

ESSAY

# The Rise of African American Intellectual History

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*This essay makes a decisive turn to the history and historiography of African American intellectual history, a field of study long relegated to the margins of the general field of US intellectual history. Its principal intention is to reflect on the origins, growth, and recent institutionalization of African American intellectual history while showing the relationship between those developments and broader trends within the US and, at times, European historical profession. This framework is meant as a corrective. African American intellectual history is a distinctive field with its own origins, objectives, and methods. Yet it also demands centering within US and global intellectual history. Marginalized for too long, African American intellectual history has long proposed and advanced innovative ways of doing and conceptualizing intellectual history. I suggest that this burgeoning field has important, generalizable lessons about the practice and possibilities of intellectual history writ large.*

In June 1957, the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, the precursor of today's *Journal of American History*, published John C. Greene's "Objectives and Methods in Intellectual History." In his essay, Greene tried to "offer a provisional definition of intellectual history, explain and illustrate the method of research implied in the definition, and argue the advantage to be gained by a wider application of this method in American intellectual history."<sup>1</sup> He expected to define the agenda and methodologies of an emergent field. For Greene, the intellectual historian had to "search for and describe those most general ideas, or patterns of ideas, which inform the thought of an age, define its intellectual problems, and indicate the direction in which solutions are to be sought."<sup>2</sup> He—the "he" was explicit—had to embrace a Eurocentric cosmopolitanism. "American thought is but an aspect of Western thought," Greene concluded.<sup>3</sup> It was the study of Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson—the reading and analysis of European

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<sup>1</sup>John C. Greene, "Objectives and Methods in Intellectual History," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 44/1 (1957), 58–74, at 59.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 69. Here Greene demonstrated the internationalism that spurred the rise of Atlantic history in the post-World War II United States. As David Armitage writes, historians and journalists hoping "to rally their ideological allies" at the start of the Cold War "proposed the idea that there had existed, at least since the Enlightenment, a common 'civilization' in the North Atlantic world that linked North American societies." David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (New York, 2002), 11–27, 250–54, at 14.

and Euro-American texts which would reveal the mind of the “great thinker” and the “country parson” alike.<sup>4</sup>

If, as one prominent historian has claimed, Greene’s essay “marked the incorporation of intellectual history into the mainstream of the larger field of United States history,” then it simultaneously affirmed the exclusion of African American history from the general field of US intellectual history.<sup>5</sup> Intellectual history became an influential field of US history after World War II. It arrived at the dawn of the modern civil rights movement—as John Hope Franklin, the pre-eminent African American historian, announced the arrival of a “new Negro history” characterized by real analysis of “what has actually happened in the history of the American Negro” rather than racist “predilections.”<sup>6</sup> These events were parallel, not overlapping. Even as Franklin proclaimed that the civil rights movement had facilitated African American history’s entrance into the mainstream of academia, a pioneering generation of self-identified US intellectual historians proceeded as if Black thinkers did not exist. The uncritical conflation of thinking with whiteness resulted from and then reinforced a privileging of written sources produced by elite European and Euro-American men who had near-exclusive access to the institutions in which “serious” thinking presumably occurred and from which it emanated. It reflected intellectual historians’ place within their own history. In identifying Europe as the birthplace of and most enduring influence on US ideas and intellectuals, Greene and his colleagues bound themselves and their field to a tradition of racial thought that had its roots in the Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> They, however inadvertently, assumed the mantle of Kant and Jefferson by implying through omission that Africans and their American descendants lacked a defining trait of humanity: the ability to reason, which was equated with thinking.

While recent collections of US and global intellectual history have included a few Black authors and afforded some recognition to Black intellectuals and ideas, this essay makes a more decisive turn to the distinct history and historiography of African American intellectual history.<sup>8</sup> Amid the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and the “mainstreaming” of African American history, scholars such as Earl E. Thorpe and August Meier produced the first comprehensive histories of “Negro thought.”<sup>9</sup> Their works challenged the inescapable implications of prevailing studies of the “American mind”—that African Americans were either

<sup>4</sup>Greene, “Objectives and Methods in Intellectual History,” 65.

<sup>5</sup>David A. Hollinger, “American Intellectual History, 1907–2007,” in *History and Historians since 1907*, *OAH Magazine of History* 21/2 (2007), 14–17, at 14.

<sup>6</sup>John Hope Franklin, “The New Negro History,” *Journal of Negro History* 42/2 (1957), 81–97, at 91, 95–6.

<sup>7</sup>Emmanuel Chukwudi Ezi, ed., *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Cambridge, 1997).

<sup>8</sup>Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York, 2013); Joel Isaac, James T. Kloppenberg, Michael O’Brien, and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, eds., *The Worlds of American Intellectual History* (New York, 2017); and Raymond Haberski Jr and Andrew Hartman, eds., *American Labyrinth: Intellectual History for Complicated Times* (Ithaca, 2018). A more comprehensive essay would also evaluate the relation of African American intellectual history to parallel and often overlapping fields, including African and Caribbean intellectual history.

<sup>9</sup>On the “mainstreaming” of African American history see especially Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *What Is African American History?* (Malden, 2015), 6–26.

un-American, unthinking, or both—while also hinting at what distinguished African American intellectual history. Although the pioneering generation of African American intellectual historians have been denied a place in the canon of intellectual history, they had a demonstrable impact on a subsequent generation of scholars, including Lawrence Levine, who produced important work at the increasingly porous boundaries of intellectual, social, and cultural history. Their scholarship provided the foundations of a current renaissance in African American intellectual history. In the past five years, historians have established the first professional societies and book series devoted to African American intellectual history; hosted roundtables, panels, workshops, and conferences on that subject; and published numerous books focused on African American thought. They have institutionalized African American intellectual history, while making it more transnational and inclusive of other fields, including women's history.

Still, a question lingers: what, exactly, is African American intellectual history?<sup>10</sup> In responding to that question, this historiographical essay recognizes the porousness of academic disciplines but primarily focuses on interpretations of the past positioned within the discipline of history.<sup>11</sup> Its principal intention is to reflect on the origins, development, and institutionalization of African American intellectual history while showing the relationship between those developments and broader trends within the US and, at times, European historical profession. This framework is meant as a corrective. African American intellectual history is a distinct field with its own origins, objectives, and methods. Yet it also demands centering within US and global intellectual history. Marginalized for too long, African American intellectual history *matters* for the present and future reimagining of intellectual history writ large.

## Origins

Intellectual history has long located, not problematized, its origins in the Enlightenment. In an influential historiographical essay published in the April 1951 issue of the *American Historical Review*, pioneering US intellectual historian John Higham characterized Samuel Miller's *Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* (1803) as the first work "to study systematically the materials of intellectual history," while proclaiming that it "performed a similar function and bore a similar debt to the impulse of the Enlightenment."<sup>12</sup> According to Higham, Miller's sweeping study of material and intellectual developments in the eighteenth-century West, which paid particular attention to the growth of a historical craft predicated on the critical interpretation of sources and meaning, "testified in nearly every chapter to the triumphs of progress and reason."<sup>13</sup> His *Brief Retrospect* was both a celebration

<sup>10</sup>For another response see "What Is African American Intellectual History?", the online forum held by *Black Perspectives* in June 2019, at [www.aaihs.org/online-forum-what-is-african-american-intellectual-history](http://www.aaihs.org/online-forum-what-is-african-american-intellectual-history).

<sup>11</sup>Limited space is given, for instance, to Black philosophers and political scientists, whose work might figure prominently in a more capacious assessment of scholarship on African American thought.

<sup>12</sup>John Higham, "The Rise of American Intellectual History," *American Historical Review*, April 1951, 453–71, at 454.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

and a reflection of the Enlightenment. For Higham, the Enlightenment could be characterized as a time when philosophers such as Kant, Voltaire, and John Locke, subjects of Miller's work, "first looked to the act of thinking for a key to the whole course of historical development." It was a momentous era when Europe's intellectuals "celebrated the progress of humanity and the power of reason as its driving force."<sup>14</sup>

While the Enlightenment, defined by its universalism, skepticism, and concern with unexamined hierarchies based on faith, superstition, and prejudice, certainly produced critiques of the slave trade and colonial slavery, it also created new *racial* hierarchies and classifications. The idea of universalism raised questions for that day and ours. Whose cultures and values become universalized? And how are ostensibly universal ideals applied or enforced? The Enlightenment cannot be uncoupled from European colonialism and imperialism—from practices that emerged from the tendency to treat European values and subjects as *the* universal ones. Moreover, as Ivan Hannaford writes, we must reckon with the Enlightenment's impulse to discard "the metaphysical and theological scheme of things for a more logical description and classification that ordered humankind in terms of physiological and mental criteria based on observable 'facts' and tested evidence."<sup>15</sup> The philosophers and authors of natural history celebrated by Miller and his successors formalized theories of biological racial difference, which rationalized obvious contradictions to the idea of inalienable and universal rights. The most prominent Enlightenment thinkers include Scottish philosopher David Hume, who wrote that he was "apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all other species of men, to be naturally inferior to the whites." Hume's interlocutors include Kant, the German philosopher who argued, "The Negroes of Africa have received from nature no intelligence that rises above the foolish ... The difference between the two races ... appears to be just as great in respect to the faculties of the mind as in color."<sup>16</sup> These men and their peers were intentional in writing Africa and Africans out of history and arousing the "suspicion," stated most forcefully by Jefferson, "that the blacks ... are inferior to the whites in the endowments of body and mind."<sup>17</sup>

These infamous writings demand repetition as the point from which intellectual histories have traditionally proceeded and the place from which an honest reckoning with the field of intellectual history must begin. As Higham crafted an enduring story about the "rise of American intellectual history" that began with Miller, his peers, including Greene, tried to define their field as it entered the mainstream of the US historical profession. Their generation of US intellectual historians, writing in a cultural milieu shaped by a world war against fascism and an ensuing ideological conflict between democracy and totalitarianism, attempted to write sweeping "mind studies" in which ideas and intellectuals were deeply contextualized. Some of these studies were certainly attentive to thinking about African

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore, 1995), 187. On the Enlightenment and race thinking in the early United States see especially Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

<sup>16</sup>Quotations from David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, 2006), 75.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1787), 153.

Americans; none gave any meaningful attention to African Americans as subjects.<sup>18</sup> These standard omissions reflected, then reinforced, some limitations of the prevailing methodologies in intellectual history, including the routine privileging of literary sources, even to understand eras in which patriarchy, capitalism, slavery, and racism greatly limited access to formal education, literacy, and publishing opportunities. They revealed and reaffirmed the unexamined legacies of the Enlightenment, too. In the same moment when Franklin proclaimed that “White and Negro historians, Northern and Southern historians, Japanese and Dutch historians [had] turned their attention to the study of the history of the Negro in the United States,” white intellectual historians operating in the racially segregated US academy did not consider African Americans as serious or influential thinkers.<sup>19</sup>

It was up to Black historians, including Earl E. Thorpe, to do this heavy lifting. Born in Durham, North Carolina in 1924, Thorpe embodied the value that ordinary Black families have placed on formal education; his stepmother and his father, a low-wage worker in Durham’s tobacco and cotton mills, ensured that all six of their children earned college degrees.<sup>20</sup> After receiving his BA and MA degrees from the North Carolina College for Negroes (now North Carolina Central University) and serving in the US Army during World War II, Thorpe enrolled in the Ph.D. program in history at the Ohio State University. There he identified a lifelong mission based on his own marginalization and misrecognition. As Thorpe later recalled, his US historiography class included only one book that contained even passing mention of African American historians.<sup>21</sup> He could not simply enter a profession that held “Black” and “scholar” as mutually exclusive categories; instead, he would have to reposition a long tradition of Black thought as a subject of scholarly inquiry—to, in a sense, write his own existence into being.

While Thorpe certainly helped steer the entrance of the broader field of “African American history into the mainstream of academia,” he saw the need for more specialized work, which would establish the foundations of the field of African American intellectual history.<sup>22</sup> In 1961, Thorpe published *The Mind of the Negro: An Intellectual History of Afro-Americans*. His groundbreaking book—the first to “analyze the Negro mind in the United States”—was born out of an overlapping gap in the fields of African American history and intellectual history.<sup>23</sup> Thorpe noted that he followed in the footsteps of a number of Black scholars,

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1955).

<sup>19</sup>Franklin, “The New Negro History,” 95.

<sup>20</sup>On Thorpe see especially Jerry Gershenson, “Earlie Thorpe and the Struggle for Black History, 1949–1989,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 12/4 (2010), 376–97.

<sup>21</sup>Michael Kraus, *A History of American History* (New York, 1937).

<sup>22</sup>Gershenson, “Earlie Thorpe and the Struggle for Black History,” 376. Recent books on Black historians and historical writings include Stephen G. Hall, *A Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 2009); Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement, Carter G. Woodson, and Lorenzo Johnston Greene* (Urbana, 2007); Dagbovie, *African American History Reconsidered* (Urbana, 2010); and Claire Parfait, Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry, and Claire Bourhis-Mariotti, eds., *Writing History from the Margins: African Americans and the Quest for Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>23</sup>Earl E. Thorpe, *The Mind of the Negro: An Intellectual History of Afro-Americans* (Westport, 1970), xiii.

including E. Franklin Frazier, Alain Locke, Benjamin Quarles, and Carter G. Woodson, whose work addressed or compiled documents about “various aspects of Negro life and thought.” Yet he recognized that the “general and broad story of the evolution of the Negro mind” remained unwritten.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, although Thorpe acknowledged as influences prominent intellectual historians such as Vernon Louis Parrington and Merle Curti, he simultaneously recognized how prejudice had limited the scope of his white counterparts’ work. “The question may be raised as to whether there is a need for tracing the mental development of any one segment of the population,” Thorpe wrote, anticipating subsequent criticism of African American intellectual history as parochial. “One reply,” he continued, “would be that this is a long and accepted procedure.”<sup>25</sup> His assessment of the “Negro mind” was no less valid or significant than existing, widely-praised studies of the “Puritan mind” or “The Mind of the South.”<sup>26</sup> In fact, it was a critical addition to an emergent field of US intellectual history and a necessary corrective to extant studies, which implied that the white European or American mind was normative, not unique.

Thorpe thus offered some initial theories on what distinguished African American intellectual history. According to Thorpe, “the mind of the Negro is not completely subsumed under topics treated by” white intellectual histories because “the Afro-American has held a status, hence played a role in the national drama, which is in some ways unique.”<sup>27</sup> More than three centuries of enslavement and second-class citizenship ensured that African Americans had distinct intellectual traditions. Suggesting that slavery, segregation, and discrimination were the most salient factors in shaping the ideas and sensibilities of African Americans, Thorpe argued that the “central theme of Negro thought has been the quest for freedom and equality.” He insisted that “Negro thought”—which Thorpe equated with “accommodation and attack thought”—was vindicationist. “Negro spokesmen and leaders” had often “been on the opposite side from the white South, attacking, equally as confident that God, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, and right are on his side.” That “defensive element in Negro thought ... derived from the felt need of defending the race against the charge of biological or racial inferiority.”<sup>28</sup>

Although Thorpe did not describe his book as vindicationist, he outlined some objectives that mirrored the goals of other Black scholars who were motivated by contemporary currents of Black politics and protest. “In this volume,” Thorpe wrote, “the author hopes that he has ... bared the soul of the American Negro ... that not only shall white America and the world know him better, but that the present-day Negro may know himself better.”<sup>29</sup> For Thorpe, African American intellectual history could enhance Black pride and encourage multiracial democracy.

Thorpe’s emphasis on and expression of Black protest thought reflected his methodologies, which shared some similarities with and shortcomings of prevalent

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., xiii–xiv.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., xiv.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., xi.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., xi–xii.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., xii.

approaches to intellectual history. In *The Mind of the Negro*, Thorpe defined intellectual history simply as the “history of ideas” and “the tracing and analyzing of ideas.”<sup>30</sup> His imprecision does not suggest substantial reflection on how deep consideration of the African American experience might alter prevailing definitions of intellectual history; instead, it mirrors the “method of research” promoted by John C. Greene. Thorpe attempted to identify large patterns in African American thought, then explain how those large patterns changed across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He drew his conclusions “from the record”—mainly from the published writings of Black male professionals such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois.<sup>31</sup> While those male-authored documents allowed Thorpe to identify major patterns in Black thought and somewhat connect those patterns to their social and political context, they gave an incomplete picture of Black intellectual life in the United States. Thorpe admitted that relying on “the written record may well have given this volume a too-strong middle-class coloring.”<sup>32</sup>

He was less cognizant of his gender biases. Taking a patriarchal approach that has afflicted intellectual history, Thorpe concluded that there was “no evidence” that the thought of Black women “on such matters as slavery, civil rights, love of country, devotion to education, culture, and family has been significantly different from that of their menfolk.” His assumption was based on the popular myth that Black women had “not spoken out publicly as often as have the men”—that their “silence” had resulted in a dearth of sources from which historians could recover their voices.<sup>33</sup>

Although Thorpe did not try to chart an entirely new course for African American intellectual history or even define it as a distinct field, he did establish strong foundations for subsequent generations of scholars who would do both. Thorpe understood the promises and pitfalls of intellectual history’s tendency towards generalization and sweeping narrative. He argued that it was “neither more appropriate nor inappropriate to speak of ‘The Negro’ than it is to speak of ‘the American,’” but acknowledged “that one might more rationally entitle an intellectual history of the race, ‘The Minds of the Negro.’”<sup>34</sup> For Thorpe, a less ambitious and more nuanced approach to African American intellectual history would acknowledge the heterogeneity among African Americans, especially as regards socioeconomic difference, and recognize Black humanity and individuality in a country where African Americans almost always appeared in academic scholarship and popular culture “en masse and as a ‘problem.’”<sup>35</sup>

Still, the significance of *The Mind of the Negro* is largely retrospective; Thorpe’s book fell into relative obscurity, dismissed by white counterparts for whom Black intellectual history was unthinkable. In one of the few reviews of *The Mind of the Negro*, Winthrop D. Jordan proclaimed that Thorpe’s “full-dress documented history of the ‘mind’ of the Negro in the United States ... does not securely establish

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., xiii.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., xii.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., xiii.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 362.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., xviii.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., xv.

the existence of the subject of the book.”<sup>36</sup> He proceeded to clarify any ambiguity in that disavowal of Black thinking and, consequently, humanity. While Jordan had valid concerns about sweeping “mind studies,” he argued that it was absurd for any scholar to base a book about Black people on the assumption “that the really important bonds and manifestations of group cohesiveness are essentially rational”—that assumption worked “just tolerably with the New England Puritans,” but there was “little justification for allowing it to guide study of American Negroes.” According to Jordan, “the experience shared by most Negroes ... which has set them apart as a group has not been primarily intellectual but emotional. Most of the impact on the Negro of slavery and race prejudice has occurred at the irrational levels of personality, so that, paradoxically, the Negro ‘mind’ (if it exists) has been welded together by searing nonrational forces.” Even Frederick Douglass, “who is quoted so frequently in Professor Thorpe’s book, was a distinctive abolitionist not because of a distinctive ‘mind’ but because of a distinctive color.”<sup>37</sup>

As Thorpe suggested, Jordan’s review of *The Mind of the Negro* is remarkable for its ahistoricism and lack of originality. A charitable reading of it places it within a body of scholarship written by liberal scholars, who affirmed stereotypes about Black irrationality, emotionalism, or parochialism in order to illustrate the evils of slavery and segregation. The Swedish economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal had, for instance, proclaimed that

Negro political and social thinking does not have much connection with broader American and world problems ... To [Negroes] social speculation ... moves in a sphere of unreality and futility ... This is what white Americans perceive when they tell the observer that Negroes are “emotional” or “unstable.” In a sense this judgement is correct ... The present author is inclined ... to view this characteristic of Negro thinking as a result of caste exclusion ...<sup>38</sup>

Decades after Thorpe published *The Mind of the Negro*, he recalled how Jordan, echoing Myrdal, had proclaimed “that there is no ‘mind of the Negro’ and no ‘intellectual history of Afro-Americans’ because the reactions of blacks to their experiences have been ‘visceral’ instead of intellectual.” Thorpe reflected on the latent irony in those claims, reasoning that Jordan’s repudiation of Black intellect resembled the hypocrisy of antebellum white southerners who declared that Black people were inferior while stealing “black bodies, labor, brains, and lives.”<sup>39</sup>

Rather than an easily dismissible piece of writing from an otherwise stellar career, Jordan’s review of *The Mind of the Negro* demands analysis as a document that reveals much about the conditions that stifled and shaped African American intellectual history. Jordan articulated the Cartesian assumption that the mind and body

<sup>36</sup>Winthrop D. Jordan, review of *The Mind of the Negro: An Intellectual History of Afro-Americans*, by Earl E. Thorpe, *Journal of Southern History* 28/4 (1962), 496–8.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Gunnar Myrdal, *American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, vol. 2 (New York, 1944), 781–3.

<sup>39</sup>Earl E. Thorpe, review of *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915–1960*, by August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Journal of Negro History* 78/2 (1993), 123–7, at 126.



are distinct entities. He, echoing the racist thought of the Enlightenment, suggested that Black people possessed laboring bodies, not minds. In his review of *The Mind of the Negro*, Jordan argued that Thorpe had not offered “rational pronouncements of articulate Negroes,” which would establish Black thinking. He dismissed the examples that Thorpe did provide as coming from “Negroes who had been most thoroughly absorbed into the white man’s world, who had become least Negro in the ‘mind.’”<sup>40</sup> He recycled the trope of the emotional or imitative but certainly not intellectual Negro. While Jordan would earn recognition for his work on US slavery and racism, his early dismissal of Black thought points to the ideas and assumptions that inhibited the growth of African American intellectual history. The scholars who rejected the most basic premise of Thorpe’s work—that historians *could* write an intellectual history of African Americans—directed undergraduate curriculums, controlled graduate admissions, reviewed grant applications, and controlled hiring decisions. Their disavowals of Black intellectual history appeared in such places as the *Journal of Southern History*, which seldom published scholarship by or about African Americans. It is hard to imagine how African American intellectual history could grow in such conditions.

In a development that reflects the history of race and racism in the United States, it was not Thorpe but one of his detractors who has been credited with writing the foundational book on African American intellectual history. In the fall of 1961, August Meier published a brief review of Thorpe’s *The Mind of the Negro*. While Meier justifiably critiqued Thorpe for moving unevenly between a thematic and a chronological approach, he was on far shakier ground in concluding that “the informed reader will find little that is new in [*The Mind of the Negro*].”<sup>41</sup> A grievance might have influenced that harsh judgment. In a telling passage of his cursory review, Meier criticizes Thorpe for failing to use “manuscript sources or the very relevant unpublished doctoral dissertations.”<sup>42</sup> The latter presumably included Meier’s own work. In 1957, Meier had completed a dissertation at Columbia University entitled “Negro Racial Thought in the Age of Booker T. Washington, circa 1880–1915.” Six years later, it became *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915*, a book that, as one Black intellectual historian puts it, would become “a bed-rock text of African American intellectual history,” although it notably did not cite Thorpe a single time.<sup>43</sup>

What should we make of Meier’s silencing of *The Mind of the Negro*?<sup>44</sup> Meier was, of course, well aware of Thorpe’s pioneering book when he published *Negro Thought in America*. His review of the former was almost three decades old when he wrote a revised introduction to the latter, which proclaimed that “very little had been done in Afro-American intellectual history” before 1963, the notable exception being *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written during the*

<sup>40</sup>Jordan, review of *The Mind of the Negro*, 497.

<sup>41</sup>August Meier, review of *The Mind of the Negro: An Intellectual History of Afro-Americans*, by Earl E. Thorpe, *Journal of Negro Education* 30/4 (1961), 410.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>Robert Greene II, “Black Thoughts and American History,” *USIH Blog*, 19 June 2016, at <https://s-usih.org/2016/06/black-thoughts-and-american-history>.

<sup>44</sup>I use silencing in the sense offered by Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA, 2015).

*Crisis, 1800–1860*, a collection of primary sources edited by Woodson.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, Meier’s unwillingness to acknowledge Thorpe’s precedent has significant implications. As Thorpe would later write in a generous review of Meier and Elliot Rudwick’s *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915–1980*, white scholars had habitually told their peers “that their research and writing on black history owed nothing to previous scholarship by blacks.”<sup>46</sup> Citational practices are political practices, inseparable from the histories that scholars “objectively” tell. To ignore *The Mind of the Negro* displaced Thorpe from the origins story of African American intellectual history. It reproduced and elided the racist ideas about Black intellectual incapacities that Thorpe challenged.

Yet Meier, like other white activist–scholars of his era, was self-consciously shaped by his intimacies with Black communities; he would, in fact, identify a direct connection between these formative experiences and his scholarship.<sup>47</sup> In the earliest years of his professional career, which were spent teaching at Black colleges in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Maryland, Meier observed how Black educators navigated white racism in order to secure funding. He developed a comparative analysis of Black leaders, including Washington and one of his self-identified heirs, Fisk University president Charles S. Johnson, and gained an appreciation for Black activists and educators as thinkers and theorists. While Meier credited the publications of Black scholars such as Johnson, Franklin, Quarles, Locke, Frazier, and Ralph Bunche for inspiring his research into African American intellectual history, his attention to the ideas that guided Black leaders and institutions owed just as much to his participation in the Black freedom struggle. His scholarship reflected his conversations with Black activists and intellectuals like Stokely Carmichael who, in sharing with Meier their “decidedly nationalist sentiments” or debating with him the “question of black and white leadership in the movement,” articulated complex theories of social change, self-determination, and power.<sup>48</sup> His “idiosyncratic experiences did much to determine [his] world view, and the subject and nature of *Negro Thought in America*.”<sup>49</sup>

Born from this sustained engagement with Black people, institutions, and communities, *Negro Thought in America* was praised upon its publication and remains an important work today. Meier’s dedication to recovering African American thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led him to numerous archives, including the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Collection, and the special collections at Fisk, Hampton, and Howard universities. Moreover, his “effort to consult all books and pamphlets written by Negroes ... and all books and pamphlets about Negroes in this period” resulted in the amassing of “a bibliography of nearly twelve hundred titles” in addition to countless Black periodicals.<sup>50</sup> While Meier’s published sources revealed a

<sup>45</sup>August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor, 1988), iii.

<sup>46</sup>Thorpe, review of *Black History and the Historical Profession*, 126.

<sup>47</sup>On Meier’s upbringing and early career see especially August Meier, *A White Scholar and the Black Community, 1945–1965: Essays and Reflections* (Amherst, 1992).

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>49</sup>Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, iv–v.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 281.

great deal about the ideas of Black male leaders such as Washington and Du Bois, Meier was also attuned to the role of ordinary people in influencing social and intellectual change; he had learned through experience that the study of Black institutions such as the Colored Conventions and the Black press would “shed some light ... on the attitudes of the nonvocal” and reveal “the unvocalized ideas of the articulate.” *Negro Thought in America* thus proceeded from the fundamental idea that “no adequate understanding of Negro racial thought can be given without an analysis of the institutional developments in the Negro community and their interrelationship with the changing trends in Negro thought.”<sup>51</sup>

Besides affirming methods that became standard in subsequent works of African American intellectual history, Meier built on existing Black leadership studies to advance what became field-shaping arguments.<sup>52</sup> African Americans’ fluid thinking about race and nation was a central theme of *Negro Thought in America*. Reflecting intellectual historians’ tendency towards generalization, Meier argued “that nationalist tendencies tended to be salient during periods when conditions were becoming worse and white public opinion more hostile, while the integrationist became salient when the blacks’ status was improving and white public opinion becoming more tolerant.”<sup>53</sup> He certainly affirmed some reductive binaries—protest versus accommodation, assimilationism versus nationalism—but he also acknowledged the need to recognize the complexity of Black thinkers, who often had to revise their ideas and tactics in response to, or anticipation of, the shifting nature of white supremacy in the United States.

*Negro Thought in America* helped stimulate an embryonic field of African American intellectual history, which budded in the midst of the mainstreaming of African American history, the piecemeal collapse of legalized racial discrimination in the United States, and the rise of a global Black Power movement. During the 1960s and early 1970s, some scholars published anthologies on Black thought as reflected in the published writings of Black male leaders.<sup>54</sup> Others built on long-standing traditions in Black letters by writing biographies of influential Black activists and intellectuals; the most popular subjects included Martin Delany.<sup>55</sup> These works were characterized by their focus on political thought—on how a class of Black professionals had shaped the long Black freedom struggle for freedom, citizenship, and equality through their actions and ideas. They were

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., xi–xii.

<sup>52</sup>Bunche, a political scientist, and Black philosopher William Fontaine had, for instance, written foundational studies of Black leadership. See especially Bruce Kuklick, *Black Philosopher, White Academy: The Career of William Fontaine* (Philadelphia, 2008); and Ralph J. Bunche, *A Brief and Tentative Analysis of Negro Leadership*, ed., Jonathan Scott Holloway (New York, 2005).

<sup>53</sup>Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, ix.

<sup>54</sup>Francis L. Broderick and August Meier, eds., *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1965); Howard Brotz, ed., *Negro Social and Political Thought: 1850–1920* (New York, 1966); and Herbert J. Storing, *What Country Have I? Political Writings by Black Americans* (New York, 1970).

<sup>55</sup>Dorothy Sterling, *The Making of an Afro-American: Martin Robison Delany—African Explorer, Civil War Major, and Father of Black Nationalism* (New York, 1971); Victor Ullman, *Martin R. Delany: The Beginnings of Black Nationalism* (Boston, MA, 1971); Cyril E. Griffith, *The African Dream: Martin R. Delany and the Emergence of Pan-African Thought* (University Park, 1975). Other prominent subjects included T. Thomas Fortune, A. Philip Randolph, Booker T. Washington, William Monroe Trotter, and Ida B. Wells.

certainly influenced by the recent victories for Black civil and political rights and the ongoing struggle for Black political and economic power most identified with the rebellions rocking urban America and the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party.<sup>56</sup> In their most polemical forms, these early studies of Black ideas and intellectuals, especially those written by puzzled white scholars, tried to identify the roots of the seemingly inexplicable “rage” behind the call for Black Power.<sup>57</sup> Conversely, Harold Cruse, a former Communist turned Black nationalist, critiqued the historical relationship between African Americans and the American left, arguing that Black intellectuals of the late 1960s had to chart a course towards Black economic, political, and cultural independence, which would lead towards actual Black freedom and empowerment.<sup>58</sup>

While this burgeoning scholarship suggests that John C. Blassingame might have exaggerated when, in 1975, he characterized African American intellectual history as “neglected,” it was undoubtedly a nascent field with a somewhat limited conceptual scope.<sup>59</sup> Reflecting wider academic practices, the initial wave of scholarship self-defined as African American intellectual history tended to be patriarchal—it was hindered by a preoccupation with elite male intellectuals and the question of how those educated men of letters responded to the problems of slavery and racism. Moreover, despite giving substantial attention to Africa as an object of African American interest and gesturing towards different roots and routes of transatlantic intellectual history, early works of African American intellectual history accepted the nation-state as the principal, and perhaps only, unit of analysis. The “global vision” which had long characterized the general practice of African American history did not wield the influence on specialized studies of African American intellectual history that it would later exert.<sup>60</sup>

Still, the work of Thorpe, Meier, and their contemporaries established several important precedents. These historians demonstrated the benefits of studying Black individuals and institutions and suggested the need for scholars to have strong connections to the contemporary Black communities whose histories they hoped to tell. Their studies were cautiously attentive to differences of class and legal status among African Americans and attuned to the potential utility of gender as an analytical category. In fact, some identified methods that might help scholars transcend intellectual history’s harmful tendency towards elitism. As the pioneering Black

<sup>56</sup>See especially E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (New York, 1964); John H. Bracey Jr, August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick, eds., *Black Nationalism in America* (Indianapolis, 1970); Sterling Stuckey, *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism* (Boston, MA, 1972); Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987); Alphonso Pinkney, *Red, Black, and Green: Black Nationalism in the United States* (London, 1976); Raymond L. Hall, *Black Separatism in the United States* (Hanover, NH, 1978); and Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (New York, 1988).

<sup>57</sup>See Theodore Draper, *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (New York, 1970); and S. P. Fullinwider, *The Mind and Mood of Black America: 20th Century Thought* (Homewood, IL, 1969).

<sup>58</sup>Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, 1967).

<sup>59</sup>John W. Blassingame, review of *Black Protest: Issues and Tactics*, by Robert C. Dick, *Reviews in American History* 3/2 (1975), 218–21, at 218.

<sup>60</sup>Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘But a Local Phase of a World Problem’: Black History’s Global Vision, 1883–1950,” in *The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History: A Special Issue, Journal of American History* 86/3 (1999), 1045–77.

librarian Wallace Van Jackson wrote in his review of *The Mind of the Negro*, readers of the early scholarship on African American intellectual history were offered brief allusions to Black culture but ultimately left wondering “how much could be added” if intellectual historians really studied the “poems and music” of African Americans. “Surely,” he predicted, a more integrated study of Black thought, culture, and social life “would give some insight into the mind of the Negro.”<sup>61</sup>

## Reconsiderations

At the same time that African American intellectual history emerged, a remarkable surge of interest in social history swept the historical profession. During the late 1960s and the 1970s, in the midst of youth movements erupting everywhere from Berkeley to Berlin, US and European historians turned from the traditionally dominant fields of political and intellectual history towards “history from below.” Some scholars penned new histories of the French Revolution from the perspectives of the French peasantry or gave renewed attention to the English working class. Others offered new histories of US slavery focused on “the slave community” and “the black family.”<sup>62</sup> For these scholars, skeptical of the primacy of written sources and critical of the inordinate attention given to elites, history had to attend to the oppressed. Their histories “from below” recovered the experiences of ordinary people in relation to large structural changes.<sup>63</sup>

The resurgence of social history caused concern, especially among the intellectual historians who gathered at the Wingspread Conference. In December 1977, John Higham and Paul Conkin convened a conference at Wingspread, the late architect Frank Lloyd Wright’s house in Racine, Wisconsin. The homogeneous gathering, exclusive of African Americans, was compelled by a sense of crisis. Higham, Conkin, and many of the Wingspread attendees were concerned that intellectual history was declining due to the grandiosity and generalizations that had characterized the sweeping studies of such subjects as the “American mind.” They were worried about social history. The resurgence of interest in social history then sweeping the US and European historical professions had exposed intellectual historians to a range of criticisms, including inattention to socioeconomic inequality and political repression, the privileging of elite subjects, and the dismissal of feelings and emotions, all of which had resulted in misleading claims of consensus. The Wingspread attendees, as Angus Burgin demonstrates, “would need to determine what they should appropriate from social historians even as they reaffirmed the boundaries that held them apart.”<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup>Wallace Van Jackson, review of *The Mind of the Negro: An Intellectual History of Afro-Americans*, by Earl E. Thorpe, *Phylon* 23/4 (1962), 411–12, at 412.

<sup>62</sup>John W. Blasingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); and Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York, 1976).

<sup>63</sup>On social history see especially Peter N. Stearns, “Toward a Wider Vision: Trends in Social History,” in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, 1980), 205–30; and Alice Kessler-Harris, “Social History,” in Eric Foner, ed., *The New American History* (Philadelphia, 2007), 231–56.

<sup>64</sup>Angus Burgin, “New Directions, Then and Now,” in Isaac et al., *The Worlds of American Intellectual History*, 343–64, at 347.

While historians have emphasized the Wingspread attendees' anxieties, more attention should be given to their specific assumptions about social history.<sup>65</sup> How, exactly, did US intellectual historians define the field that they would simultaneously emulate and rebuff?

The writings of Rush Welter and Laurence Veysey, two of the attendees at Wingspread, suggest how race, along with gender and class, profoundly shaped US intellectual historians' ambivalent responses to social history. In his contribution to *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, the edited volume that emerged from Wingspread, Welter proclaimed that the "proponents of Black Studies and Women's Studies, not to mention what no one calls Lower-Class Studies," had made well-meaning but ill-advised attempts to incorporate "the disadvantaged and dispossessed into the study of intellectual history." Those groups, Welter argued, had left materials that were either "very simple in their apparent argument" or of "little value for identifying the commitments that distinguished subordinate groups' thought from that of their superiors."<sup>66</sup> While Welter argued for a renewed search for "the American mind" grounded in literary evidence produced by ostensibly consequential white men, Veysey admonished intellectual historians who were inattentive to social structure and advised his peers to avoid making claims about the "social aggregate that their evidence did not support."<sup>67</sup> Yet he made some of the same connections as Welter. Shortly after Wingspread, Veysey argued that: "the 'new' social history is ... almost never pursued as such. Instead what is pursued is demographic history, urban history, the history of the family, of women, blacks, Chicanos, or native Americans ... *The society ... is hardly ever studied.*"<sup>68</sup> While Veysey accepted that intellectual history needed improvement, he complained that it was under attack, particularly by "Leftists," as "'minority' history of the wrong kind, reflecting the values of elites rather than of downtrodden groups." He praised social historians' innovative methods, discoveries, and attention to the "problems of representativeness in evidence," but implied that social history could easily become too narrow or unrepresentative of "*the society.*"<sup>69</sup>

The point here is not to equate Welter or Veysey with someone like Thomas A. Bailey, the Organization of American Historians president who derided African American history as dangerous "pressure group history."<sup>70</sup> Instead, I'm suggesting that their words call attention to how disciplinary fields become racialized (and gendered and classed)—to a subtext that should become the text in a more critical interpretation, contextualization, and decentering of Wingspread.

<sup>65</sup>Additional retrospectives on Wingspread include "Forum: The Present and Future of American Intellectual History," *Modern Intellectual History* 9/1 (2012), 149–248; and James Livingston, "Wingspread: So What?" in Haberski and Hartman, *American Labyrinth*, 11–20.

<sup>66</sup>Rush Welter, "On Studying the American Mind," in John Higham and Paul Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1979), 64–82, at 64, 77.

<sup>67</sup>Laurence Veysey, "Intellectual History and the New Social History," in Higham and Conkin, *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, 3–26, at 20.

<sup>68</sup>Laurence Veysey, "The 'New' Social History in the Context of American Historical Writing," *Reviews in American History* 7/1 (1979), 1–12, at 5.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 2, 4, 10.

<sup>70</sup>Thomas A. Bailey, "The Mythmakers of American History," *Journal of American History* 55 (1968), 5–21, at 7–8.

Veysey's admonitions do not just reflect his personal concern that social history might trend too far away from holism. Instead, they demonstrate a routine practice of conflation and devaluation in which African American history becomes a parochial or "myopic" aspect of social history. This tendency—which should not be confused with how scholars of African American history, particularly US slavery, have defined themselves as interpreters of politics, culture, and *ideas* from the "bottom up"—further cleaved African American history from intellectual history. That artificial separation raises difficult, unexplored questions for the latter field. What more should we make of the "anxiety" afflicting the US intellectual historians of the post-civil rights era? If Wingspread was a "watershed" moment in the history of US intellectual history, one that set the "agenda for the subfield in the years ahead," then what are the implications of its exclusion of Black scholars and scholarship and its founding assumption that African American history belonged to a different field challenging the hegemony of intellectual history?<sup>71</sup> Does the resurgent attention to Wingspread amplify its silences?

I want to further suggest that overemphasizing Wingspread has reified intellectual history's assumed whiteness and overshadowed the scholars who, through innovative studies of Black history, truly led the merging of intellectual, social, and cultural history. As the Wingspread attendees fretted over the state of "their" field, scholars of African American history were, in the words of one prolific historian, pioneering "the study of symbolic behavior among the 'inarticulate' ... the illiterate, preliterate, and semiliterate, who really manage to express themselves very well through their own cultural forms." Several works on enslaved African Americans drew recognition for working through "difficult sources" to find intellectual life outside professional thinkers.<sup>72</sup> Few were more successful in achieving that goal than Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*.

Published in the same year as Wingspread, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* emerged from Levine's activist background and his acute understanding of the inadequacies of mainstream intellectual history. Like Meier, Levine was shaped by his involvement in the Black freedom struggle, including his picketing of segregated Woolworth's stores in New York and his membership in the Berkeley branch of the Congress of Racial Equality. His scholarship was shaped by his recognition that Black histories had been marginalized, elided, and excluded from US history books and courses such as those that Levine took as an undergraduate student at the City College of New York and as a graduate student at Columbia University.<sup>73</sup> Building on "the demand for a politics 'from the bottom up,'" Levine departed "from the traditional historical practice of viewing the folk as inarticulate intellectual ciphers, as objects who were continually acted upon by forces over which they had no control." His work rebuked scholars "who would restrict intellectual history to the educated, the intelligentsia, the elite," and

<sup>71</sup>Benjamin L. Alpers, "Culture as Intellectual History: Broadening a Field of Study in the Wake of the Cultural Turn," in Haberski and Hartman, *American Labyrinth*, 271–84, at 273.

<sup>72</sup>Robert Darnton, "Intellectual and Cultural History," in Kammen, *The Past before Us*, 327–54, at 346.

<sup>73</sup>Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press), x–xi.

implored them “to look carefully at the richness of expression, the sharpness of perception, the uninhibited imagination, the complex imagery” of Black folk.<sup>74</sup>

Adding to the work of Black writers, who had long tried to steer professional history away from its biases rooted in the logic of chattel slavery, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* is a study of African and African American folk thought from the antebellum era to World War II premised on the simple, albeit powerful, assumption that enslaved people and their descendants “were human beings and therefore *thinking* beings.”<sup>75</sup> Levine began his groundbreaking book with the sacred worlds and secular stories of enslaved African Americans. He, intervening in the long-standing debate about African “survivals,” argued that enslaved African Americans had not simply retained some elements of African cultures or assimilated into ostensibly dominant European cultures but had instead created from both a distinct African American identity and worldview.<sup>76</sup> Moving to the decades after Emancipation, Levine then examined how urbanization, migration, and other large aspects of social change affected this Black “culture and consciousness.” He traced emergent forms of African American folk thought through the rise of new cultural expressions, which ranged from the gospel and blues to trickster and hero tales. In African American religion, music, laughter, and folktales, Levine certainly identified elements of protest thought and addressed the degree to which African American people showed some acculturation to mainstream US culture. But, through a fundamental concern with and excavation of the values, emotions, and self-awareness of enslaved and free African Americans, Levine was most responsive to Ralph Ellison’s reminder that even an oppressed people is “more than the sum of its brutalization.”<sup>77</sup>

While Levine defined himself as a cultural historian and gained well-deserved recognition for his enduring impact on the field of cultural history, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* affirmed methodologies that could expand the conceptual boundaries of intellectual history. Rather than the written texts of self-defined or formally educated intellectuals, Levine focused on the “oral expressive culture” of ordinary people. His sources included folktales, songs, proverbs, and toasts passed down from generation to generation. To understand this rich archive, Levine studied the work of folklorists, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists. He offered important insights into the relationship between culture, particularly African culture, and ideas. While the question of African “survivals” had primarily been defined as one about cultural retention or loss, Levine suggested that African cultures were a source from which African Americans’ constructed their ideas. He affirmed the need to look at the specific cultural practices of the Igbo, Yoruba, and other African people for whom the sacred and the secular were intertwined to understand how Africans and their American descendants thought about themselves and their world.

By the 1970s, Black studies was the principal catalyst of the interdisciplinary approach to the study of Black thought and culture employed in *Black Culture*

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., xi, xxv.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., xvi, original emphasis.

<sup>76</sup>On Levine’s intervention in this debate see especially August Meier, “The Triumph of Melville J. Herskovits,” *Reviews in American History* 6/1 (1978), 21–8.

<sup>77</sup>Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 445.



and *Black Consciousness*. During the Black Power era, Black students, faculty, staff, and activists challenged the racism embedded in US higher education by insisting on courses about Black history, life, and culture and demanding academic departments dedicated to the empowerment of Black people. Their efforts resulted in the establishment of more than a hundred Black studies degree programs by the mid-1970s.<sup>78</sup> As Molefi Kete Asante, the cofounder of the *Journal of Black Studies* and the founder of the first Ph.D. program in African American studies, emphasized, Black studies is not “the study of black people ... but the study of blacks and others from an Afrocentric perspective.”<sup>79</sup> Rooted in a long tradition of activist pan-African scholarship, it emerged as a site of intellectual exchange in which the interdisciplinary, and often comparative or transnational, study of Africa and its diaspora from the perspectives of Black people took center stage.<sup>80</sup>

In attending to Black subjectivity, Black studies offered a radical challenge to hegemonic theories, objectives, and methods of mainstream intellectual history. As the eminent Black studies scholar Manning Marable wrote, “behind the concept of African American studies is essentially the black intellectual tradition, the critical thought and perspectives of intellectuals of African descent and scholars of black America, and Africa, and the black diaspora.” Black studies elaborated on the descriptive, corrective, and prescriptive intellectual tradition from which it emerged; As Marable argued, it “was ... a critical body of scholarship that sought over time to dismantle powerful racist intellectual categories,” including the post-Enlightenment ones which had fundamentally shaped the practice of intellectual history.<sup>81</sup> From its inception, Black studies refused the artificial separation of art and life, the physical and metaphysical, and ideas and experience. Its practitioners assumed that ideas had a functional role in the world—that the premise behind the “social history of ideas” envisioned at *Wingspread* was anything but new. While this guiding assumption stemmed from Black studies’ emphasis on study and struggle—on its political orientation and emancipatory ethics grounded in the earliest Black scholarship—it also reflected a deep-seated belief in the political and intellectual capacities of ordinary people. At its heart, Black studies emerged as a counterhegemonic enterprise that asked two questions fundamental to intellectual historians: who produces knowledge and what is knowledge for?<sup>82</sup>

Those questions and related ones animated Black women’s studies, too. In a foundational text of that emergent discipline, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith explained that Black women’s studies was necessary because

<sup>78</sup>On Black studies and Black student protest see especially Ibram X. Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965–1972* (New York, 2012); Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley, 2014); and Stefan M. Bradley, *Upending the Ivory Tower: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Ivy League* (New York, 2018).

<sup>79</sup>Molefi Kete Asante, “Book Review Essay: A Note on Nathan Huggins’ *Report to the Ford Foundation on African American Studies*,” *Journal of Black Studies* 17 (1986), 255–62, at 258.

<sup>80</sup>James B. Stewart, “The Legacy of W. E. B. Du Bois for Contemporary Black Studies,” in *An Assessment of Black Studies Programs in American Higher Education*, *Journal of Negro Education* 53/3 (1984), 296–311.

<sup>81</sup>Manning Marable, “Introduction: Black Studies and the Racial Mountain,” in Marable, ed., *Dispatches from the Ebony Tower: Intellectuals Confront the African American Experience* (New York, 2000), 1–28, at 1–2.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

women's studies courses "focused almost exclusively upon the lives of white women," while "Black studies ... also ignored Black women."<sup>83</sup> It was needed because knowledge produced without sufficient attention to the experiences, perspectives, and intellectual work of Black women was incomplete at best and oppressive in most instances. Building on the writings of Anna Julia Cooper and other Black women intellectuals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Black feminist scholars who established Black women's studies during the 1970s offered novel theories and histories derived from their holistic consideration and centering of Black women. They identified connections ignored by Black studies and women's studies and theorized what the critical race theorist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw would later call intersectionality.<sup>84</sup> As Black feminist scholar Beverly Guy-Sheftall noted, Black women's studies scholars were "in a unique position because of their ability to explore the intersection of race, sex, and class as experienced by black women in ways that are impossible for other segments of the population."<sup>85</sup> Their works not only affirmed Black women as producers of knowledge but also laid the groundwork for subsequent scholarship on Black women's intellectual history, including *Towards an Intellectual History of Black Women* (2015).

Edited by Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage, *Towards an Intellectual History of Black Women* self-consciously builds upon its Black feminist precedents to "construct a field of study from the standpoint of Black women," which possesses expansive implications.<sup>86</sup> In the introduction to their groundbreaking volume, Bay, Griffin, Jones, and Savage explain that moving from the "essential work of recovery" done in the increasing number of studies about the lives or writings of individual Black women towards an "intellectual history writ large" entails the "development of alternative sources and modes of analysis."<sup>87</sup> They call for the researching and writing of "intellectual history 'black woman-style.'" Clearly drawing from Black feminist epistemologies, the editors of *Towards an Intellectual History of Black Women* define this approach as one "that understands ideas as necessarily produced in dialogue with lived experience and always inflected by the social facts of race, class, and gender." They foreground the central role of positionality—the feminist concept that one's identity, as shaped by social and political environment, influences one's worldview—in the production of knowledge. In making this critical intervention, and editing a body of essays that

<sup>83</sup>Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith, "Introduction: The Politics of Black Women's Studies," in Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York, 1982), xvii–xxxii, at xx–xxi.

<sup>84</sup>Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago, 2017); and Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989), Art. 8.

<sup>85</sup>Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "Black Women's Studies: The Interface of Women's Studies and Black Studies," *Phylon* 49/1–2 (1992), 33–41, at 38–9.

<sup>86</sup>Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage, "Introduction: Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women," in Bay, Griffin, Jones, and Savage, eds., *Towards an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill, 2015), 1–14, at 2, 4.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

confirm this claim, Bay, Griffin, Jones, and Savage demonstrate the profound implications of writing from the margins of historiography. The new sources, modes of analysis, and archives mined and created by their “intellectual history ‘black woman-style’” can and should, at the very least, “be adapted to the many communities that find themselves still at the margin of the field.”<sup>88</sup>

As *Towards an Intellectual History of Black Women* shows, while Black studies and Black women’s studies encompass a range of disciplines, or, in Marable’s words, reject “the parameters of so-called disciplines fostered by white intellectuals” altogether, both have been important sites of inquiry into the history of Black thought.<sup>89</sup> By the 1980s, Black philosophers, some of them leaders of Black studies programs and departments, had built on the foundations established by pioneering Black scholars such as Alain Locke and firmly planted the seeds of “Africana philosophy.” Defined by Lewis Gordon as “an area of thought that focuses on theoretical questions raised by struggles over ideas in African cultures and their hybrid and creolized forms” in the African Diaspora, that field has been instrumental in dismantling racist, post-Enlightenment ideas of “reason” and interrogating the very meaning of race and “Blackness” in the modern world.<sup>90</sup> Its practitioners have contributed foundational works on numerous Africana and Western intellectual traditions, including pragmatism, African American political thought, Black existentialism, and Afro-pessimism.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, the establishment of Black studies and Black women’s studies provided a critical space for historians, particularly those who sought to write new histories of Black thought through the reinterpretation of old sources and the construction of new archives.<sup>92</sup> Such work cohered with the paradigm-shifting mission of Black women’s studies and the ideological impulse of Black studies—to begin intellectual inquiries from the lived experiences of Black people, dismantle racism, and use ideas to secure human freedom and equality.

## Definitions and institutions

In the same moment as Black scholars established Black studies and Black women’s studies, the political landscape shifted in ways fundamentally detrimental to those disciplines. By the late 1970s, the reactionary movement that emerged in opposition to the civil rights movement was no longer ascendant but dominant. This entrenchment of conservatism was epitomized by the US Supreme Court’s ruling against affirmative action in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978). It

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup>Marable, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>90</sup>Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York, 2000), 1.

<sup>91</sup>See, for example, Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville, 1982); West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, 1989); Lucius Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy* (New York, 1996); Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); and Frank Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York, 2020). On African American political thought the work of Black political scientists has also been invaluable. See, for example, Michael Hanchard, “Contours of Black Political Thought: An Introduction and Perspective,” *Black Political Theory* 38/4 (2010), 510–36.

<sup>92</sup>Sociologist Fabio Rojas concluded that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, history was the most common “home” discipline among Black studies professors. See Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Baltimore, 2007).

was embodied by Ronald Reagan, the politician who famously launched his 1980 presidential campaign by celebrating “states’ rights” at a speech in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the town where local Klansmen and law enforcement had collaborated in the brutal murder of three civil rights activists. While racial retrenchment affected all areas of Black life, resulting in a rising concentration of Black poverty in major cities, it had a demonstrable impact on Black intellectual life, including in academia. The Reagan administration undermined efforts to bring public colleges and universities into compliance with federal desegregation orders and encouraged or led challenges to scholarship and financial aid programs designated for racial- and ethnic-minority students. By the end of the 1980s, the charges of “political correctness” and “reverse racism” were routinely and effectively used as a bludgeon against the curriculum fought for by Black activists, faculty, and students.<sup>93</sup>

This political milieu shaped a culture of introspection among Black intellectuals, who constituted part of a growing but increasingly isolated class of Black professionals. While Black academics of the 1980s and early 1990s benefited from the end of legal racial segregation and the erosion of some institutional barriers to Black socioeconomic mobility, they faced heightened questions about their connection to the “Black community.”<sup>94</sup> How should Black scholars equipped with advanced degrees relate to the majority of African Americans, who were experiencing rising levels of drug addiction, poverty, and unemployment due to the reactionary politics of the post-civil rights era? What did it mean to possess individual privilege in the midst of communal deprivation? In grappling with these amplified, if not altogether novel, questions, Black scholars had to think deeply about the social functions of ideas and intellectuals. Many looked to the Black past to offer definitions of the “Black intellectual” and the “Black intellectual tradition.”

William M. Banks’s *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in American Life* (1996) exemplifies how this broader impulse towards introspection guided attempts to define the terms of African American intellectual history. In his sweeping study of Black thinkers and ideas from colonial British North America to the late twentieth-century United States, Banks, the first tenure-track faculty member in the University of California–Berkeley’s Afro-American Studies Program, explored a range of questions inspired by the example of Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. How, Banks asked, “did racial discrimination and prejudice shape the emergence and activities of African American intellectuals? How did race define them?” Those questions rested on the assumption that race had been the primary influence on and concern of Black intellectuals. They, in turn, raised another question: how should one define “intellectual” in another moment of crisis? Like Levine, Banks refused definitions of “intellectual” that equated it with a “list of professions or occupations.” He insisted on a definition that would include

<sup>93</sup>On the conservative movement see especially Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, 2001); and Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, 2005).

<sup>94</sup>See especially *Black Intellectuals: Commentary and Critiques*, *Black Scholar* 31/1 (2001); Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton, 1994); and Martin Kilson, *Transformation of the African American Intelligentsia, 1880–2012* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

“the earliest African American interpreters of culture, those slaves who re-created the African roles of priests and medicine men.” Accordingly, Banks, building on Richard Hofstadter’s definition of “intellect,” suggested that an intellectual was anyone who was “reflective and critical, who act[ed] self-consciously to transmit, modify, and create ideas and culture.”<sup>95</sup>

Despite Banks’s gesture towards a more democratic definition of intellectual, *Black Intellectuals* is principally a study of professional Black thinkers that affirms the utility of autobiography and biography, two traditional sources and modes of African American intellectual history. According to V. P. Franklin, the long-time editor of the *Journal of African American History* (formerly the *Journal of Negro History*), “autobiography has been the most important literary genre in the African-American intellectual tradition in the United States.”<sup>96</sup> It was a preferred genre for post-Enlightenment Black writers, who offered their literacy as the main proof of their humanity; most Black leaders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would write autobiographies, which offer not only important insights into Black self-making, but also the contexts in which Black political and social theories emerged.<sup>97</sup> To recover the ideas of a broadly defined group of Black intellectuals and, in turn, tie those ideas together into something resembling a web of Black intellectual life, Banks analyzed the autobiographies of famous African Americans, including Angela Davis, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington. He ended his book with profiles of those Black autobiographers and more than a hundred other Black intellectuals. In offering those biographical sketches, which gave additional details about the life and times of the people featured in *Black Intellectuals*, Banks harkened back to nineteenth-century Black histories, which often took the form of collective biographies of leading men of the race. He not only rooted himself firmly in a foundational Black literary tradition, but also demonstrated the continued salience of biography for the writing of Black intellectual history.

African American biography was, in fact, experiencing a resurgence in that moment. Prominent subjects of biographies produced in the 1980s and early 1990s include Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr, and Booker T. Washington.<sup>98</sup> These works show that historians continued to probe the lives and minds of Black male leaders who had substantial public writings reflecting their worldviews, widely acknowledged political influence, and, in some

<sup>95</sup>William M. Banks, *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in American Life* (New York, 1996), xv–xvi.

<sup>96</sup>V. P. Franklin, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African-American Intellectual Tradition* (New York, 1995), 11.

<sup>97</sup>See especially Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the “Racial” Self* (New York, 1987); and Kenneth Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 1999).

<sup>98</sup>Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Slave and Citizen: The Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston, MA, 1980); Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1982); Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901–1915* (New York, 1983); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986); Waldo E. Martin Jr, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill, 1986); William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1991); and David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York, 1994). Other biographical subjects included Ralph Bunche, Charles Hamilton Houston, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, George Washington Williams, and Carter G. Woodson.

cases, post-secondary formal education, but scholars increasingly turned their attention from these traditional biographical subjects to a more diverse range of historical actors, including Black women such as Sojourner Truth.<sup>99</sup> Joining a growing body of scholarship on Black women's history, which included Guy-Sheftall's groundbreaking anthology of Black feminist thought and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's influential history of Black clubwomen, those biographies did not just establish the historical significance of marginalized Black women or deconstruct mythologies about famous Black women whose actual lives had been obscured through their elevation as abolitionist or feminist symbols.<sup>100</sup> Instead, they demonstrated how a creative rereading of traditional archives shaped by racism and patriarchy, the consideration of new sources, and the use of Black feminist epistemologies could offer fresh insights into the thinking of a diverse range of free and enslaved Black women.<sup>101</sup>

There is no question that what one scholar called a "golden age of African-American biography" was also a landmark moment for African American intellectual history.<sup>102</sup> As the eminent biographer Arnold Rampersad noted, biography "represents the mutual interpenetration of the mind of the biographer and the mind of his or her subject."<sup>103</sup> Unlike the earliest Black historians, whose biographies were more descriptive because they tried to establish the fact of Black historical agency, scholars of the late twentieth century often applied psychological theory to their biographies of Black people. At times, "psychobiography" came under scrutiny, particularly when critics felt that the author had engaged in too much speculation or even imposed their own thoughts onto their subject.<sup>104</sup> But the uses of biography are just as clear as its potential pitfalls. African American biography offers an important approach to African American intellectual history, one that is conventional in many respects but also imbued with immense possibilities because it assumes that Black people were and are thinking people and often links the interior lives of Black subjects to the production of texts, broadly construed.

For some scholars, biography was *the* approach to African American intellectual history. In 1996, V. P. Franklin and Bettye Collier-Thomas edited a special issue of the *Journal of Negro History (JNH)* focused "on what African-American intellectuals *do* in general, and what historians and other social scientists have done *best* in the pages of JNH." As Franklin and Collier-Thomas wrote in their introduction

<sup>99</sup>Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York, 1996).

<sup>100</sup>Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA, 1993); Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York, 1995). See also Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1999).

<sup>101</sup>Deborah Gray White, "Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History," *Journal of American History* 74/1 (1987), 237–42. On Black feminist epistemologies see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, 2014).

<sup>102</sup>Steven Helmling, "Recent African-American Biography and Criticism," *Sewanee Review* 100 (1992), 684–99, at 685.

<sup>103</sup>Arnold Rampersad, "Design and Truth in Biography," *South Central Review* 9 (1992), 1–18, at 3.

<sup>104</sup>Sterling Stuckey, "The Tragedy of Scholarship: David Levering Lewis's *W. E. B. Du Bois*," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics, and Society* 3 (2001), 62–79.

to the special issue, Black professionals had traditionally “used their life-writings to tell the truth about themselves and their people, and expose the lies about the nature of European and American cultures and societies being spread internationally by white supremacists.” In turn, Black historians had long used biography to reveal “the important connections between ... personal experiences and ideological commitments” and demonstrate individual contributions to “the African American intellectual tradition,” which was defined by its race vindicationism. For Franklin and Collier-Thomas, African American intellectual history, much like Black studies, was synonymous with the Black intellectual tradition. Their special issue was meant to inspire what was arguably an already identifiable field of study—to “represent the beginnings of an on-going and systematic analysis of the contributions of black preachers, publishers, professors, politicians, and other members of the African-American intelligentsia to telling the truth about the history and culture of peoples of African descent in the United States and throughout the world.”<sup>105</sup>

Using a similar methodological approach and definition of “intellectual,” Wilson Jeremiah Moses offered one of the most compelling philosophies of African American intellectual history to date. By the turn of the twenty-first century, Moses had already published an influential study of the “golden age” of Black nationalism and the definitive biography of the nineteenth-century pan-Africanist Alexander Crummell. He had established himself as perhaps the leading scholar of Black thought in the United States through these books and numerous other publications, which collectively used close textual analysis and intellectual biography to explore an ostensibly distinct and predominantly male class of Black professional thinkers and their complex relationship with African and Anglo-American cultures.<sup>106</sup> In 1996, Moses published revised versions of some of his earlier work as *Creative Conflict in African American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey*. He offered a philosophy of African American intellectual history that had been implied in those earlier publications. In the preface to *Creative Conflict*, Moses argues that “all active thinking runs unavoidably into conflict; that original thought is generated by the tragic and heroic struggle to reconcile conflict; [and] mythologies represent the spontaneous struggle of the human mind to encompass opposing ideas within a single thought image.”<sup>107</sup> He positions contradiction as a universal theme of intellectual history, one that did not distinguish African American thought but instead bound it to intellectual traditions as diverse as the European *disputatio* and the West African *palaver*.

<sup>105</sup>V. P. Franklin and Bettie Collier-Thomas, “Biography, Race Vindication, and African-American Intellectuals: Introductory Essay,” in *Vindicating the Race: Contributions to African-American Intellectual History*, *Journal of Negro History* 81/1–4, (1996), 160–74, at 160, 172, original emphasis.

<sup>106</sup>Along with his *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism*, see Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Wings of Ethiopia: Studies in African-American Life and Letters* (Ames, 1990); Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park, 1993); and Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (New York, 1998).

<sup>107</sup>Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Creative Conflict in African American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey* (New York, 2004), xi–xii.

For Moses, the scholar of African American intellectual history thus has a similar objective to that of other intellectual historians: to rationalize contradiction, that “particularistic manifestation of human experience,” through attention to individual personalities and interpersonal relationships alike.<sup>108</sup> Moses insisted that it was the “task of the historian to discover the processes by which thinkers seek to reconcile or ... rationalize their own contradictions.”<sup>109</sup> He also modeled what an approach to that task might look like. *Creative Conflict* examines the competing thoughts that existed within the minds of his subjects in addition to the ideological conflicts that emerged among them. It illustrates “the dynamic and generative powers of contradiction and the energizing effects of struggle in all serious thought,” which emerged from the intellectual’s implication within social networks that resembled what the US intellectual historian David Hollinger famously called “communities of discourse.”<sup>110</sup>

Still, despite the proliferation of scholarship from Moses and his contemporaries, Pero Dagbovie was justified when, in 2010, he described “the field of black intellectual history” as “comprehensive yet undertheorized.”<sup>111</sup> I would, however, suggest that this “undertheorization” was rooted in the Black intellectual tradition, including its recent institutional manifestations. While the field of African American history, like US history, has certainly become more specialized since its mainstreaming in the civil rights and Black Power eras, being an African Americanist still entails some identification as a generalist. To quote Dagbovie, “to be an African Americanist, an expert in African American history, and a professional historian of the black past” most fundamentally “means that one centers African Americans and strives to interpret why blacks thought and did what they did at various times in the past.”<sup>112</sup> In many cases, it also means being influenced and informed by Black studies, which can be understood as a project of undoing—as a counterhegemonic discipline concerned with questioning dominant intellectual categories, including academic fields rooted in histories of slavery and colonialism, rather than creating or policing the boundaries of new ones.

In this milieu, scholars effectively responded to the call to describe the Black experience from the perspectives of African Americans and interpret their thought across time and place. But there was no analogue in African American intellectual history to the concerned state-of-the-field essay, which persisted as a prominent mode of scholarship for US and European intellectual historians who remained “troubled” about the effect of social and cultural history on intellectual history.<sup>113</sup> While those historians offered new articulations of the difference between “the history of thought”—what could be “properly” designated “as intellectual history”—and “the social history of intellectuals,” scholars of African American intellectual

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<sup>108</sup>Ibid., xiii.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., xiii.

<sup>110</sup>David A. Hollinger, “Historians and the Discourse of Intellectuals,” in Higham and Conkin, *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, 42–63.

<sup>111</sup>Dagbovie, *African American History Reconsidered*, 16.

<sup>112</sup>Dagbovie, *What Is African American History?*, 28.

<sup>113</sup>See “Symposium on ‘Intellectual History in the Age of Cultural Studies,’” *Intellectual History Newsletter* 18 (1996), 3–70; and *Historically Speaking* 10/4 (2009).



history more often moved between these ostensibly distinct approaches.<sup>114</sup> Some, including Moses, identified their definitions of intellectuals and intellectual history and proposed how scholars could productively approach the latter, but their collective reluctance to proscribe—to proclaim what intellectual history was *not*—suggests the theoretical function of “undertheorization.” Put another way, in the few articulations of possible methods, terms, definitions, and objectives of African American intellectual history, which refused to foreclose other ways of doing that work, we might see the affirmation and function of freedom as a foundational Black theory.

Rather than deterring scholarly production, the freedom of expression afforded to and claimed by scholars of African American intellectual history stimulated a burgeoning body of scholarship in what was fast becoming a recognizable field of study. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, no one could assert, as John Hope Franklin had in his preface to *Black Intellectuals*, that the field of African American history was devoid of “any critical examination of what the group ... w[as] thinking and saying.”<sup>115</sup> African American intellectual history had arrived, if it was ever absent. The proliferation of scholarship in this growing field included studies of racial and religious thought that foregrounded the thinking of professional thinkers and enslaved people alike;<sup>116</sup> histories of a diverse range of Black institutions and intellectual spaces, including colleges, beauty salons, and the mass consumer marketplace;<sup>117</sup> studies of Black radicalism, which advanced and challenged the canonical work of Cedric J. Robinson;<sup>118</sup> histories of grassroots Black political thought and culture;<sup>119</sup> and individual and collective biographies of an ever-expanding number of Black men and women.<sup>120</sup> Some of these works,

<sup>114</sup>Daniel Wickberg, “Intellectual History vs. the Social History of Intellectuals,” *Rethinking History* 5/3 (2001), 383–95.

<sup>115</sup>John Hope Franklin, “Foreword,” in Banks, *Black Intellectuals*, ix–xii, at ix.

<sup>116</sup>Judith Weisenfeld and Richard Newman, eds., *This Far by Faith: Readings in African-American Women’s Religious Biography* (New York, 1996); Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1996); Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham, NC, 1997); Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People* (New York, 2000); and Charles Banner-Haley, *From Du Bois to Obama: African American Intellectuals in the Public Forum* (Carbondale, 2010).

<sup>117</sup>Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, 2007); Zachary R. Williams, *In Search of the Talented Tenth: Howard University Public Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Race, 1926–1970* (Columbia, MO, 2009); and Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women’s Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Urbana, 2010).

<sup>118</sup>Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, 2002); Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, NC, 2007); and Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC, 2001).

<sup>119</sup>Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet* (New York, 2003).

<sup>120</sup>Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York, 2000); David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (New York, 2000); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 2003); Derrick P. Alridge, *The Intellectual Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History* (New York, 2008); Stephanie Y. Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower: An Intellectual History, 1850–1954* (Gainesville, 2008); Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York, 2009); Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); Robin D. G.

including those that traced the history of an idea or ideas over large swaths of time, adhered to traditional approaches to intellectual history. Still others, namely the intellectual biographies and innovative histories of Black institutions, showed the productive relationship between social history and intellectual history.

A common feature of this diverse body of scholarship was an expansion of the very notion of intellectual history. As Lewis Gordon suggested, “the tendency to deintellectualize Africana and black intellectual history” persisted into the twenty-first century; the routine assumption lingered that there are not “black thinkers on a par (or beyond) those of the Western canon.”<sup>121</sup> The works within the big and burgeoning tent of African American intellectual history certainly claimed a place for African Americans within the intellectual history of the United States, even the world. Yet, in reframing numerous Black cultural institutions as sites of intellectual production and intellectual life, reclaiming Black people from across the socio-economic spectrum as thinkers, and writing the history of ideas produced or engaged by Black people, they charted a new course for intellectual history. That path would not wind through any existing historical organization. Instead, it paved the way for a new institution: the African American Intellectual History Society (AAIHS).

In late 2013, at the same time as the editors of *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* celebrated a “renaissance of intellectual history,” historian Christopher Cameron devised the idea of a blog dedicated to African American intellectual history.<sup>122</sup> He talked with historian Lauren Kientz Anderson about her experience in helping to start the US Intellectual History Society Blog. He reached out to more than two dozen potential writers, including me. Along with approximately seven other scholars, I agreed to join the AAIHS.<sup>123</sup> What struck me then and resonates with me now is that Cameron proposed something important—the creation of a leading academic society on the basis of a blog. This was an innovative idea about how to create a vibrant scholarly community in the digital age. Yet it was also traditional. What Cameron conceptualized was akin to the public history work of Carter G. Woodson and his Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. It reflected an impulse that is so central to the Black intellectual tradition. An academic society built on an open-access platform fundamentally erodes the artificial boundaries between scholars and the public. It not only assumes the intellectual capabilities of a general readership but welcomes them

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Kelley, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York, 2009); Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (Athens, GA, 2011); and Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York, 2011).

<sup>121</sup>Lewis Gordon, “Reasoning in Black: Africana Philosophy under the Weight of Misguided Reason,” *Savannah Review* 1 (2012), 81–96, at 88; Gordon, “Africana Philosophy and Philosophy in Black,” in *The Role of Black Philosophy*, *Black Scholar* 43/4 (2013), 46–51, at 46.

<sup>122</sup>Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, “The Fall and Rise of Intellectual History,” *Chronicle Review*, 17 Feb. 2014, at [www.chronicle.com/article/ideas-still-have-consequences](http://www.chronicle.com/article/ideas-still-have-consequences).

<sup>123</sup>My sketch of AAIHS history draws primarily from my recollections. I’ve also referred to two institutional histories: Chris Cameron, “Celebrating Two Years at AAIHS,” *Black Perspectives*, 18 Jan. 2016, at [www.aaihs.org/aaihs-two-year-anniversary](http://www.aaihs.org/aaihs-two-year-anniversary); and “About,” *Black Perspectives*, at [www.aaihs.org/about-black-perspectives](http://www.aaihs.org/about-black-perspectives).

into a “scholarly” community bound by shared interests, not academic credentials or hierarchies.

That communal ethos would guide the institutionalization of African American intellectual history. Following the initial launch of the AAIHS blog in the summer of 2014, the foundations of the AAIHS were cemented over soul food, beer, and blues on Beale Street, at the annual convention of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History Annual Convention held in Memphis in September 2014. By the end of that year, the AAIHS blog had almost twenty regular writers, myself included. A team was forming; more structure followed. In June 2015, the AAIHS incorporated as an educational nonprofit with Cameron as its founding president, Keisha N. Blain as its founding secretary, and Ashley D. Farmer as its founding treasurer. Blain also became the senior editor of the AAIHS blog. In that role, Blain led the rebranding of the AAIHS blog as *Black Perspectives*; built a robust editorial team, which included associate editor Ibram X. Kendi; introduced a peer-review process; grew the roster of regular writers to more than thirty regular contributors; and expanded the scope of *Black Perspectives* to include more scholarship on the thought and culture of African and Afro-descended people outside the United States. *Black Perspectives* quickly became a leading, prize-winning platform for public scholarship on global Black thought and culture. Just as importantly, the conversations and communities that emerged there were intended to be transferable; with careful planning, they moved from the digital realm to the inaugural AAIHS conference, held in March 2016, to its resulting volume, edited by Blain, Cameron, and Farmer.

Published in 2018, *New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition* begins by grappling with an enduring question: what is intellectual history? In their introduction, the editors define “the general field of intellectual history” as one which “deals with the ideas and symbols that people use to make sense of the world.” Intellectual history, they continue, is grounded in the idea that “human beings depend upon the use of language, which gives meaning to individual lives” and the related belief that “human beings cannot live in the world without theorizing,” whether explicitly or implicitly, “about what they are doing.” For the editors of *New Perspectives*, intellectual history tries to make sense of people’s “cultural construction of reality”—of “the symbols and language” that we use to make meaning. The field can therefore be best understood as one principally concerned “not about what people did, necessarily, but more about what they thought about what they were doing.” While that definition gestures to some particularities of intellectual history, Blain, Cameron, and Farmer quickly add that the field is not “entirely divorced from other fields of history, including social and cultural history.” In fact, the editors conclude, “intellectual history helps to deepen our understanding of social and cultural history, forcing us to investigate the ideas that undergird political and social life and grapple with the theories and ideologies that inform historical actors.”<sup>124</sup>

In theorizing intellectual history’s connections to social history and cultural history, *New Perspectives* offers an important reflection on the relationship among

<sup>124</sup>Keisha N. Blain, Christopher Cameron, and Ashley D. Farmer, “Introduction: The Contours of Black Intellectual History,” in Blain, Cameron, and Farmer, eds., *New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition* (Evanston, 2018), 3–16, at 3.

ideas, action, and lived experience that, along with other recent work on African American intellectual history, redefines the category of intellectual.<sup>125</sup> While, as European intellectual historians have noted, the general field of intellectual history has mostly shed “an antiquated idealism that often treats ideas as magical forces that can somehow act on their own,” scholars of African American history have been especially insistent on theorizing the social production and political lives of ideas.<sup>126</sup> The editors of *New Perspectives*, for example, insist on understanding that Black people “did not simply act on a whim; they carefully thought about their actions and they carefully devised strategies and tactics.” Such an insistence does not just delegitimize post-Enlightenment theories of Black irrationality, which were evident in the dismissal of Thorpe’s *The Mind of the Negro* and endure today. Instead, it points towards what Cameron has elsewhere called a “radical inclusiveness—both in who counts as an intellectual and whose intellectual histories count.”<sup>127</sup> If thinking undergirds action, then clearly the label of “activist” is insufficient for the countless Black political actors labeled as such. Indeed, and beyond a continued grappling with praxis, the basic, albeit powerful, premise that Black people were intentional about what they did suggests the need for more histories of ideas focused on workers, enslaved people, and a wide swath of folk who, as earlier scholars like Levine showed, were fully capable of making sense of their world without possessing degrees or even the privilege of literacy.

Ultimately, Blain, Cameron, and Farmer arrive at the conclusion that African American intellectual history must encompass a wide range of historical actors and methodologies. Even while positing some definitions of intellectual history, the editors of *New Perspectives* conclude that “Black intellectual history is by no means monolithic, and there are varied approaches to the study of black thought.” They, too, refuse to proscribe ways of doing intellectual history. The editors’ resistance to replicating the “exclusionary framework” that long placed Black thought and Black people at the margins of intellectual history affirms the theoretical centrality of freedom of expression or exploration to the field of African American intellectual history.<sup>128</sup>

While the “radical inclusiveness” affirmed in *New Perspectives* has certainly encouraged a diversity of scholarship on African American intellectual history, the burgeoning field has been characterized by a clear emphasis on

<sup>125</sup>Along with *Towards an Intellectual History of Black Women*, recent or forthcoming edited works on African American intellectual history include Jonathan Scott Holloway and Ben Keppel, eds., *Black Scholars on the Line: Race, Social Science, and American Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Notre Dame, 2007); Adolph Reed Jr. and Kenneth W. Warren, eds., *Renewing African American Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought* (New York, 2016); Brian D. Behnken, Gregory D. Smithers, and Simon Wendt, *Black Intellectual Thought in Modern America: A Historical Perspective* (Jackson, MS, 2017); Sherrow O. Pinder, ed., *Black Political Thought: From David Walker to the Present* (New York, 2020); Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner, eds., *African American Political Thought: A Collected History* (Chicago, 2020); and Derrick P. Alridge and Cornelius Bynum, eds., *The Black Intellectual Tradition: African American Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, forthcoming).

<sup>126</sup>McMahon and Moyn, “The Fall and Rise of Intellectual History.”

<sup>127</sup>Christopher Cameron, “New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition: An Editor’s Response,” *U.S. Intellectual History Blog*, 18 April 2019, at <https://s-usih.org/2019/04/new-perspectives-on-the-black-intellectual-tradition-an-editors-response>.

<sup>128</sup>Blain, Cameron, and Farmer, “Introduction,” 3.

transnationalism or internationalism. In recent years, intellectual historians have pushed beyond imperial and national boundaries. An increasing number of studies explore the movement of ideas across borders or examine how intellectuals were informed by or responded to events outside their local or national contexts.<sup>129</sup> Although the burgeoning work on Black internationalism cannot be divorced from this general “global turn” in intellectual history, its origins lie in the much older “global vision” of African American history.<sup>130</sup> It is less a response to globalization and more a product of the Afro-diasporic intellectual and popular cultures that Paul Gilroy identified as the “Black Atlantic.”<sup>131</sup> In placing US-based Black intellectuals in conversation with intellectuals and intellectual traditions in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and even the Pacific, scholars of African American intellectual history have traced different routes than did their US and European counterparts.<sup>132</sup> They have offered new insights into modes of Black belonging beyond the nation-state.

In doing so, some have centered women.<sup>133</sup> Much of the recent work on Black internationalism has focused on communities of organic and professional Black women intellectuals who shaped the contours of anticolonial, antifascist, and Black nationalist thought.<sup>134</sup> These studies have challenged received wisdom about African American intellectual history. For instance, recent books by Blain and Farmer dismantle the long-standing masculinist narrative of Black nationalism and Black Power in the United States that suggests that there was a “golden age” of Black nationalism from the 1850s to the 1920s, a decline, and then a resurgence of revolutionary Black nationalism in the long 1960s before the collapse of the Black Panther Party in the late 1970s. By focusing on the ideas, experiences, and global politics of overlooked Black women intellectuals such as Mittie Maude Lena Gordon and “Queen Mother” Audley Moore, they reveal a much longer *durée* of Black nationalism and internationalism.<sup>135</sup>

Clearly transformative, not additive, the scholarship on and by Black women has not only proposed new periodizations of African American intellectual history but

<sup>129</sup>See Moyn and Sartori, *Global Intellectual History*; and Isaac et al., *The Worlds of American Intellectual History*.

<sup>130</sup>Kelley, “But a Local Phase of a World Problem.”

<sup>131</sup>Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London, 1993).

<sup>132</sup>Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London, 2015); Nicholas Grant, *Winning Our Freedoms Together: African Americans and Apartheid, 1945–1960* (Chapel Hill, 2017); Peter Cole, *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area* (Urbana, 2018); and Benjamin Talton, *In This Land of Plenty: Mickey Leland and Africa in American Politics* (Philadelphia, 2019).

<sup>133</sup>Beyond the study of Black internationalism, recent works on Black women’s intellectual history include Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana, 2017); and Ula Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* (Chapel Hill, 2017).

<sup>134</sup>See especially Imaobong D. Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Berkeley, 2018); Keisha N. Blain and Tiffany M. Gill, eds., *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Urbana, 2019); and Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire* (Urbana, 2020).

<sup>135</sup>Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill, 2017); and Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia, 2018).

also posed questions about power, history, and the archive that have profound implications for the field. As Farmer has written, newer scholarship on Black women's history has moved from attempting to find Black women in the traditional archive, often by reading male-authored sources against the grain, to "acknowledging and interrogating issues of empowerment and erasure embedded in the archive itself." They have asked, "How should historians conceptualize the archive? What can be discerned from traditional and nontraditional sources? How do scholars interpret and account for the power dynamics that the archive reproduces? And, how should this dynamic inform historical inquiry and methodology?"<sup>136</sup> Farmer persuasively suggests that one outcome of this "archival turn" is that historians, and perhaps especially intellectual historians, can no longer be beholden to or blinded by the search for the "right" sources—to an uncompromising commitment to empiricism, a claim about and to knowledge born of the Enlightenment.<sup>137</sup> There are histories of ideas and thinkers to be found in archival silences and omissions or in "non-traditional" texts that might be painted, drawn, or spray-painted on a wall. Farmer's own work testifies to that very point. In *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era*, Farmer analyzes Black women's artwork and political cartoons to show how their "gendered imaginary" became a critical site for theorizing Black Power. Attuned to how violence and power have structured the traditional archive and reified its claims to objective truth, she shows how historians can mine untapped and well-trodden sources to write innovative Black intellectual histories.

## Futures

So what is African American intellectual history? The field of African American intellectual history has its roots in the long Black intellectual tradition—what Marable described as "the critical thought and perspectives of intellectuals of African descent and scholars of black America, and Africa, and the black diaspora."<sup>138</sup> Its more immediate origins can be found in the civil rights and Black Power eras. Influenced by the Black freedom struggle, scholars such as Earl E. Thorpe and August Meier wrote the first self-defined, comprehensive histories of African American intellectual history. They established theories and methods that inspired future generations of scholars, even those who introduced new ways of doing and defining African American intellectual history that bore the influence of social and cultural history. Today, following a critical period of introspection among Black intellectuals of the post-civil rights era, the field of African American intellectual history has become more inclusive, particularly in its

<sup>136</sup>Ashley D. Farmer, "In Search of the Black Women's History Archive," *Modern American History* 1/2 (2018), 289–93, at 289.

<sup>137</sup>Recent scholarship focused on power and the archive include Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12/2 (2008), 1–14; Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, 2016); Lisa Ze Winters, *The Mulatta Concubine: Terror, Intimacy, Freedom, and Desire in the Black Transatlantic* (Athens, GA, 2016); Jessica Marie Johnson, "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads," *Social Text* 137 (Dec. 2018), 57–79; and Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York, 2019).

<sup>138</sup>Marable, *Dispatches from the Ebony Tower*, 1.

attention to gender and class, more expansive in geographic scope, and more organized than ever before. It is now possible to identify it as a distinct field with its own methods and objectives.

Many of those methods and objectives are not set in stone, however. At its core, African American intellectual history is the study of the thinking of (not about) enslaved Africans and their descendants—of humans who were defined as chattel, not thinkers, and denied full inclusion in Eurocentric conceptualizations of humanity. It is a field very much concerned with how ideas move in the world and, in the spirit of the Black intellectual tradition, troubles post-Enlightenment ideas of progress and linearity by asking how ideas of the ostensible past might pertain to possible, liberated futures. Yet, in writing intellectual histories informed by and often attuned to present concerns, scholars have adopted a wide range of approaches, from close textual analysis and intellectual biography to the study of institutions and intellectual life. They have analyzed traditional sources such as newspapers and books written by professional thinkers while also mining a wealth of untapped sources, including artwork, political cartoons, songs, and folklore, to show how organic Black thinkers made sense of themselves and their world. Accordingly, this diversity of sources and modes of writing suggests that African American intellectual history might be best defined as a field that encourages the reconsideration of the sources from which ideas emerge and the rethinking of the category of intellectual. It is guided by an ethics of freedom—a philosophical orientation towards proposing, questioning, and exploring; a propensity for pushing, rather than policing the boundaries of intellectual history.

Consequently, the future of African American intellectual history is tantalizingly uncertain. Scholars will certainly continue to produce intellectual histories, including biographies, that place African American ideas and intellectuals within global and Afro-diasporic contexts.<sup>139</sup> Women's history and the archival turn led by Black women scholars of slavery will assuredly shape African American intellectual history in the coming years, as will continued grappling with digital realms as critical sites and sources of Black intellectual production.<sup>140</sup> African American intellectual history will continue to be shaped by the socioeconomic and political environment in which it is produced. But how? The field of African American intellectual history has now established strong roots in the academy. Yet, the "Ivory Tower" is crumbling before our eyes. Surely this confluence of events—the erosion of the neoliberal university amid tepid steps towards its diversification and decolonization—will influence the future of African American intellectual history. Intellectual spaces outside the academy could become even more valuable. We might need even more fresh thinking about maroonage.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>139</sup>See Myriam J. A. Chancy, *Autochthonomies: Transnationalism, Testimony, and Transmission in the African Diaspora* (Urbana, 2020); Keisha N. Blain, *East Unites with West: Black Women, Japan, and Visions of Afro-Asian Solidarity* (under contract); and Ashley D. Farmer, *Queen Mother Audley Moore: Mother of Black Nationalism* (forthcoming).

<sup>140</sup>Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, 2020); and Jessica Marie Johnson and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *Black Code, Black Scholar* 47/3 (Fall 2017).

<sup>141</sup>Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Maroonage* (Chicago, 2015).

As Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor suggested in her stirring keynote at the fifth annual AAIHS conference, our current political moment will also require continued engagement with the Black radical tradition. This generation of scholars, shaped by the frustrated promise of a Black presidency, global economic recession, and the parallel rise of the Movement for Black Lives, will surely grapple with the problems of racism and capitalism in addition to the related concerns of a growing climate crisis and the global rise of far-right politics. I imagine that our scholarship will continue to bridge the artificial divide between professional thinkers and folk who create knowledge through struggle. And that we'll remain committed to finding those ideas and intellectual histories needed to get us free.

All intellectual historians would be wise to pay attention. In recent years, African American intellectual history has started to receive token inclusion in conferences and edited collections about intellectual history. But this essay moves it from the margins to the center. It suggests why intellectual historians should treat African American intellectual history as essential, not additive—as foundational rather than ancillary to any substantive analysis of US or even global intellectual history. The field of African American intellectual history, produced from the margins of historiography, has constantly proposed new theories, methods, and sources drawn from academic research, personal experience, and Black epistemologies. It can—will—help us reimagine the future practice and possibilities of intellectual history writ large.

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