



PROJECT MUSE®

Central or Peripheral: Reconsidering the Place of African Americans within the American Intellectual Establishment

Ben Keppel

Reviews in American History, Volume 43, Number 4, December 2015,
pp. 674-680 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/rah/summary/v043/43.4.keppel.html>

**CENTRAL OR PERIPHERAL:
RECONSIDERING THE PLACE OF
AFRICAN AMERICANS WITHIN THE
AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL ESTABLISHMENT**

Ben Keppel

Martin Kilson. *Transformation of the African American Intelligentsia, 1880–2012.* The W. E. B. DuBois Lectures. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014. ix + 220 pp. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95.

Daniel Matlin. *On the Corner: African American Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013. 350 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95.

Do we think of Frederick Douglass as a founding father of the modern social democratic tradition in the United States? Or is he taken as proof in our textbooks that a slave could indeed become a “great American”—proof that, for all their flaws, our slave-holding founders were right after all: “all men are created equal”? Is Martin Luther King Jr.—a public philosopher of international reputation and esteem, and one recognized today in his homeland by a federal holiday—understood as a significant social thinker on the same plane as Thoreau, Jefferson, or Lincoln? Despite the ample textual evidence provided in the published papers of Douglass and King, they remain for most Americans (including some scholars among us) evidence that those who were once the “other” have successfully negotiated the incorporation of “their people” into a pre-existing revolution.

That this inequality of influence and esteem should exist reflects on what Martin Kilson correctly identifies as a “generic cultural flaw” (p. 131) in our culture: the deep process by which racial hierarchy continues to structure the varying ways in which different groups both perceive and rank priorities, ideas, and entire groups of people. Even as our demography becomes more ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse, fundamental divisions fall upon a familiar axis of “white” and “black.”

The books under review here are welcome and provocative reminders of the ways in which, in the United States as in other societies, historical precedents,

patterns, and memories, continue to act decisively upon the present. Although political scientist Martin Kilson and historian Daniel Matlin are deeply read in the scholarship produced on both sides of the gender line, they invite us to look back with special care to a time when, as Matlin points out, "in the eyes of the media, an authentic or representative black perspective was necessarily a male one" (p. 11). Acknowledging the weight of this precondition to participation is the first step toward facing an even larger fact: how racial categorizations continue to exert a durably structural influence on who is seen as an important generalized contributor to understanding American civilization, rather than as someone whose words are treated, at best, as friendly amendments to someone else's national "establishment" and liberation narrative.

The analysis provided in Kilson's *Transformation of the African American Intelligentsia, 1880–2012*, a kind of valedictory address capping a distinguished academic career of sixty years, is the fruit of both exacting formal study and lived experience stretching back no fewer than four generations on both sides of his family. Early in this narrative, Kilson shares the following information about his intellectual geneology:

My maternal great grandfather—a Civil War veteran . . . organized an African-American Protestant church in a small Pennsylvania factory town in 1885, and my father, the Reverend Martin Luther Kilson, Sr., pastored that church during my youth in the 1930s and 1940s. My maternal paternal great-great-grandfather, Isaac Lee, was a boot maker and he organized an African-American Methodist church . . . before the Civil War . . . for a Free Negro community in Kent County, Maryland. [pp. 6–7]

This is a strong reminder that "intellectual history" is made by people in all stations of life, not just those of us fortunate enough to receive a college education. To these prized and essential ingredients, Kilson adds his own experience as a college student at Lincoln University, where he and the 600 other freshmen in the class of 1950 were provided with a "rigorous intellectual identity" (p. 7). Kilson left Lincoln committed to following in the footsteps of his hero, W. E. B. DuBois, who, by Kilson's graduation day in 1954, had become an ideologically marginalized figure, harassed by the federal government for being both "red" [communist] and "black." In a fine tribute to DuBois' fearless scholarship, Kilson reconstructs the deadly circumstances in which African Americans were forced to live and work even after the nation had, at least officially, declared itself as constitutionally opposed to chattel slavery. Chattel slavery was replaced by circumstances that were scarcely less confining: "a legalized racist oligarchy in the south, and veritable authoritarian governance vis-a-vis black folks" (p. 2).

Until fairly late in the last century, African Americans found their political and social life structured by "skin color and color-caste patterns" and the

“reactionary politics” that grew out of such close proximity to a larger society that was avowedly and officially “whites only.” It is in hastening the decline of “color-caste pretensions” as “dishonorable to blackness” that DuBois has special significance to Kilson’s analysis (p. 33). Although by no means alone in rejecting such “self-hating beliefs” (there emerged a broad moral consensus extending from members of the “New Negro” movement to the millions enlisted in the ranks of more populist African American religious movements), DuBois took the lead in organizing and articulating a response that changed African American life for the better (p. 33). Du Bois successfully advanced a new ethic in which members of the “talented tenth” and of the somewhat larger black middle class used their “social class capabilities to advance inter-class black civil society mobilization” (p. 57).

As an African-Americanist who has taught at the University of Oklahoma for more than twenty years, I especially welcome the first two chapters, in which Kilson not only tells this important historical story, but provides a tactile, clear, and practical discussion of how a people went about constructing an intellectual world when the surrounding white society denied and ignored their capacity to do so. The detective work described here should be read by any student, at whatever level of training, who aspires to be an intellectual historian. It challenges many still reigning assumptions about what intellectuals are and where they are to be found.

In his last two chapters, Kilson issues a bracing call to arms in which African American scholars re-embrace a “Du Bosian moral leadership obligation” to insure that the 40 percent of African Americans who are still structured out of opportunity in U.S. society are raised (p. 154). His description of current conditions of our brick-and-mortar intellectual establishment—in which prisons have a greater custodial and educational function than schools—is detailed, damning, and up to date. Nonetheless, here is also where, in my view, some problems arise.

First of all, there is the matter of DuBois himself. David Levering Lewis’ two-volume biography¹ portrays DuBois as having a more complex and conflicted sense of intellectual identity (and identities) than the one that Kilson presents here. If ever this country has produced an intellectual who can also claim the mantle of being a “world historical figure,” it is DuBois. And yet, even today, he is only a conditional member. We honor and accept the man not as a full-fledged contributor who belongs at the center of the American intellectual tradition. We continue to classify him as an “indigenous interpreter” of the “souls of black folk” only (p. 9). Sadly, Kilson tends to dismiss out of hand the efforts by others to flesh out the complexities of intellectual identity and obligation.

The ideological hex cast by DuBois’ decision to be “black” and “red” at the same time continues to keep him from full-fledged membership in the U.S.

intellectual establishment. In view of DuBois' own fate in the public square, it is especially disappointing to see Kilson deny to conservative black intellectuals the status of "authentic black dissenters" whose talents are limited to performing "disingenuous intellectual procedures" and "shrewd maneuvers" (pp. 142–47).

When I read Kilson's very complete discussion of U.S. public opinion and electoral behavior I was reminded of DuBois' larger vision of coalition politics—one that social forces and historical circumstances thwarted for more than a century. Even as the suppression of African American electoral participation has returned as official policy in some states, and even as the Supreme Court's decision in "Citizens United" gives greater reign to plutocrats in contemporary political and intellectual life, the American public square today is not a recreation of the Gilded Age.

Does not the growing ideological and economic diversity among African Americans suggest that now is the time for a broader campaign of public education and advocacy in which class dynamics are strongly linked to continuing patterns of human separation and polarization on the basis of race? Is it not more possible today than it has been in the past to make the case for a moral imperative whose weight falls on a far greater number of American shoulders?

Americans have just concluded a four-year sesquicentennial commemoration of the Civil War, a process rich in ritual, debate, and historical re-enactments that reached one official end when the postal service released a stamp marking the surrender at Appomattox. The question now follows: how will all of us mark the 150th anniversary of the (admittedly less-coherently defined) historical phase that followed, known as Reconstruction: a process that continues—with breaks and continued opposition—into the present? Daniel Matlin's *On the Corner: African American Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis* provides us with an excellent place to start as we consider the ways in which this troubled and bloody past continues to structure American lives today.

It is Matlin's mission to "reconstruct the role of indigenous interpreter and to explore the ways it was envisioned and experienced" by psychologist Kenneth B. Clark, writer Amiri Baraka (who first entered public life as Le Roi Jones), and painter Romare Bearden (p. 11). Daniel Matlin in no way minimizes the struggles of African Americans who have not "made it" when he asks us to rigorously reconsider the role that our political and cultural system has assigned to black Americans. One of the most obvious but least discussed ways in which the United States remains a polity and culture still crucially unreconstructed from its founding in the midst of chattel slavery is that, still today, the millions of African Americans who are working in all parts of U.S. society must, whether they wish to or not, live with a double burden: being symbolized as flesh-and-blood vindications of an "American Dream" and, at

the same time, as “indigenous interpreters” of those, who, in the eyes of some of their admirers, they have “left behind.” While this double burden is shared by millions of people who are not recognized as public figures, we can best map the boundaries of this experience by examining how Clark, Baraka, and Bearden negotiated this minefield of expectations during the 1960s and 1970s. Today, accomplished African Americans continue to be framed by this culture as “indigenous interpreters” of someone else’s experience.

Among the qualities of Matlin’s work that I most admire is that he does not come to his work with a preconceived ideal type of the intellectual who has entered an imagined “promised land” beyond the burdens imposed from without by historical time, place, and situation. In each of three careful renderings, each human subject is shown reckoning with the world as they find it, and then—through a constantly changing mix of improvisation and reflection—composing a life in which bravery and purposeful creation is punctuated by improvident improvisation, rash response, and inconsistency of thought and action.

Matlin opens his trio of intellectual biographies in a way that is new and refreshing, with Clark’s presidential address before the American Psychological Association in 1971. Matlin is right to criticize previous scholars (including me) for not giving closer attention to the controversy Clark’s words generated. It is indeed telling that Clark chose to advocate that citizens of this and other nations consider whether or not their national leaders should be required to submit to an ill-defined “psycho-technological, biomedical intervention” (p. 37).

This prospect, Matlin reminds us, accomplished something that no laboratory experiment could have produced: strong and instant censure from the *New York Times*, Clark’s liberal allies in social science, and Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew, who courted the contempt of “liberals” with a joyfully spiteful relish and rhetorical skill that, in my judgment, remains unequaled in the annals of U.S. political invective. Matlin chooses this event as the opening scene of his account of Clark not because he sees Clark’s words as overlooked gems of social analysis, but because they highlight Clark’s frustration and despair that—as *Brown v. Board of Education* retreated into history—so little had actually been accomplished in its name (p. 116). By the same token, it does not necessarily follow from the lack of attention previous scholars (such as myself) have given to the text of Clark’s APA address that we have not appreciated the depth of his disagreement with the reigning ideas of his discipline or of postwar liberalism (p. 38).

As someone who has spent much of my time over the last thirty years thinking and writing about the “doll man” of *Brown v. Board*, I am impressed by Matlin’s thorough and contextually sensitive discussion of these experiments, rendered enduringly symbolic by a child-centered discourse on racism. Matlin also provides convincing evidence to refute those who have seen in

Clark's invocation of terms such as "community therapy," a heavy-handed kind of paternalistic social control (p. 93).

Matlin's discussion of Amiri Baraka adds important nuance to the popular sound-bite treatment of black power that still exists in the United States. His close and sensitive reading of this figure and his times enables him to skillfully untangle a rhetoric profuse with "accusation and insult" and to find something more interesting and less easy to dismiss: "a self-incriminating commentary on such politics" (p. 145). My own prior experience as student of playwright Lorraine Hansberry's short but significant career also led me to want more specific attention to Jones/Baraka, the playwright. After all, it was this work, especially, that made 1964 "the year of Jones," at least in New York cultural circles. In addition, I am less certain than Matlin that previous scholars have simply missed many important continuities between the black power and the racial uplift traditions (pp. 167–68). Finally, Amiri Baraka's passage in American life continues—and recently included a tempestuous and brief tenure (in 2002) as New Jersey's poet laureate—so a few closing words bringing together Baraka's past and this more recent present were in order.

As someone whose appreciation of the visual arts is guided by the same rule of thumb that Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart applied to detect pornography—"I know it when I see it"—I read Matlin's chapter on Romare Bearden with great pleasure and profit. Here, Matlin makes an important point when he argues that Bearden's contributions to modernism further expressions of the "confident cosmopolitan" associated most readily with Ralph Ellison, rather than showing an expected detachment from political commitments because of the imperatives of Cold War political culture. Furthermore, Matlin's enlightening discussion of Bearden's interactions with individuals and influences—ranging from Cezanne, Caravaggio, Andre Malraux, Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray—demonstrates how Bearden strove to escape the "narrow dictates" that honored him most fulsomely when he was seen as meeting the "obligation of the indigenous interpreter to furnish a picture of pervasive hardship and misery" (p. 251).

One of the important intellectual dividends that readers will receive from Matlin's inclusion of Romare Bearden in this study is that the links between the activism of the 1930s and the 1960s are nicely established. Although the distance between Great Depression America and the broadly affluent world of the United States in the 1960s is, in material economic terms, quite vast, activists and policymakers did look back to the 1930s for a variety of inspirations. Within this discussion, Matlin offers strong evidence that prior scholars have blurred the lines and the timing of Bearden's ideological development as an artist with an affinity for Marxist thought.

My criticisms of Kilson and Matlin at various points here are not intended as a list of disqualifying demerits. I have written on the issues under discussion and know first-hand how difficult it is to satisfy every serious, informed, and discerning reader. As I closed each of these books I was grateful that, together, they work constructively against a new “generic tendency” in some of today’s American thinking: the assumption that increasing demographic diversity will somehow automatically move the United States beyond the historical trap of the “black and white” oppositions to which this society has been geared historically.

I leave these pages convinced that the sociologist Eduardo Bonilla Silva, in *Racism without Racists* (2014), is right to warn us about the likely contours of the future for this very incompletely reconstructed people. We are likely to remain a society that, even as its human composition changes in myriad ways, responds most often by casting its new peoples in old and familiar roles drawn in “black” and “white,” with some receiving unearned scrutiny and hardship while others are supported by an unearned and perhaps even unconscious amount of privilege.

Ben Keppel, an associate professor of history at the University of Oklahoma, is the author of *The Work of Democracy: Ralph Bunche, Kenneth B. Clark, Lorraine Hansberry and the Cultural Politics of Race* (1995) and *Brown v. Board and the Transformation of American Culture: Education and the South in the Age of Desegregation* (2015). He is also the co-editor (with Jonathan Scott Holloway) of *Black Scholars on the Line: Race, Social Science, and American Thought in the Twentieth Century* (2007).

1. See David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. DuBois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (1993); and volume 2: *W. E. B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (2000).