

# HARPER'S

M A G A Z I N E

## The Gatekeepers

On the burden of the black public intellectual

by Mychal Denzel Smith  
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David Shrobe, *Bloom*, 2018, acrylic, ink, and fabric on canvas and wood, 34 x 27 inches

Toward the end of the Obama presidency, the work of James Baldwin began to enjoy a renaissance that was both much overdue and comfortless. Baldwin stands as one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century, and any celebration of his work is more than welcome. But it was less a reveling than a panic. The eight years of the first black president were giving way to some of the most blatant and vitriolic displays of racism in decades, while the shooting deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and others too numerous to list sparked a movement in defense of black lives. In Baldwin, people found a voice from the past so relevant that he seemed prophetic.

More than any other writer, Baldwin has become the model for black public-intellectual work. The role of the public intellectual is to proffer new ideas, encourage deep thinking, challenge norms, and model forms of debate that enrich our discourse. For black intellectuals, that work has revolved around the persistence of white supremacy. Black abolitionists, ministers, and poets theorized freedom and exposed the hypocrisy of American democracy throughout the period of slavery. After emancipation, black colleges began training generations of scholars, writers, and artists

who broadened black intellectual life. They helped build movements toward racial justice during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whether through pathbreaking journalism, research, or activism.

At a time of national upheaval, Baldwin adroitly described the rot of white supremacy eating away at the possibility of American democracy. But his most famous book, *The Fire Next Time*, is emblematic of the dilemma that has always faced the black public intellectual, which Adolph Reed described memorably in the pages of the *Village Voice*. "Black intellectuals," Reed wrote, "need to address both black and white audiences, and those different acts of communication proceed from objectives that are distinct and often incompatible." Being a black public intellectual has always meant serving two masters, and one of those masters is so needy that the other is hardly tended to.

The Fire Next Time, published in 1963, consists of two sections, both of which are warnings. "My Dungeon Shook" is a warning to Baldwin's young nephew about what awaits him in a world of racism's creation, and "Down at the Cross" is a warning to white Americans about the consequences of their failure to properly address "the negro problem." Read together, the two essays are a literary meditation on the corrosive effects of racism on the black American psyche, but the split structure is revealing. "Down at the Cross" is much longer than "My Dungeon Shook." Baldwin speaks at length to white people, while his nephew, and, by proxy, his black audience, is given short shrift.

There is a part of me that wonders what The Fire Next Time could have been if Baldwin had devoted the entire book to his nephew, or, perhaps, to his niece. What questions might he have raised? Would he have focused solely on warnings, or might he have conjured strategies of resistance? Freed from the need to talk to white people, what might Baldwin have prophesied?

The dilemma is old, but the terrain is new. Black public intellectuals have grown in number and prominence over the past several decades. In a 1995 cover story for The Atlantic, "The New Intellectuals," Robert Boynton cited interviews with Cornel West and Stanley Crouch on Charlie Rose, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s op-ed for the New York Times, and Stephen Carter's appearance on The Today Show, as proof of the rise of black public intellectuals. He also mentioned scholars and critics such as the historian Manning Marable, feminist sociologist bell hooks, law professor Randall Kennedy, poet and essayist June Jordan, cultural critic Michelle Wallace, and more. This cohort, Boynton wrote, was the heir apparent to the New York Intellectuals of the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties in that they were "consistently and publicly addressing some of the most heavily contested issues of the day."

That same year, Adolph Reed took a bleaker view of the new generation in his Village Voice essay. According to Reed, these intellectuals did little more than use their elite credentials to garner prestige from white gatekeepers eager to have them explain black culture. Reed argued that because they spent their intellectual capital entertaining a white audience, they had so far failed to focus on the black audience, which desired "careful, tough-minded examination of the multifarious dynamics shaping black social life." And so they had formed no real program to combat white supremacy.

As the internet democratized publishing and the rise of Barack Obama pushed "the question of race" to the forefront of our national politics, black thinkers became the most important public intellectuals in the country. In a 2015 essay for The New Republic, Michael Eric Dyson described a "black digital intelligentsia," black thinkers who were engaging the life of the mind online. In addition to Ta-Nehisi Coates, Dyson name-checked Melissa Harris-Perry; Jamelle Bouie, of Slate; Joy Reid, of -MSNBC; Jamilah Lemieux, then at Ebony; and a number of others. "Brilliant, eloquent, deeply learned writers and thinkers," Dyson wrote, "they contend with the issues of the day, online, on television, wherever they can." Dyson argued that what



David Shrobe, *Cross-Over*, 2018, acrylic and ink on canvas, 34 x 27 inches

distinguished this group from the almost exclusively academic cohort of the Nineties was that their influence wasn't "exclusively dependent on validation at the university level."



David Shrobe, *Celestial Pose*, 2018, acrylic and ink on canvas, 34 x 27 inches

But the tension remained. Dyson, like Boynton before him, highlighted writers known for their contributions to publications or media outlets that are owned and operated by white people, or largely serve a white audience. There were a few exceptions—he mentioned Lemieux, for instance, and Brittany Cooper's blog posts for *Crunk Feminist*—but those who had spent their careers writing for *The Root*, *Essence*, *The Grio*, or any of the *Interactive One* properties were largely left out of the narrative. It would seem that you are not considered a black public intellectual unless you are speaking directly to a white public. But if you are writing and thinking about black life for a majority-black audience, which part of the black public intellectual identity have you not fulfilled? Is your work not public? Is it not intellectual? Is it not black?

My own career began during the period that Dyson described. In 2010, I started freelancing and was soon writing for a small, now -defunct website devoted to "African-American news and opinion." The website relied heavily on the social media presences of its writers to drive traffic, offering bonuses to contributors who got more than a thousand page views. Over the next year or so, through connections I made on Twitter, I was able to move on to writing for *The Grio* and *The Root*—much larger sites with similar missions. From time to time I would be invited to offer commentary on radio programs that served black audiences.

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Then, in 2012, I wrote for *The Nation* about the killing of Trayvon Martin. Many black writers addressed the same topic. There was a sense of urgency—a pressing need to make the country pay attention to the ways in which it was devaluing black lives, even as people harbored fantasies of a post-racial society. I felt it necessary to say yes to every television and radio interview that followed—coming, now, from stations and producers that reached a "general" audience. I believed that explaining to white people what it was like to live as a young black person in a racist country was the highest purpose of my work.

But I began to feel a conflict within myself that persists today. In the aftermath of Martin's death, my inbox became more active. Some of the messages were praise, many of them were hate, but others were requests from white editors. I found that each time there was a killing or a violent arrest caught on video, or a new report on police violence, white editors asked if I would be interested in writing about it for their publications with majority--white audiences. They offered to pay me—a young, broke writer—a higher fee than I had received at the black-run websites. And I said yes.

As I found during that time, the black public intellectual, so defined, is largely responsible for defenses and explanations of black culture, or for arguing in favor of black people's humanity and right to life, for a white audience. This necessarily constricts the questions we are able to ask and degrades the level of discourse.

Consider the amount of energy expended by black writers and pundits defending the character of victims of police violence. To participate in this dialogue requires an excavation of black pain for the consumption of a white public; it takes up space that could otherwise be used to consider the function of policing or the root causes of racist violence. It leaves no room for new ideas or even real debate.

Perhaps it is ironic that I am writing this for Harper's Magazine, which has a white editor, a nearly all-white masthead, and a largely white subscriber base. Most essays of this genre, even Reed's scathing rebuke of the Nineties class of black public intellectuals, appear in such publications. There are a number of reasons for this, resources chief among them. So the work of black public intellectuals is often shaped by white gatekeepers. White people assign the stories, produce the television segments, and book the radio guests, and they seek out narrative structures they understand. They call upon black public intellectuals to speak to the tragedy of black lives defined by violence, or to make sense of black cultural trends, while diverting attention and energy away from more challenging work that is often relegated to smaller platforms.

There is power lost when the oppressor serves as interlocutor. This is not new. Navigating the constraints of white supremacy while establishing a self-definition outside of it is what being black in America has always meant. Slave narratives are powerful firsthand accounts of the horrors of slavery and important assertions of black humanity. But each one, whether Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass or Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, is compromised by the fact that its intended audience was almost exclusively white. It was never the enslaved who needed to hear about the brutality of enslavement. To accurately record the true nature of those atrocities—to acknowledge the complicity of all white people, not only slave owners, in its horrors—would almost certainly have meant not being published. Even now, similar constraints limit one's ability to be useful. As a writer, I have spent more time asking white people to see me as human than I have thinking about the world I would like to live in.

I feel as though I've built a career by capitalizing on black pain—exploiting that of others and monetizing my own. The dilemma is both personal and political. The guilt of my ambition is intertwined with the sense of a fruitless project. Writing to white people about the black experience is meant to engender their sympathy. Yet it never comes. For hundreds of years, black writers have tried to shift the consciousness of the white majority by telling stories of black suffering. And here we are, in Trump's America. Appeals to the white conscience have not worked, and there are no signs that they ever will. It is a strategy whose burial may be long overdue.

W.E.B. Du Bois was perhaps the most celebrated black public intellectual of his generation. For most of his career, Du Bois taught at the historically black Atlanta University. "I was fortunate with this teaching in having vivid in the minds of my pupils a concrete social problem of which we all were parts and which we desperately desired to solve," Du Bois wrote. "There was little danger, then, of my teaching or of their



David Shrobe, *St. Nic*, 2018, oil, acrylic, fabric, charcoal, and mixed media, 33 x 25 inches



David Shrobe, *Night Vision*, 2018, oil, acrylic, graphite, paper, canvas, vinyl, and fabric, 60 x 49 x 2 inches

thinking becoming purely theoretical.” This, Patricia Hill Collins wrote in her 2005 essay “Black Public Intellectuals: From Du Bois to the Present,” kept him from “uncritically embracing universalism” and allowed him to see “his work as squarely planted within a tradition of moral social service.” He also cofounded the NAACP and *The Crisis* magazine, incubators of radical political thought and activism.

Of course, an immersion in all-black environments is no guarantee of a Du Bois-like politics. Even though Booker T. Washington graduated from and founded a black institution of higher education, he still spent his career arguing that black Americans needed to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps for an audience of white power brokers. And it is also true that white-controlled institutions have sometimes borne radical fruit, such as the work of Derrick Bell at Harvard. But it has often proved necessary to form communities outside of these institutions, such as the Combahee River Collective, the black feminist socialist group of academics, activists, and artists who came together in Boston in the late 1970s to theorize liberation. To recognize this is not to argue in favor of segregation, but rather to

acknowledge that the question of audience grounds intellectual work and can determine its focus. For black public intellectuals, having to placate a white audience has created a body of work composed of repetitive assertions of black humanity.

Since the question of race is treated as one of personal experience, and largely an emotional one, the particular realms of expertise of black public intellectuals are often elided or ignored by the white public. Coates is a journalist; Cornel West is a philosopher; Nikole Hannah-Jones is an investigative reporter; Harris-Perry is a political scientist; Dyson is a theologian; Marc Lamont Hill is an anthropologist; Claudia Rankine is a poet; Doreen St. Félix is a cultural critic; Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor is a historian; Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw is a legal scholar; Kiese Laymon is an essayist; Jesmyn Ward is a novelist; Charlene Carruthers is an organizer; Angela Rye is a political analyst. They are not, of course, limited to these roles, and often embody more than one. But each discipline carries its own traditions and responsibilities, requires its own form of training, and is a distinct type of engagement with that inexorable condition known as blackness.

Nevertheless, the black public intellectual is called forth to explain the black part of that identity with little consideration for what formed the intellectual part. The white audience does not seek out black public intellectuals to challenge their worldview; instead they are meant to serve as tour guides through a foreign experience that the white audience wishes to keep at a comfortable distance. White people desire a representative of the community who can provide them with a crash course. It is easier, then, for a white public unwilling to grapple with the complexities of these varying disciplines, and the perspectives they produce, to reduce their engagement with black public intellectuals down to a handful of spokespeople, and hopefully, only one.

This is evident in the reaction to last year's exchange between West and Coates. It began when, in an interview with the New York Times, West took issue with the title of Coates's latest book, a collection of essays written over the course of the Obama presidency:

West: When it comes to black leaders, if the model is to be successful but not publicly attack white supremacy—well, then that's really about success to fit in. Fitting in, in a neoliberal world, is to be well adjusted to injustice. I'll give you an example: Dear brother Ta-Nehisi Coates has just come out with a new book.

Audie cornish: Yes. We Were Eight Years in Power.

West: Who's the "we"? When's the last time he's been through the ghetto, in the hoods, to the schools and indecent housing and mass unemployment? We were in power for eight years? My God. Maybe he and some of his friends might have been in power, but not poor working people.

West later expanded his critique in an op-ed for the Guardian. Coates responded to each of West's points in a series of tweets, but the backlash reached such an uncomfortable pitch that he later deleted his Twitter account.



David Shrobe, *Kneelt*, 2018, oil, acrylic, fabric, wood, and paper, 60 x 39 x 4 inches

It was, in the end, not much of a debate. But the headlines evoked the idea of a battle royale between West and Coates, the stakes of which were the political future of black America. ("Past Debates Echo in Split Between Cornel West and Ta-Nehisi Coates" was the New York Times's contribution.) It was pure spectacle, presented to a white public whose investment in the debate does not go beyond the declaration of a winner. It was a twenty-first-century version of Frederick Douglass vs. Martin Delany, Washington vs. Du Bois, or Martin Luther King Jr. vs. Malcolm X. These limiting comparisons present a masculinist narrative of black intellectual life that obscures the various strands of black thought that offer differing conceptions of a black liberation project. It would be impossible to understand the black intellectual tradition by focusing only on such men.

Baldwin, too, was guilty of centering the narrative of black America around a masculinist idea of freedom. He was prone to writing about how white supremacy limited black men's ability to become effective patriarchs—fathers who earned enough to provide food and housing to their families, who protected their sense of manhood and dignity by defending their wives and children. But in a 1984 conversation, published in *Essence*, Baldwin and the black feminist writer, poet, and activist Audre Lorde discussed violence within the black community, particularly that directed at black women by black men. Baldwin attempted to explain it as only a symptom of racist domination, while Lorde challenged him to broaden his thinking:

Baldwin: Something happens to the man who beats up a lady. Something happens to the man who beats up his grandmother. Something happens to the junkie. I know that very well. I walked the streets of Harlem; I grew up there, right? Now you know it is not the Black cat's fault who sees me and tries to mug me. I got to know that. It's his responsibility but it's not his fault. That's a nuance. I got to know that it's not him who is my enemy even when he beats up his grandmother. His grandmother has got to

know. I'm trying to say one's got to see what drove both of us into those streets. We be both from the same track. Do you see what I mean? I've come home myself, you know, wanting to beat up anything in sight—but Audre, Audre . . .

Lorde: I'm here, I'm here . . .

Baldwin: I agree with you. I see exactly what you mean and it hurts me at least as much as it hurts you. But how to maneuver oneself past this point—how not to lose him or her who may be in what is in effect occupied territory. That is really what the Black situation is in this country. For the ghetto, all that is lacking is barbed wire, and when you pen people up like animals, the intention is to debase them and you have debased them.

Lorde: Jimmy, we don't have an argument.

Baldwin: I know we don't.

Lorde: But what we do have is a real disagreement about your responsibility not just to me but to my son and to our boys. Your responsibility to him is to get across to him in a way that I never will be able to because he did not come out of my body and has another relationship to me. Your relationship to him as his father is to tell him I'm not a fit target for his fury.

Baldwin: Okay, okay . . .

Lorde: It's so entrenched in him that it's part of him as much as his Blackness is.

Two brilliant black public intellectuals sat down and talked about their responsibility toward one another. It was not perfect, but it happened. And it had an effect. In his final book, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, Baldwin wrote:

If women dream less than men—for men know very little about a woman's dreams—it is certainly because they are so swiftly confronted with the reality of men. They must accommodate this indispensable creature, who is, in so many ways, more fragile than a woman. Women know much more about men than men will ever know about women—which may, at bottom, be the only reason that the race has managed to survive so long.

Provided the space to challenge one another without the distraction of a white audience, Baldwin and Lorde were better able to engage in a debate around the social life of black people and blackness. It is these kinds of dialogues that can put us closer to theorizing effective strategies for survival, resistance, and rebellion. It is precisely these kinds of dialogues that white people would rather we did not have.