relates parts and wholes.

What you have in the 90s are people attempting to enact a certain kind of eloquence in terms of speaking clearly, being able to give people a sense of the whole, and do it in a language that's intelligible to them. Hofstadter did it by the page. In the 1990s, people are doing it by the page but also orally.

We have to keep in mind that in the 1950s and 60s, you've got towering public intellectuals, like Sinclair Drake, but nobody talks about them. Drake writes *Black Metropolis* in 1945, before he finishes his Ph.D. thesis, and it's introduced by Richard Wright, who's just been a *New York Times* best-seller in 1940 with *Native Son*. Drake's still a graduate student, and he's a celebrity in Chicago, but nobody talks about him. Why? Invisible.

It's part of the challenge of black intellectuals. Nat Hentoff wrote an essay in *The Chicago Review* in 1955 called "Jazz and the Intellectual, Someone Goofed." It is a powerful critique of the New York intellectuals' refusal to come to terms with white supremacy and its legacy.

There's a whole tradition that has always put a primacy on eloquence, on the page, speaking. Why? Because they respect their audience. Hofstadter wrote well because he respected his audience. If you're going to write an essay on the unpopularity of intellect, the last thing you want to do is write a jargon-riddled essay on intellect that nobody or very few people can read.

JJ: So a whole group of black intellectuals emerge in public life—a new version of the New York intellectual.

It's not a new version, though. It's different, but it's connected.

JG: Could you explain how it's different? Why is it not just a new version of the New York intellectuals?

The New York intellectuals had their own problematic. They were wrestling with modernism and Marxism and urbanism and what it is to be new immigrants who voluntarily came here vis-à-vis the goyim, vis-à-vis the WASPs, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants,

whereas the black intellectuals are actually dealing with the night side of American democracy. They're dealing with the problematic of forms of death, social death and civic death, spiritual death and psychic death, in America. So it's a very different context in which they're working; they have a very different relation to the world.

Look at W. E. B. DuBois—his relation to the world is so very different. It's Africa. It's the Bandung Conference. It's China. Whereas for the New York intellectuals, it's Berlin—its ugly memory, but also its grand achievements. It's Goethe. It's Beethoven. But it's also concentration camps. There's nothing wrong with that problematic—I have great respect for many of the great New York intellectuals, but I understand them to be both towering figures and children of their age. Black intellectuals are in conversation with them, but we're in a very different space and have a very different kind of problematic.

The sad thing is that the children of the New York intellectuals are the ones who bash us. They have difficulty taking seriously the new because they only understand the new in light of their fathers, in light of the old. It's understandable.

JJ: So, this new visibility of a whole number of figures, does this mean that in the 1990s *de facto* racially segregationist intellectual practices were beginning to erode or come to an end? Or are we still suffering under the legacy of an intellectual segregation?

That's a good question. You know, the irony is that you probably had as much or more black presence in *Commentary* in the 1940s and 50s under Elliot Cohen, when *Commentary* was very progressive. The same would be true for *Partisan Review*. So, even though in those days you had New York at the center of things, you had the new immigrants basically providing guidance for the modernist Marxist problematic. They had an openness to black voices and black intellectuals.

These days you've got a kind of *de facto* racial segregation in the life of the mind, with one or two black intellectuals writing for these kinds of publications—that's it. And they're writing the same thing over and over and over and over and over. *Times Literary Supplement*—I read it regularly, but it's very sad when it comes out. *New York Review of Books*—I read regularly, but it's very sad. What you actually have is a kind of thoroughly marginalized black presence—and by black presence I don't mean just black writers, but black subject matter. If someone were to come down from Mars and read these major journals of the last thirty years, he'd think there's hardly a black intellectual tradition at all because there's hardly any there. They're rewriting about Ellison and Baldwin and so forth, but there's Leon Forest out there, for example.

You've got a whole host of folk out there doing important things, but they're below the radar screen. It's probably because there are so many other texts to look at that come from different parts of the world and so forth. I can understand that, but it's a kind of

Jim Crow, Jr., in the life of the mind. Jim Crow, Esq.—professional and sophisticated and subtle. And no, they're not racists at all, but when you actually look at their *de facto* practices, they're very segregated. They're very segregated.

JJ: In your interview with Bill Moyers on *A World of Ideas*, you said, “I understand the vocation of the intellectual as trying to turn easy answers into critical questions and putting those critical questions to people with power. The quest for truth, the quest for the good, the quest for the beautiful all require us to let suffering speak.”¹ In light of this, what do you see as the ethical burden of the intellectual?

Well, you know the idea that the condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak actually comes from the next-to-last line of the section called “The Speculative Moment” in Theodor Adorno’s introduction to *Negative Dialectics*. He said the condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak.² That’s very Hebrew scripture, very Judaic, and I resonate with that even though he’s got a secular mode of it and a very sophisticated, negative, dialectical way of conceiving it. But he’s always looking for the defeated. It’s important to focus on the most vulnerable, the widow, the stranger. It comes very much out of Hebrew scripture, couched in their very stories and narrative.

Now, why is that important? It’s important for me first as a Christian because I understand that we Christians are a rich footnote to prophetic Judaism, that for us to be human is to practice a certain kind of loving-kindness or steadfast love that highlights the most vulnerable or the least of these and actually finds joy in serving others and believes that love itself is a desirable mode of being in the world, even though it’s absurd given the kind of world in which we live. That’s just Christian, so you either decide that you don’t love and be part of the living dead, or you love and love intensely and end up being crushed. Now, that’s kind of a crude way of putting it, but that’s a Christian ethic. And you can hold to that whether you believe in Jesus as the Son of God or not. It’s just a way of being that this first-century Palestinian Jew enacted as a representative of prophetic Judaism, that other people then jumped on, and Paul almost invented the whole movement around this particular Jewish life and death.

Now, what does that mean for me? It means, then, as an intellectual with this Christian baggage, I’m going to be free because the world is not going to determine who I am. I have a definition of who I am that cuts over against the world. I’m in the world but not of it. And so I’m free to do what? Be Socratic. Try to tell the truth. *Parrhesia*, plain speech, frank speech, and so forth. I’m free to do what? I’m free to love across the board. As you speak a truth, you can do it with a generosity but also with a bite, so you speak the truth, expose the lies, but most importantly, you bear witness.

¹ Cornel West, “A World of Ideas,” *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas, 1999) 294.

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973) 17–8.

JJ: The model that you represent is defined by the “insurgent black intellectual.” This is not a quiet model.

Absolutely. That’s right.

JJ: What do you mean by that notion and what are the ways in which you’ve sought to embody it?

Yeah. I think that it’s a combination of things, really. What it really means is to be a jazz man in the life of the mind and a blues man in the world of ideas. A jazz man is someone who tries to find his or her own voice. This is crucial. To find your own voice means you have to have enough courage to discover who you are, what your own vocation is, so the vocation is never to be reduced to your profession, your calling’s never to be reduced to your career. But you don’t find your voice unless you bounce it up against other voices.

Ralph Waldo Emerson says the greatest genius is also the most indebted person. By “genius” he doesn’t mean some romantic notion of isolated individuals conquering the world. He means geniality, largeness of mind and heart and spirit, but if you’re a genial person in that sense, you’re listening to so many other voices. You’re indebted, which is his definition of piety, right—being indebted to those who came before you to help you make your move from womb to tomb, so you acknowledge what came before. See, Emerson was always just quoting and quoting and quoting and quoting; he’s just embedded. He’s showing you “this is what Montaigne means to me,” “this is what Plato means,” “this is what so and so means.” And yet, the configuration of those voices generates a voice that’s just his, just Ralph’s, and that for me is a fundamental. That’s why Emerson means a lot, but for me, it’s primarily a jazz model, you see. That’s one.

Another model is the black church model, which has to do with what we talked about before. The third has to do with the New York intellectuals. See, the irony is that the New York intellectuals—not all of them, but the Michael Harringtons and the Lionel Trillings and the Jacques Barzuns and the Richard Hofstadters—they mean so much to me precisely because they were emerging when the academy itself was beginning to consolidate, and they could dig into the academic specialization but tease out of it something that provided a broader view. I love that about them.

The fourth would be progressive social movements. The black church model has to do with trying to understand speaking boldly, clearly, passionately as a form of service that empowers and inspires others, and the progressive movements have to do with trying to be non-dogmatic in one’s language so you don’t speak a language that excludes others religiously or politically. When I say exclude, what I mean is that it’s broad enough to speak of issues of justice, not just tied to one religious tradition, of freedom and equality, not just tied to one religious interpretation of it, see? So in that sense, it’s open-ended, even though it still takes a stand.

JJ: You've said that you want to allow many different voices to resonate and echo through a process of quotation, citation, but you've been criticized for a sort of name-dropping in some of your writing, for articulating a position but not necessarily articulating all the complex arguments that go along with that. That has to do with the style of writing in part for a public audience. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Yes, I think there are two sides to it, and I'm glad you raised that. You see, when you do come out of a tradition, especially like Emerson, where the namedropping is a way of signifying a whole position, a moment in a tradition, it does assume a certain kind of baggage that people will have in reading it, but you're speaking as well to yourself in terms of what that name signifies, how that name relates to various positions and viewpoints and orientations and so on. So I think some of that criticism is warranted.

But if you're going to unpack every particular major allusion and reference, then you end up not being able to get to your point or give people a sense of what the whole is. This is, of course, in Emerson. *Essays* is the great example of that, but this is also true for the New York intellectuals.

My God, you read Trilling's great essay on Keats's letters. He's got allusions across the board he never fleshes out. Why? Because he's on the move, and he drops these things. It's enabling him to make the connections, and he hopes that you have enough knowledge to know what's going on, but that's part of their style.

JJ: Is there an element of the critique, though, that bothers you, in the sense that people don't read you generously when they make that critique or with the acknowledgment that if you wrote texts that were loaded with footnotes, you could tease those connections out? They're not appreciating the multiple affiliations that are created in the whole of your work.

I think you're right about that. I mean, *American Evasion* actually does do that, and very few people allude to that text. *Keeping Faith* is a text that very few people ever refer to whatsoever, you see, where those essays do, in fact, flesh out and unpack things the way in which an essay or *Race Matters* might not, or parts of *Democracy Matters* might not, but I mean this is true for our culture as a whole. It's not just me.

I mean the level of charitable readings and generous interpretations has decreased exponentially in the last few decades. That's part of the sad features of intellectual life, that there's always going to be a pettiness and jealousy and what-have-you in the life of the mind, but it becomes so pervasive that it's hard to feel as if you ever get a fair hearing because of the polarization of our intellectual and ideological life. It's not just an individual like me. It's true across the board.

JG: Can I ask you about the antagonism of the academy towards doing work for the public? For example, it's actually bad for an assistant professor's tenure case to have written books oriented towards the public. And also, why do you think people in the academy have such a hard time speaking in ways that people outside the academy can hear or understand?

I think it goes partly back to Hofstadter. You know, Hofstadter's point is that America's a business civilization, deeply anti-intellectual in terms of fearing the intellect but loving intelligence, so that as a creative critical faculty they're afraid of it because it's too Socratic and asks terrifying questions, but as a manipulative faculty, it helps them achieve ends and objectives. Americans love intelligence; intellect, they fear.

If you're going to actually make the choice of being an intellectual in the deepest sense of that, it means that it's going to pit you against most of the civilization and culture. Therefore you create your own world to reaffirm your sense of calling—which becomes very insular and inward-looking—and to help you sustain your project because so much of the rest of the culture looks at you like you have lost your mind.

America is business, and, of course, we know that. The academy itself becomes more corporatized, more business oriented, more modeled on markets, and so forth and so on, and we have to come to terms with that. I mean, markets are here to stay. Intellectuals have to deal with markets. The question is how do you use these markets in such a way that you still hold up non-market values like integrity and playfulness of the mind, non-market values like the intrinsic pleasure of intellectual engagement, and so forth and so on.

JG: What does the life of the mind have to offer to our broader culture today? What do you think our society needs from those who are engaged in the life of the mind?

I think the life of the mind is fundamentally about a sense of awe, wonder, openness, exploration. The kind of adventure the great Alfred North Whitehead talked about. It's an adventure in exploring different views and viewpoints, different arguments and perspectives. There's a certain capaciousness that goes with it, an expansiveness of heart, mind, and soul that has its own exhilarating joy in and of itself, and it is a desirable way of being in the world. It's still worldly, in the way Edward Said put it. It's rooted in circumstances, but it still has its own intrinsic joy.

I say joy rather than pleasure because I don't think it's hedonistic. I think joy is something much deeper. Joy has to do with a connection with others. You can have pleasure all by yourself. Joy, you need others, and when Montaigne is sitting there in dialogue with Plato, or Emerson's in dialogue with Montaigne, it really is a community across time that's being re-established even though it's a voice that's now that of a dead man and a reader who's alive.

JG: How would our culture be transformed if that life of the mind was engaged with contemporary American culture?

Well, see, the thing about the life of the mind is that it's not intrinsically moral—it doesn't necessarily make people better. I don't believe that if the life of the mind became a mass movement that America would necessarily be a better place, because you've got virtues among those outside of the intellectual world that are quite precious, and you've got vices inside the intellectual world that are quite vicious. So I don't want to romanticize the life of the mind, that somehow it carries with it these wonderful political effects and consequences.

My conception of *paideia*—this formation of attention and cultivation of self and maturation of soul—goes beyond a life of the mind. It's really more a shaping of a kind of person, and the life of the mind is just one dimension of that person. So I wouldn't want to over-freight the talk about life of the mind within the larger backdrop of *paideia*. A democratic *paideia* includes a Socratic life of the mind, but without the prophetic and a certain moral shaping and empathy and sympathy and so forth—I mean some of the most fascinating people I have ever met in the life of the mind, who I love to talk to, are not decent persons. I hate to say that...

JJ: It goes beyond that also in the sense of not only a kind of ethical vocation that demands attention to the downtrodden and the wretched of the earth, but also a political effort to work at creating community and institutions that are able to create conditions that enable people to continue the process of the life of the mind. One of the things you've said is that the life of the mind should not itself be fetishized or idolized, that there are other forms of knowledge or wisdom that are crucial.

Absolutely.

JJ: At least some of your political praxis has focused on the university itself as an important site of struggle. So what are the ways in which the university helps to support oppositional and insurgent black intellectuals? And what are the ways in which the university is complicit with hegemony and with power?

I think the university at its best constitutes a space within liberal society in which a robust and uninhibited dialogue is taking place, and therefore it allows for a divergence of intellectual and ideological perspectives that one might find difficult to enact in other spheres in American society. And that's a beautiful thing because there has to be a space where there are some robust discussions going on, investigations and interrogations going on. Now, that's the ideal. It certainly doesn't always happen, but its justification, the very existence of the university is a quest for truth (small "t"), a quest for knowledge (small "k"). It's very important.

That's not true for corporations concerned with producing X product or Y product. Now, what that means, I think, is that persons like myself can find a place and position to work and engage young precious minds—all colors, classes, genders, sexual orientations—wedded to that fundamental mission: the quest for truth and knowledge is endless. You never really possess the truth, but we're after it. Well, that to me is very precious; it's very precious indeed.

Now, I know that universities are still shot through with all the different prejudices and problems that the larger society is, but these universities have a certain legitimation in light of this ideal. So even if you bring critique to bear on universities, they have to somehow justify what they're doing in light of that quest. Not a McCarthyism or the escalating authoritarianism now among certain universities; they can just say explicitly, "Well, you know, we don't take that quest for truth that seriously."

JG: Is it possible that there is a politicization of knowledge that actually destroys what you find so precious about the life of the mind? What are the possible relations between public life and the life of the mind? What are the dangers? How do we keep what's precious about the life of the mind but also see that intellectual life does have a public role?

Well, I think three things. One is that within the university itself there has to be a full-fledged pluralism regarding the conversation. You have to have a variety of different voices, methodologically, ideologically, politically, and so forth and so on. Now, there's always a politics that goes along with pluralism, but it's a form of politics that doesn't allow for vulgar politicization, that trumps conversation, that doesn't allow for certain viewpoints.

Now, even still—the larger point—there's still the acknowledgment of the university as part of a larger set of interlocking institutions connected to our economy, connected to the capitalist world economy, that cannot be overlooked. The university can't survive outside of the world, outside of the economy, outside of the big donors, outside of federal support, be they private or public universities, and so forth and so on. The question is: how do you preserve that rich space of robust inquiry given all of those structural realities that are characterized by dirty politics? In one sense, it's just a matter of acknowledging the way in which the political economy of the university is not a pretty story, even though what we get in the university can be quite precious.

JJ: Your work has operated in different genres and disciplines—in philosophy, religion, literature, black history, oratory, spoken word. You've also embraced the dialogical in your work with others. You have not only written alone. So, how central is it, in fact, to the very task of the intellectual to speak in different idioms, to dialogically engage with others, to speak to different audiences? How central is that to the role of the intellectual, to be a true public intellectual?

I think there are so many different ways of being an intellectual, be it a democratic intellectual, public intellectual, however one wants to define it. I mean, as for myself, in this case, I don't believe there's one model, one paradigm of public intellectual. There are so many different ways of being.

I think Stephen Sondheim is one of the great public intellectuals of our day. He's the greatest playwright in song that we've ever had, but he does it in a certain kind of a way. He's not out there all the time. You just listen to *Passion*. Go see *A Little Night Music*, *Company*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, and, above all, *Sweeney Todd*. That's one way of being a public intellectual. Garry Wills is another I have great respect for. Very different. See, we can go right across the board in that regard.

For me, see, I come out of a tradition, and here it's close to Ralph Ellison. You know, Ralph Ellison, James Weldon Johnson, they always understood themselves as renaissance men, so that a renaissance person is just a humanist, concerned about human beings who are going to die, about what you're going to do before you die, what kind of a person you're going to be before your body's a culinary delight to terrestrial worms. That's what the humanist tradition is, going back to Erasmus, right? So that you act as if you live in a de-disciplinized world, as if disciplines don't exist. It's not a matter of being interdisciplinary. That still presupposes disciplines.

You're trying to make sense of how to live, back to the sense of the whole, which is a question of learning how to die, so that what happens is that you have a variety of different venues. Ellison tried the trumpet, then he tried the novel, then he tried essays. Then he became a magnificent interviewer. I mean his interviews are works of art, really. John Coltrane's the same way. He's reading Einstein; he's reading the Kabbalah. He's got the Koran; he's got the Bible. He's listening to Stravinsky. He's trying to make sense in light of his own calling. He's not a singer, but listen to *A Love Supreme*. He's got his voice, like Beethoven's Ninth at the end—only a human voice will do. Trying to impose some order on what Samuel Beckett called “the mess.” I mean, that's really what he's trying to do. That's all I'm trying to do, and so I just pull from all these different venues to communicate.

JJ: If you had to choose one word to define your orientation, would it be wrong to choose the term “existentialist”?

Yeah, but not because “existentialist” tends to be associated with Sartre.

JJ: But you've advocated a Chekhovian existentialism, a Christian existentialism. There's an existentialist, Marxist tradition. It's a way of grouping your orientation, in the way in which it always attempts to relocate things in terms of real people's lives, the nature of the human condition, our struggle to be fully human.

That's right. I mean, that's humanism. In that sense, it'd be just Christian humanism, humanist Christian, Chekhovian Christian. But, see, that's why I would never be a jazz critic or a blues scholar. I'd rather be a jazz man and a blues man, you know, a participant in the ongoing tradition and not just a spectator checking it out. You want to be a shaper and a molder of the culture or civilization in which you're a part—you know what I mean?

Let me put it this way. If there's one thinker in the twentieth century who speaks to me out of the European tradition, it is Walter Benjamin. Benjamin has the same sensibility as I do. Actually, it's a deeply Jewish sensibility. In that sense, I have a very profound elective affinity to certain thinkers out of the Jewish tradition who have that problematic of the catastrophe, the monstrous, the scandalous, the traumatic. Kafka has it probably more than any of them. And I resonate deeply with that even though it's within my own context, you see. I come out of a black intellectual and political tradition.

JG: If you had a vision, a dream, of what intellectual life would be like in twenty years, fifty years—and we've talked about the segregation of intellectual life right now—do you have a vision for what it would be like?

An intellectual life? Wow, that's a good question. Well, we would be reading and attending more Chekhovian plays and listening to more of Coltrane's music, which is to say we'd be looking at our lives and saying: "My God, my God, they can be so much better. We're wasting our time doing this and that, with levels of superficial diversion. We ought to be involved with very substantive questioning and with Coltrane." We would be finding joy, not just pleasure, in our lives even as we interrogate and examine ourselves.

Now, what institutional form would that take? Probably fewer disciplines and more intellectual discussion and conversation, more cosmopolitan forms of inquiry that would transcend just the national, the tribal, the racial, and so on.

But, you know, the twenty-first century will probably be a contestation between the United States and China anyway, so we have to always understand the historical context. China's going to have to learn some deep democratic lessons from America—very deep—just like we've got to learn some deep lessons from China regarding how you sustain community and get beyond the vicious, rapacious individualism, even as we preserve democratic notions of individuality. So, you've got these two leviathans emerging. It's going to be real, very real.