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Black intellectuals, white audiences: searching for tales of authentic blackness

When race is in the news, white audiences turn to black intellectuals and writers for authentic tales of blackness. But, as Matthew Clair writes, this can result in an optimistic obfuscation of truth

Ta-Nehisi Coates Photograph: The Washington Post/Getty Images

By Matthew Clair

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Sometime last fall, I received an email from a Harvard colleague inviting me to join a reading group of Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*. "I just had an image this morning of a room full of white people discussing the book," she wrote, before clarifying in the next line: "I certainly don't mean to say, 'come explain what it's like to be black to us.'" But of course, in some way, that is precisely what she meant.

Amid protests against racialized police violence and debates over the limits of free speech on increasingly diverse college campuses, a good many (often, white) progressives have been left scratching their heads. What explains the current upswell of black Americans' frustration, just eight years after the election of the nation's first black president? Black intellectuals like Coates—perceived to be authentic interpreters of the black experience—have been recruited to make sense of the

disillusionment. That Coates is both black and a native son of Baltimore's restless inner city only heightens his authenticity in the eyes of a white liberal public searching for answers. But even I—the suburban-raised son of two black physicians—carry a certain racial authenticity, one seemingly much desired in predominantly white academic spaces.

Where does this belief in, and demand for, racially authentic explanations of black life come from? Far from unique to this contemporary moment, the notion of a racially authentic interpretation of blackness has been a mainstay of American understandings of the role of black intellectuals for more than a century. In his book *On the Corner*, Daniel Matlin considers how Kenneth Clark, a psychologist, Amiri Baraka, a writer, and Romare Bearden, an artist, variously navigated their designations as "indigenous interpreters" for white audiences in the 1960s. Placing these books in conversation illuminates the costs and benefits of racial authenticity in the production of knowledge about black America and, ultimately, in the struggle to alter the course of American racial inequality.

The 1960s marked a turning point in the position of black intellectuals with respect to white progressives, Matlin argues. The migration of African Americans from the South to major cities in the North and Midwest in the mid-20th century resulted in a massive geographic—and symbolic—relocation of black America. The terms "ghetto" and "urban" came to signify a population that had, for successive generations, been exploited and contained in the rural South. But migrants' lofty expectations of northern prosperity were tempered by the realities of dilapidated housing, a declining manufacturing sector, and more modern, less strident forms of racism. The cities grew restless. Various white audiences looked to black intellectuals—whom Matlin describes as racial "insiders" with "experiential knowledge"—to make sense of the emerging black ghettos and the attendant appeal of the Black Power movement's politics of racial separatism.

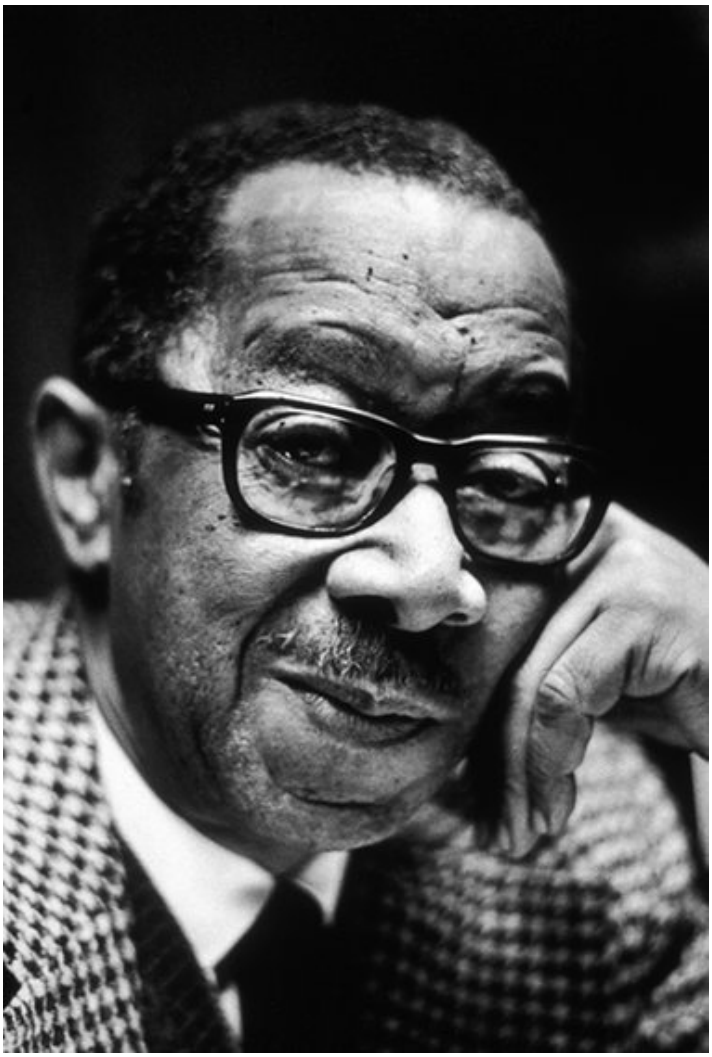
On the Corner opens during the Harlem riot of 1964. During a racist altercation between a white man and several young black students on Manhattan's Upper East Side, James Powell, a black boy, was shot dead by Thomas Gilligan, a white police officer. Protests lasted several days. As the summer progressed, similar protests against police brutality engulfed cities from Philadelphia to Rochester. To many observers, the perils of the northern black ghettos were fast eclipsing the promises of the southern civil rights movement, which had dominated media coverage in the preceding decade.

Malcolm X, pictured in Harlem in 1964. Photograph: Louis Draper

It was “amid the riots” that cultural arbiters such as newspaper editors, theatre producers, and policymakers sought out black intellectuals to interpret “black urban life to the white American public.” For these cultural arbiters, the racial identity of black intellectuals—in addition to their intellect and disciplinary training—was fundamental to the legitimacy of their claims about and solutions to black urban crises. “The logic of racial authenticity,” Matlin writes, “stipulates both that black intellectuals have a particular responsibility to *represent*, in both senses of that word, ‘their’ people, and that, as racial insiders, they are uniquely capable of doing so.”

As much as it has been imposed by white audiences, the logic of racial authenticity has been articulated by black publics and intellectuals as well. Intellectuals as disparate as Du Bois and Baraka argued that blacks possessed not only intimate understandings of blackness but also the moral authority to speak first on the social problems facing black ghettos. In the 1960s white liberals imbibed these dual claims, fostering a veritable marketplace for the “pronouncements of those believed to possess both intimate knowledge of black life and the ability to articulate that knowledge to a broad white public.” This marketplace boosted the careers of many black intellectuals of the time. Black scholars, writers, and artists were invited to the White House and regularly asked to provide their perspective on myriad black urban crises, large and small, in the form of interviews, essays, art exhibitions, and social science research.

But there were costs, too. Matlin reveals how Baraka, Bearden, and Clark each experienced ambivalence, at one point or another, toward their roles as indigenous interpreters. The story of Kenneth Clark paints the clearest portrait of what it meant for black intellectuals to feel "cornered" by the logic of racial authenticity.



Psychologist and educator Dr Kenneth Clark in 1979.

Throughout his career, Clark would maintain that interpreting for white audiences was critical to social change. The psychologist who, with his colleague and wife Mamie Clark, provided social science evidence undergirding the Supreme Court's assertion in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregation was damaging to the psyche of black children, Clark witnessed firsthand the impact his scholarship could have on social policy. In his 1965 book*Dark Ghetto*, Clark sought to "lay 'the *truth* of the ghetto' before the white American public and to explain the meaning of the riots to white liberals perplexed and disturbed by this violent turn." Social change, he believed, would come about only by appealing to the compassion of the "ruling white

majority" through the dramatisation of the "injustices of segregation and poverty." While other black intellectuals, such as Ralph Ellison, criticised Clark for pathologising the black ghetto, Clark found such an accounting to be not only accurate but also practical in the struggle for white sympathy.

But Clark would later grow disillusioned. The Johnson administration's War on Poverty ultimately failed black ghettos, and local politicians chose to treat urban unrest as a crime problem requiring police suppression rather than as a social problem requiring welfare state intervention. Clark came to view white elites as unwilling to enact needed social reform. At the same time, he began to wrestle with his intellectual identity, struggling to define himself outside white audiences' expectations. When elected in 1969 to serve as the first black president of the American Psychological Association, Clark felt pressure to give a presidential address that spoke to general, as opposed to only black, psychological and social processes. The resulting address—which advocated for the use of psycho-technological drugs among political leaders to inhibit their potential to abuse power—proved disastrous. Clark would later lament that his address failed not necessarily because his ideas were anathema but, at least in part, because his colleagues expected him to speak only on issues of race or civil rights—the intellectual domain "reserved for blacks."

Since the 1960s, the logic of racial authenticity in the production of knowledge has blossomed both within and beyond the confines of black intellectual practice—with contradictory consequences. On the one hand, the belief in an authentic black form of knowledge has fostered inclusion. Workplaces recruit minority employees with the understanding that diverse perspectives are good for the bottom line, and the most rigorous white academics have come to interrogate the potential limitations and biases of their whiteness, particularly when documenting the conditions of the black urban poor. On the other hand, the belief in authentic black knowledge has also been the foundation on which new justifications for the exclusion of people of colour have been built. Since the late 1970s, for example, affirmative action has become justified as a compelling state interest not because people of colour face unique disadvantages or because integration is an absolute good, but because minorities are understood to have inimitable perspectives to contribute—but only in certain contexts. Minorities' experiential knowledge has thus come to be valued only when such knowledge enlightens white audiences. Thus, in oral arguments in the latest affirmative action court case, the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court can legitimately ponder: "What unique perspective does a minority student bring to a physics class?"

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For his part, Coates, one of today's most recognized black intellectuals, has expressed skepticism about writing for the enlightenment of white audiences. During a public conversation in New York this past October, he remarked that he never "set out to accumulate a mass of white fans," going on to observe that when black intellectuals have sought to interpret for white audiences, they have often, seeking not to offend, done so in a way that obfuscates more than clarifies their understanding of racial injustice. Coates's sentiment echoes that of a new generation of unapologetic black activists and intellectuals who, with their impenitent positioning of white supremacy as the root cause of racial inequalities, have garnered the attention, and resentment, of great numbers of whites. As history reveals, sympathetic attention does not always translate into policy. Even when it does, long-term social change can be elusive. It is disheartening how familiar the 1964 police killing of James Powell in Harlem appears to us today, in 2016, as images of police brutality dominate our daily newsfeeds.

For more than a century, black intellectuals from various disciplinary backgrounds and political positions have articulated their insights on racial injustices. Some have played their role as indigenous interpreters faithfully and with an unfailing optimism, while others have grown wary of bearing witness, of explaining the array of emotions and events—from tragedy and rage to humor and brilliance—that constitute the black American experience. Matlin writes that depicting oppressed people "in a manner that both witnesses the extent and consequences of their suffering and simultaneously recognizes their dignity, resourcefulness, and agency remains an intractable problem for social scientists, artists, and historians." But the representation of black subordination—no matter how carefully constructed—must also find a receptive audience. So much black intellectual energy has been expended on convincing white audiences simply to care about the exploitation of the black poor and the alienation of the black middle classes. The receptivity of particular white audiences has fluctuated over time, and with it—in tandem, arguably—various indicators of racial inequality. Perhaps just as pressing, then, as interpreting blackness for white audiences is interpreting the causes and consequences of white attention for the rest of us.

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