Prophecy and Wisdom in the African American Intellectual Imagination

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Contemporary public debates between and among African American public intellectuals have been unremittingly embittered. Writing in the pages of the *Village Voice* in the nineties, Adolph Reed likened prominent black public intellectuals to Willie, a character in *Ramar of the Jungle*, an early television adventure series. Much as Willie, whose role as head bearer to white adventurers involved explaining the ominous throbbing of bongo drums to his white masters and reassuring them that the sullen black faces of their porters were no sinister portent of a brewing conspiracy, so the "definitive role of the black public intellectual," Reed argued, amounted to "interpreting the opaquely black heart of darkness for whites."

Festering rivalries among prominent black intellectuals seemed to come to a boil with the presidency and, afterward, the contested legacy of Barack Obama. In an opinion column in the *New York Time*s in the later stages of Obama's presidency, Eddie Glaude denounced black intellectuals as having "sold their souls." The nadir of these contestations seemed to be plumbed in the vitriolic falling out between Cornel West and his erstwhile protégé Michael Eric Dyson, two of the most visible black public intellectuals. Dyson's title, "The Ghost of Cornel West," all but pronounces a death sentence on what is left of West's once formidable scholarship. West shot back in a Facebook post: "Character assassination is the refuge of those who hide and conceal [social justice] issues in order to rationalize their own allegiance to the status quo."

West would go on to open up a new front of hostilities with the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates. Writing in the *Guardian*, West describes Coates as the "neoliberal face of the black freedom struggle." Coates,

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he goes on to say, "fetishizes white supremacy. He makes it almighty, magical and unremovable." West concludes with his own account of the black intellectuals he claims are deserving of attention and recognition: "I stand with those like Robin D. G. Kelley, Gerald Horne, Imani Perry, and Barbara Ransby who represent the radical wing of the black freedom struggle."

With some justice, many commentators dismissed these heated exchanges as little more than ego-fueled tempests in (academic) teapots. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the political theorist Zenzele Isoke argues that "masculinist ego contests have instigated longstanding cleavages between individuals and competing factions within important black-freedom struggles." Isoke contrasts the Dyson-West altercation to earlier historical clashes between prominent African American public intellectuals—which she argues at least had the merit of reflecting divergent worldviews—and characterizes the dispute as a "melodramatic showdown" lacking "a morally significant crisis of thought."

Isoke's view gives expression to widespread exasperation, even repulsion, at the ad hominem thrust of debate among male black intellectuals; she also provides a much-needed critique of their masculinist posturing. Still, it would be a mistake to think that such a critique exhausts these debates' intellectual interest. For one, dismissing these particular exchanges as devoid of substance reiterates an invidious distinction between a supposedly transcendent realm of ideas and a vulgar sphere of egoism. When we recall that it is precisely this distinction—between logos and pathos; philosophy and rhetoric; mind and body—that has been mobilized to deny intellectual content to black thought, it behooves us to reexamine the significance and implications of these fierce debates. The intellectual critic will often find that wisdom can be caked in puerility, that insight can drip with envy, that the petty is not necessarily the antipode of the sublime.

In what follows, I want to contextualize these debates as constituted by deeper currents within black intellectual history. Specifically, I argue that African American public intellectual life emerges in the dialectic between at least two major black intellectual traditions—prophetic and wisdom traditions. By situating black public intellectuals within the *longue durée* of critical contestation, I want to complicate our understanding of the deeper logics driving the harsh exchanges in black public-intellectual spheres. Understanding black public debate in the flow of intellectual history may have the salutary effect of moving the debate beyond its individualistic frame and its polemical posture, as well as demonstrating the stakes of these debates. This essay also subjects to scrutiny those who are apt to speak of "the black radical tradition" as a monolithic body of thought. It offers a fresh perspective on a now-rote tendency among political theorists to classify black thought into neatly reified ideological blocs—most often, that of nationalists, liberals, radicals, and conservatives. At stake in the essay is an invitation for political theory to revisit the varieties of black radicalism.

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Prophetic and wisdom intellectual formations are deeply embedded historical practices across a range of societies and polities throughout the world. By the *prophetic*, scholars have designated disparate practices oriented toward particular embodiments and speech acts of social criticism. These have included moral judgment and censure; soothsaying and divination; and mediation, diplomacy, and even political governance. *Wisdom*, or the *sapiential*, has been deployed expansively in scholarly discourse to refer to a wide variety of speech acts, embodied and institutional roles, and performances. Forms of wisdom have included schools of knowledge, anthologies of instruction and socialization, as well as vernacular forms of discourse such as proverbs and sayings. *Prophecy* has most often designated a particular strain of protest, while *wisdom* has dominantly been defined as a tradition and genre of social instruction.

In some polities at certain historic eras, these practices came to be institutionalized such that there were distinct castes of sages and prophets. Scholarship on ancient Israel, for example, is sharply divided over whether prophets and sages were distinct, mutually opposed groups. By and large, however, careful engagement with the texture and diversity of wisdom and prophetic traditions as they have been articulated across different geographic and historical sites cannot sustain any easy opposition between the prophetic and the sapiential. Certainly, within African American intellectual traditions, wisdom and prophetic intellectual traditions—while irreducible formations—have been inextricably intertwined.

A critical entry point into prophetic rhetoric can be found in its animating energies. Prophecy is gripped by the specter of an exigence, stricken by the onslaught of a catastrophic crisis. The word *crisis* can be traced to the ancient Greek κρίσις, which meant, in various contexts, dividing, choosing, judging, or deciding. Few encounters more compellingly reveal the urgency of prophetic discourse—its imperative to action—than the abolitionist David Walker's account of a meeting with one of what he calls his "ignorant brethren," in his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829):

> I met a coloured man in the street, a short time since, with a string of boots on his shoulder; we fell into conversation, and in course of which I said to him, what a miserable set of people we are! He asked why?—Said I, we are so subjected under the whites, that we cannot obtain the comforts of life, but by cleaning their boots and shoes, old clothes, waiting on them, shaving them, etc. Said he, (with the boots on his shoulders,) "I am completely happy!!! I never want to live any better or happier than when I can get a plenty of boots and shoes to clean!!!!"

The prophet conceives of time as *kairos*, what Walter Benjamin referred to as *jetztzeit*, a point when time stands suspended, ready to be seized for revolutionary ends. For Walker, speaking to his black compatriot whom he finds inexplicably content, the urgency of the moment dictated nothing less than a root-and-branch overthrow of the slave system. It is now a commonplace that the prototypical genre of prophetic rhetoric in US history is the American jeremiad, a mode of discourse that offers a ferocious excoriation of the perfidious moral rot at the heart of society and announces calamitous judgment. This is true of the dominant mode of prophecy in the United States, but it neither captures how African Americans creatively—even subversively—transformed the jeremiad nor does it show the variety of black prophetic rhetorics. Frederick Douglass, for example, proffered a sweeping critique of the jeremiad's foundational metaphysics and crafted instead a radical materialist alternative. If, for the Puritan, one's orientation to the world is in the first and last instance a matter of true belief, Douglass, in contrast, insists on the deed. "I prayed for freedom for twenty years," he wrote, no doubt to the consternation of his Protestant readers, "but received no answer until I prayed with my legs." The archetypal form of prophecy in black rhetoric has tended to be oral—delivered from the political stump, the church pulpit, or even the academic stage—but that does not exhaust its vast range, running the gamut from the intensely lyrical, contained rage of June Jordan's poetry, the searing analysis of Black Panther pamphlets, to the scorched polemic in Barbara Christian's academic essays.

For precisely this reason, the tension between "high" formalistic and "low" vernacular versions of prophecy is just as acute as those that distinguish prophecy from other discourses. The fraught relationship between Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth is, among other things, particularly striking for how it makes manifest the divergent telic orientations driving prophetic discourse. Douglass crafted a prophetic discourse that consciously sought to realize oratorical and literary sublimity and beauty. He combined this with a reflexive performative style, one that in its elegance and refinement reflected the grand republican style of statesmanship and yet one that sharply—even traumatically—forced a reckoning with its conditions of possibility. As Douglass demonstrated this style, he also uncannily served as a reminder of the enslaved black body. Sojourner Truth, on her part, often made her interventions extemporaneously, the rhythm of her speaking often a jarring syncopation, veering from pietistic ecstasy to a homely earthiness, from withering sarcasm and indignation to a zanily humorous, fervent intensity, and from directness to a free-associative wandering.

It is no wonder that their encounters proved combustible. Douglass took Truth's vernacular style as posing an implicit rebuke to the sublime style that he had striven so mightily to cultivate. Truth, Douglass complained, “seemed to feel it her duty to trip me up in my speeches and to ridicule my efforts.” At their first meeting, Douglass was patronizing and condescending, damning her with faint praise, describing her as a useful member of the black community “in its day of small things.” Much of Douglass’s conduct can be attributed not only to sexism, but to the class and status snobbery and shame that churned within him as he sought to be the preeminent representative of black people.

But that is not to say that Douglass’s reservations about Truth’s performances were wholly unwarranted. At stake, he recognized, was a politics of style. Truth drew on a long-standing vernacular style of prophecy that enacted and embodied moral certainty. The ancient Israelite prophets, it should be recalled, pushed against the injustices of their time demonstratively, theatrically. One of their major prophets, Isaiah, ominously foreshadowed God’s impending judgment by walking around naked for three years. In a certain moment, at a certain time, with certain persons, such a style can prove electrifying. Douglass had reason to worry that this was not always the case with Truth’s style. One of Truth’s most authoritative biographers, Nell Irvin Painter, describes her speeches as a “complex medley of tough talk and humorous delivery”: “Her manner of speaking undercut the intensity of her language. To capture and hold her audience, she communicated her meaning on several different levels at once, accompanying sharp comments with nonverbal messages: winks and smiles provoking the ‘laughter’ so often reported.” As a black woman speaking in a virulently racist context, Truth was almost certainly going to be received with ridicule and laughter whatever she did. Still, Douglass feared that an air of minstrelsy swirled around her performances. He also wanted a mode of political engagement that focused itself much more intentionally to direct and transitive critiques, fearing that Truth’s public performances generated spectacle and spectatorship.

Another fault line cut across the ideologies of these two celebrated rhetoricians. Truth narrated the continuing struggle for black freedom in a predominantly religious idiom, one that characterized her antislavery activism, commitment to women’s emancipation, and temperance advocacy as a complex unfolding of spiritual as well as material forces. Douglass, on the other hand, increasingly came to embrace a largely secular understanding of the struggle for freedom, his prophetic language relentlessly flaying the Christian ideological underpinnings of white supremacy. An anecdote, one that was subsequently embellished to the point of legend, is symbolic of their clashing views. It tells of an encounter between Truth and Douglass in 1852 in Salem, Ohio, at a meetinghouse of the Progressive Friends, a group of abolitionists who were then reeling in the wake of the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act by the United States Congress. Douglass declared to the gathered abolitionists that it was futile for black people to expect justice from white Americans. Black people, he concluded, should take up arms to fight for freedom: "It must come to blood; they must fight for themselves, and redeem themselves, or it would never come." After Douglass's speech, Truth spoke up to challenge his conclusion. "Is God gone?" she is reported to have asked. The tension between religious and secular readings of exigence, revealed in Truth's question, continues to be a marked fissure throughout the long history of prophetic and wisdom discourses. Though not always explicit, this division has sharpened the friction between black public intellectuals, from that between Alain Locke and Mordechai Johnson, to James Forman and Martin Luther King, and to the more recent disagreement between Ta-Nehisi Coates and Cornel West.

The wisdom tradition is just as broad, fed with just as many currents, as prophetic discourse. Indeed, the cleavages within wisdom rhetoric are as salient as its differences with prophetic discourse. Its most definitive contours, however, have often been delineated by a focus on the quotidian, the everyday, and the ordinary. If prophetic rhetoric, on the one hand, is characterized by a call to mobilize against or toward the exigent (and it is important to remember that the exigencies of prophetic rhetoric range across the ecological, the political, the ethical, and the aesthetic), wisdom rhetoric, on the other hand, is concerned with the banal ways of living in the shadow of exigencies.

The major cleavages between prophetic and wisdom rhetoric have turned on the scope, sensibilities, and demands of the political, the ethical, and/or the existential. For the prophetic, the *political* has principally been seen in terms of a relatively distinct punctum at which a person, collective, or text joins battle for a cause or against an antagonist. The sapiential's political form and themes have not been as clear. Rather than a designated space or punctum, political articulations of the sapiential have been emergent in spaces often designated by liberal political theory as "civil" spaces—schools, stadiums, and synagogues—and by republican political theory as "social" spaces—barbershops, beauty salons, and bookstores.

Still, responses to the political within wisdom rhetoric are not reducible to a single story. The most distinctive public-intellectual avatars of African American wisdom rhetoric have either sought to transcend the political, or have regarded the political as ultimately epiphenomenal to the everyday. A great deal of this ambivalence and, at times, outright rejection of the political in black wisdom rhetoric has been in opposition to what the rhetoricians have taken to be the pervasiveness, even hegemony, of the critique of race in prophetic discourse. "Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color," stated Zora Neale Hurston, articulating a long-standing desire in a strain of wisdom rhetoric to transcend the "problem" of race in the United States. The African American public-intellectual polymath Albert Murray expressed a resonant impulse in wisdom rhetoric—not so much to transcend race, as Hurston desired, but rather to bracket it as, in the final instance, secondary to the fundamental questions of human existence.

Hurston's and Murray's responses, however, do not exhaust the various ways the wisdom intellectual tradition has taken up the question of the political. One significant response has involved nuanced efforts to articulate the dialectic of the exigent and the quotidian. In his short autobiographical essay, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," the novelist Richard Wright writes of how black people in the Jim Crow South navigated their way through the everyday terror of white supremacy. Wright calls the knowledges necessary for black people to survive this racist regime "Jim Crow wisdom." In telling anecdote after telling anecdote, he recounts the microphysics of embodied survival, the infinitesimal gradations of tone, gesture, comportment, and vocabulary that determine the difference between life or lynching.

"Jim Crow wisdom," Wright's essay teaches, counseled strategic forms of subordinate comportment and expression in order to secure black survival. Of the various performative repertoires that black people drew upon to pull off this painstaking feat, Wright was particularly struck by—and repulsed by—one: the fool. The African American fool, perhaps most vividly rendered in the character Shorty in Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*, acts like a simpleton in front of white audiences but also, in his clownishness and minstrelsy, serves as a figure of entertainment for white supremacy. It is this character that Wright is keen to write against in much of his work.

The bitter conflict that erupted between Wright and Hurston—and then, later, the one between Wright and James Baldwin—is usually understood as one between a "protest" aesthetics and a "universalist" aesthetics. But such a view—apart from simply reprising the polemical goals of both Hurston and Baldwin—proves unhelpful insofar as it folds the clash within a well-worn, now clichéd North Atlantic frame that sees politics as vulgar and aesthetics as transcendent. An analytic more attuned to the texture of African American intellectual histories shows that what was at stake in the debate involved nothing less than contestations over black wisdom—understood, in this instance, as a question of the qualitative and normative form and themes of black experience, as well as of how black artists and thinkers should take up and reimagine these forms of wisdom. In other words, the conflict in many ways echoes with the same notes as were struck in the mutual incomprehension between Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, but this time in a sapiential rather than prophetic register.

The sharp exchanges between Wright and Hurston were also embedded in deeply vexed epistemological contests between and within prophetic and wisdom intellectual traditions. For the prophet, truth—the knowledge of it, the telling of it, the practicing of it—is primary. Prophecy, however, does not articulate a conception of truth as correspondence to a putatively external world. Rather, prophetic truth is constitutive, transformational. Sojourner Truth, for example, adopted her name—changing it from Isabella Van Wagenen—not only to underscore her deep commitment to truth telling, especially given the perennial disbelief and incredulity she faced from white people, but also as a marker of her transformation to a life of itinerant preaching and prophecy. Indeed the prophet is often impatient, even contemptuous, of existing reality, judging it the manufactured veil of power. The upshot, one that often provokes incredulity and outrage from audiences, is that the prophet rejects what everyone else thinks is manifest, the common sense of the community, precisely in the name of a commitment to a deeper truth.

Such a stance makes the prophet seem an incorrigibly flint-faced judge. The prophet, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes of those within the Hebraic tradition, "makes no concession to man's capacity. Exhibiting little understanding for human weaknesses, he seems unable to extenuate the culpability of man." The prophetic stance also raises knotty questions about why prophetic discourse proves authoritative even as it pronounces a root-and-branch critique of its auditors. Within a devout religious formation, of course, one can point to the prophet's claim to be the messenger of a deity. But even in such a context, there often exists a diversity of prophets demanding allegiance. In a well-known formulation, Max Weber attributed prophets' authority to their charisma. Such a claim, however true in some instances, offers too sweeping a generalization to be useful to the many varieties of prophetic discourse. For one, Weber's account takes prophecy to be an essentially religious practice, a presupposition that fails to account for secular and artistic traditions of prophecy. Moreover, it is in danger of conflating a prophet's claim to authority with the successful uptake or reception of the prophet by an audience of some sort.

Rather than charisma, which is in any case too amorphous a description, a more concrete descriptor of prophetic authority would point to the prophet's reliance on *iconicity*. By iconicity, I mean a claim to authority that is staked upon a self, an artifact, a particular action, or a knowledge of a better life to come, in this world or the next. Here, for example, the abolitionist David Walker draws on a long-standing prophetic maneuver of staking the cause against slavery on his very life:

> If any are anxious to ascertain who I am, know the world, that I am one of the oppressed, degraded and wretched sons of Africa, rendered so by the avaricious and unmerciful, among the whites. If any wish to plunge me into the wretched incapacity of a slave, or murder me for the truth, know ye, that I am in the hand of God, and at your disposal. I count my life not dear unto me, but I am ready to be offered at any moment. For what is the use of living, when in fact I am dead.

If prophetic discourse has been generally characterized by a commitment to truth telling, wisdom discourse involves the articulation and dissemination of particular forms of knowledges, skills, and practices. Definitions of wisdom, of course, have been astonishingly diverse, but many traditions seek to highlight social practice as a way of life, an ethic—that is, a conviction that life is not a series of discrete behaviors and deeds, but rather an interconnected, relational web that, moreover, shows the inextricable intertwinement of knowledge and agency, theory and practice. Of the various knowledges and skills articulated by the African American wisdom tradition, arguably none has been as central and as urgently communicated as the mastery of the arts and crafts of survival.

For this reason, the African American wisdom tradition's engagement with truth has been poised delicately on a paradox. On the one hand, seeking after truth, understanding the truth, has been seen within wisdom traditions as an absolute imperative for black survival. "I have spent most of my life," James Baldwin said, "watching white people and outwitting them, so that I might survive." But if knowledge of the truth was critical to survival, it was, on the other hand, just as vital that black people never let on to white people that they knew that truth. To survive in a white supremacist society, a black person had to master the arts and crafts of lying. An excerpt from Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* serves as a striking example of this phenomenon:

> If a white man stopped a black on a southern road and asked: "Say there, boy! It's one o'clock, isn't it?" the black man would answer: "Yessuh."
>
> If the white man asked: "Say, it's not one o'clock, is it, boy?" the black man would answer: "Nawsuh."

Thus, in contrast to African American prophetic discourse that has emphasized truth telling at its most lacerating, wisdom discourse has attended to the uses of falsehood, silence, cunning, trickery, ambiguity, and misdirection. Zora Neale Hurston's informants on black folklore, for example, described their tales, fables, and myths as "big old lies." James Baldwin's response to the killing fields of white supremacy also differed subtly from that of the prophet. He characterizes himself as a "witness" rather than a spokesman: "I have never seen myself as a spokesman. I am a witness. In the church in which I was raised you were supposed to bear witness to the truth. Now, later on, you wonder what in the world the truth is, but you do know what a lie is." Unlike the prophet who deeply believes in the efficacy of truth —"speaking truth to power"—the sage conceives of truth as oriented toward an asymptotic horizon. Baldwin characteristically puts it best: "In my mind, the effort to become a great novelist simply involves attempting to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more. It is an effort which, by its very nature—remembering that men write the books, that time passes and energy flags, and safety beckons—is obviously doomed to failure."

The epistemological tensions between and within prophetic and wisdom traditions have often been embedded in institutional contestations as well. Zora Neale Hurston's infamous labeling of luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance as "the niggerati" denoted more than individual ressentiment at those she believed stood in the way of her professional and creative advancement. It also brings to light the profound divide between African American intellectuals who had received a measure of public recognition—usually in prominent universities and cultural institutions—and those who had not. As her noxious label underscores, Hurston's profound alienation from the black intellectual establishment of her time, an alienation cultivated in part by her socialization within a vernacular wisdom tradition, often cankered into an ugly anti-intellectualism. But there was much to justify her opposition as well. Alain Locke, who styled himself the midwife of the Harlem Renaissance, was animated by the vision of a "New Negro"—sophisticated men of letters, steeped in a Western classical education, fiercely committed to modernity. For Locke, that meant a contempt and wholesale dismissal of what he considered the "pseudo-primitives" that populated the likes of Hurston's novels.

The marvelously textured combination of the literary and the phenomenological in slave narratives, followed by Ida B. Wells's relentless, empirically based critiques of lynching, then finally synthesized by the formidable innovations in theory and research conducted by W. E. B. Du Bois—all these achievements expanded as well as sharpened the repertoires of prophetic and wisdom rhetorics. Yet as modern intellectual work came to be compartmentalized by disciplinary apparatuses, it was perhaps inevitable that the cleavages in African American intellectual traditions would be inflected by these divisions. Hovering over the intense aesthetic debates that broke out between Du Bois and Locke, Wright and Hurston, Baldwin and Wright, Murray and Baldwin, was the question of the relationship between an ascendant social-scientific disciplinary hegemony against a precipitously declining literary aura and sensibility. James Baldwin inaugurated his entrance into literary stardom largely on the back of a harsh denunciation of Wright as a man besotted by sociology: "One is told to put first things first, the good of society coming before niceties of style or characterization. Even if this were incontestable—for what exactly is the 'good' of society?—it argues an insuperable confusion, since literature and sociology are not one and the same; it is impossible to discuss them as if they were." It is no small irony, then, that Baldwin's subsequent reflections on his fallout with Wright involve a rueful realization that Wright's trouble lay precisely in his having a poor sociological imagination: "It is strange to begin to suspect, now, that Richard Wright was never, really, the social and polemical writer he took himself to be. In my own relations with him, I was always exasperated by his notions of society, politics, and history, for they seemed to me utterly fanciful. I never believed that he had any real sense of how a society is put together."

Few African American intellectuals, however, took on the social sciences with as much brio as Albert Murray. For Murray, the social sciences constituted the "folklore of white supremacy," whose chief theme, he contended, consisted in the propagation of the "fakelore of black pathology." Murray insisted that what he called "social science survey technicians" could not account for the complexities, ambiguities, and absurdities of human experience, let alone that of black people. For Murray, the wisdom and beauty of the black intellectual tradition was realized in the blues musical idiom, by which he meant an expansive musical tradition, "which in its most elaborate extensions includes elements of the spirituals, gospel music, folk song, chants, hollers, popular ditties, plus much of what goes into symphonic and even operatic composition." Murray directed some of his fiercest fire at the social psychologist Kenneth B. Clark for putting forward the thesis, in his *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (1965), that black Americans were confined to ghettoes defined by social pathologies and psychological damage. Clark, Murray charged, was little more than a vendor of "social science fiction" specializing in the dissemination of "dirty stories about Negroes." But Murray also thought that the baleful influence of the social sciences was manifest in the fiction of black America's most celebrated writer of his time, James Baldwin. Far from fulfilling the promise that lay in his critique of Richard Wright, Murray argued, Baldwin ended up simply becoming another "protest novelist." In a particularly cruel comparison—whose devastating impact must have been fully intended—Murray claimed that Baldwin was the Harriet Beecher Stowe of the civil rights struggle.

The geologic fracture upon which these debates heaved was the vexatiously perduring fissure of identity. What was blackness? Who was the African American? Who could claim to be the truest—in the broadest sense of that word—representative of black communities? As with all discourses, these questions sluiced through the structural pressures of nationality, class, gender, sexuality, and religion. In 1967, the critic Harold Cruse launched a broadside against the major black intellectuals of the civil rights era. His widely read and influential polemic *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* flew the banner for an antinomian strain of black nationalism. Cruse lambasted prominent black intellectuals for their desire to be assimilated into white society. Such a desire, he claimed, springs from the cultural deracination of black intellectuals, their alienation from the folkways of the black masses of the United States.

If, for Harold Cruse, black nationalism should force a reckoning with the exceptional creativity and vitality of US black folk culture —indeed, Cruse described a philistine white culture that is parasitic on black cultural genius—he was just as eager to defend a notion of black *American* exceptionalism in relation to other black populations, principally West Indian/Caribbean black people. In doing so, Cruse not only rejected the then powerful pan-African diasporic strains of black intellectual thought, but he tapped into an enduring nationalist vein within African American discourse that sees the black Americans as primus inter pares in the assembly of black peoples. The potency of this line of thought went beyond the sectarian precincts of black nationalism. Few people wielded notions of racial authenticity with as devastating an effect on behalf of politically conservative ends as Albert Murray. Incensed by Clark's social pathology thesis, Murray sought to discredit his antagonist by painting him as a foreigner to the United States. He referred to Clark as a "brownskin Panamanian" and claimed that the social psychologist's influential book revealed "very little if any meaningful, first-hand contact with any black community in the United States."

Against Cruse and Murray's US-centrism ran equally formidable currents of internationalist thought among black intellectuals. The playwright Lorraine Hansberry, who had been at the receiving end of a scathing denunciation by Cruse, stood out for an unflinching internationalist strain in black radical thought. For Hansberry, imperialism was inextricably entangled with the racist, homophobic, sexist, and class-based oppression that prevailed in the United States. She argued for a radical, internationalist freedom movement that would destroy capitalism and bring about liberation for black people all over the world. Hansberry was the target of rebarbative gibes from the likes of Cruse and Amiri Baraka, who cast her as a middle-class poseur with no connection to the black masses. For Hansberry, of course, a radical political perspective meant precisely that one's economic class background did not necessarily express one's political solidarities. "Somehow you have got to know more than what you experience individually" was one of her favorite quotations from her teacher and mentor W. E. B. Du Bois.

The clash between Cruse and Hansberry is one entry point into the complex conceptions of identity and subjectivity that have marked prophetic and wisdom intellectual traditions. No easy opposition between the prophetic and the sapiential can be made in this register, for these genealogies of thought have insisted on the melding of the "particular" and the "relational." Here, I want to draw attention to three schools of thought in African American discourse that have attended closely to questions of identity. These schools of thought may also serve to illuminate how black thought refuses any easy assimilation into traditional frames of political philosophy.

The most familiar "particularistic" school of African American thought, advocated by scholars such as Maulana Karenga and Molefi Asante, is Afrocentrism. This school advocates a reclamation of the cultural heritages and achievements of ancient African societies, perhaps most insistently that of ancient Egypt. If Afrocentrism offers a nonapologetic commitment to a black African particularism, it is also deeply internationalist in its outlook. Its leaders, born in the United States, offer searching critiques of nationalism—particularly US nationalism. They are also enthusiastic advocates of a particular form of pan-Africanism that embraces the black diaspora at large.

The second particularistic strain, one often rendered in opposition to Afrocentrism, holds to the notion that it is not primarily the *Africanness* of African Americans that renders them exceptional, but precisely their African *Americanness*. In other words, African Americans constitute a *culturally exceptional* people, not just in relation to a largely decaying if politically dominant white nation but also relative to other black populations in Africa and the diaspora. In the thought of Cruse this took the form of a cantankerous left nationalism; in Murray's case this often translated into a contrarian political conservativism.

At their worst, both Afrocentrism and African American exceptionalism may bear a frightful family resemblance to "blood and soil" discourses and attendant ideologies of racial essentialism. But even when they disavow any affirmation of troubling histories of racial purity, as indeed Murray worked hard to do, they are still tempted into endorsing tests of authenticity—for Afrocentrists, black authenticity; for African American exceptionalists, American authenticity—as seen in Murray's efforts to cast Clark as not only inauthentically black, but also un-American.

A third intellectual formation, opposed to the first and second, unravels the opposition between the particularist and the internationalist in black thought. Its most brilliant exponents have been black feminist intellectuals. This position has held that black women, by virtue of their experience in the crucible of race, gender, and class antagonisms, occupy a radically unique position in the political-economic structure of US society. The scholar and activist Anna Julia Cooper was one of the first to explicate this notion when, in her book *A Voice from the South* (1892), she argues: "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*.'" A full explication of the context within which she was writing allows for a layered understanding of Cooper's point. She was not only contesting the dominant patriarchal presupposition that black men, by sheer default, were representative of "black people" in general, but was also pushing back against ideas of racial authenticity that held up "unadulterated" (read: racially pure) black men such as Martin Delaney as the "true" leaders and exemplars of black people. Cooper's point went beyond a critique of representation: it also involved a historical and structural critique of the sexual assault of black women, violence that underwrote myths of origin and purity. Anticipating standpoint epistemological theory, which holds that the material and social location of knowers significantly shapes the depth and breadth of their knowledge, Cooper states: "Not by pointing to sun-bathed mountain tops do we prove that Phoebus warms the valleys." Black women, at the bottom of the social hierarchies that constituted the United States, had intimate knowledge of the valleys of US history and structure. Exactly a century after the publication of Cooper's *A Voice from the South*, the Combahee River Collective (a radical black feminist organization active in the Boston area from 1974 to 1980) would echo and amplify her voice: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."

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Contemporary practices of prophetic and wisdom rhetorics can help us evaluate the historical trajectories that these intellectual traditions have taken. In the case of prophetic rhetoric, perhaps the most striking has been the rolling wave of denunciations that black intellectuals who claim the mantle of the prophetic have leveled at the state of black public discourse in the United States. In his book, *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era* (2008), the prominent literary critic Houston Baker issued a stinging condemnation of the neoconservative and liberal centrism of celebrated black intellectuals. Another distinguished black intellectual, Eddie Glaude, lamented in the pages of the *New York Times* that "too many black intellectuals have sold their souls 'for a mess of pottage' while the misery in black America deepens." Glaude was in many ways echoing a refrain that his mentor Cornel West had long been sounding throughout the administration of Barack Obama.

These fiery condemnations in many ways speak to the unflinching commitments of prophetic rhetoric to frank speech. But they are also symptomatic of the etiolated rhetoric of black prophetic discourse in the United States today. The theme of "betrayal" and "selling out" harped upon by champions of prophetic rhetoric turns on an essentialist notion that there is a "pure," "authentic" core to black subjectivity. It thereby fails to think through the crosscutting dynamics of class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nationality that are constitutive of black subjectivity—or indeed of any subjectivity. Beyond this, it also takes as self-evident the existence of a clear and present moral imperative that imposes a binary decision on black intellectuals either to fall in line with an authentic, self-evidently correct stance or be condemned as venal, even traitorous.

But for champions of an intellectual tradition that has arguably been the most reflexive about the theory and practice of rhetoric, contemporary black prophetic intellectuals here offer a remarkably one-dimensional, vulgarly instrumental conception of their craft. The rhetorical mode contemporary prophets have sought to engage has been the jeremiad, long the dominant genre of white prophetic rhetoric in the United States. But what has distinguished its most realized black performances—from that of Frederick Douglass to that of Angela Davis at the height of her renown as a member of the Black Panther movement—is the resignification of the jeremiad from the philippic to what the literary scholar Geneva Smitherman, in *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, called "the forms of things unknown": black modes of discourse encompassing call-response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing. The philippic is mainly distinguished by its moralistic temper—the manner it deploys to indict the individual for moral failings. It is also fundamentally dolorous insofar as it mourns a lost identity, subject, or object. Smitherman's "forms of things unknown," on the other hand, turns on a historicist, dialectical analytic. Its greatest virtues lie not only in its brilliant interanimation of speaking and listening—and thus its ability to clarify the ideological stakes in dispute—but also in its responsiveness to the irreducibly aesthetic aureole of a speech act. Yet what has been the most recognizable feature of the public interventions of present-day prophetic rhetoric, be it declaimed in the Christian homiletics of Cornel West or the Marxist harangues of Adolph Reed, has been its polemical thrust.

To be clear, the question at issue here is not polemic per se. Rather, methodological posturing in the academic social sciences and humanities in the postwar era succeeded in stigmatizing polemic as a suspect genre. In the social sciences, "objectivity" is now wielded as a strategic ritual of legitimation. And even in the humanities, where invocations of "the political" are omnipresent, poststructuralist investments in an austere self-image of antinormativity have rendered *polemic* a term of abuse. Elsewhere, various scholars have proffered a critique of the epistemological and ideological imaginary supporting these disparate theoretical sensibilities. Judgments about the validity of any particular rhetorical form ought to be attuned to the contextual and imaginative exigencies that call forth the mobilization of an utterance. Any stricture that, a priori or by definition, declares a particular rhetorical form illegitimate fails the most elementary standard of epistemological rigor or aesthetic responsiveness. The critique of black prophetic rhetoric in the contemporary United States proceeds then from the immanent possibilities of its form. Its present-day deployment is adjudged vulgar for its epistemic and aesthetic failures; its unrelieved monotony, predictability, and sheer dreariness; its litany of stock villains and romanticized revolutionaries. The political commitment of today's black prophetic critics is not in doubt. And yet, insofar as they take the measure of current black intellectualism as a puny rendition of the greatness of thinkers, texts, and movements of yesteryear, their critical posture increasingly comes across as a rearguard defense of their authority. The upshot is a form of rhetoric that, at times, may be apt to confuse truculence for stringency, screed for analysis, moralism for ethics.

If such is the state of prophetic rhetoric today, the realization of wisdom rhetoric, at least in its most celebrated manifestations, has not been salutary either. Ta-Nehisi Coates, likely more than anyone in the US public sphere, has stood out as working within the grain of the sapiential rhetorical tradition. Much of the venom directed at Coates has proved to be crude and unusable. His conservative critics—such as the writer Thomas Chatterton Williams—predictably reached for the familiar chestnut that he traffics in victimhood. His black prophetic critics—such as Cornel West—also floundered for all-purpose put-downs. West writes, for instance, that Coates is the "neoliberal face of the black freedom struggle," but he doesn't offer any evidence drawn from Coates's writings to back up the claim. And I think one needs to distinguish, in a way that West doesn't, between Coates's professed political commitments and the interpretation of this work by liberals and neoliberals.

It does not of course help that Coates's meteoric rise to celebrity has been significantly borne aloft by the tailwinds of a liberal readership that has had little acquaintance with the black radical tradition, let alone engagement with radical literature of any sort. But what his admirers and critics miss altogether is the extent to which Coates's major contributions are pedagogical and existential. His writings are pedagogical not only because they consist in bringing scholarship well known to academic humanists to popular or mainstream audiences, but also because he works within a long-established black tradition of autodidacticism. Indeed, one significant dimension of the power of Coates's writing comes not from his propositional arguments—which, as he has been at pains to acknowledge, involve the amplification of historical scholarship—but rather in the way that he models a mind at study, his writings offering an uncanny visual time lapse of an imagination enlarged and transformed through serious reading. Far from offering any systematic social theory, the impact of Coates's writing functions on a lower frequency, namely its existential register, the evocativeness by which he draws out the phenomenology of life under white supremacist terror: the sheer singularity of, say, parenting a black child in a society "where it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage."

But if Coates's eagerness to learn, his irenic temperament, is winsome and hospitable, it is also streaked with a disconcerting dash of ingenuousness, as was initially evident in the mix of deference and pained collegiality he extended to his conservative mentors and colleagues like Andrew Sullivan and Jeffrey Goldberg at the *Atlantic* magazine, his former place of employment, and then further attested to by his starstruck interview with then President Barack Obama. For all the plasticity and capaciousness of his imagination, Coates's writings have remained bound by a US-centric political horizon. There is little in his writings that offers a sustained wrestling with the hegemony of the United States in the pockmarked landscape of international political economy, little that speaks insightfully and penetratingly of politics, economics, and culture outside the United States. This should not be read as a complaint against Coates for not writing on the topics that would please this reader. Rather, it is a reminder that Coates seeks to embed himself within a particular intellectual tradition, one whose illustrious predecessors saw the United States as inextricably constituted by its entanglement with the world.

The parlous state of black prophetic and wisdom rhetoric calls for a scholarly critique of economies of attention that are primarily driven by celebrity, fame, and prominence—in a word, by power. A deeper, more robust engagement with the rich histories of these intellectual traditions awaits. If the best of wisdom philosophy and practice invites entry into vibrant and uncanny intellectual worlds that constitute the African American quotidian, the prophetic summons a reckoning with a "history that hurts," then beckons us to sublime horizons undreamt of by the gatekeepers of white cultural hegemony. The promise for intellectual history is nothing other than the emergence of a critical practice of prophetic wisdom.