

The failure of black intellectuals examined

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

After peering at the books in my library on contemporary American racial history, a good friend asked why none of the books were written by blacks.

The question seemed more like an accusation than a question. As an author and researcher of contemporary racial issues, I pride myself on my large collection of books by black authors. I quickly grabbed books by David Levering Lewis, on W.E. B. DuBois, Arnold Rampersad on Langston Hughes, Robin G. Kelly on blacks and the Communist Party, and Nell Irving Painter on Sojourner

Truth and waved them in front of him as examples of solid, compelling works by black writers that enhance understanding of racial problems, issues and events. My answer satisfied him, but not me.

When he left I sat for a long time staring at my bookshelf. I realized why he asked the question. Other than the four books I showed him, the majority of my books on racial issues were written by white authors. They are first-rate scholarly works based on an exhaustive mix of primary and secondary sources, archives, private papers, government documents and reports,

newspaper articles and personal interviews.

They were published by non-academic presses and written in a non-pedantic and highly readable style. These books are frequently referenced and discussed by students, academics, policy makers and the general reading public. They will stand the test of time as important works.

I can't say the same for the books by black intellectuals. And it's painful because I remember during the 1960s black militants savagely attacked white academics for carving out a lucrative cottage industry "studying" blacks.

They charged that white

academics had easy access to research and foundation grants, paid sabbaticals, an unlimited supply of eager students to comb the archives for source material and unlimited use of libraries. Their ultimate pay-off was a fat contract from a mainstream publisher.

Black activists demanded that colleges and universities hire and promote more blacks to faculty positions, provide them equal time and money for research and for publishers to provide them with contracts.

Once this happened it was expected that black scholars would pour out an avalanche of solidly researched books on the black struggle.

The critics were right and wrong. In that era, white

academics had a total lock on campus resources and the publishing world. And many editors didn't believe that blacks were capable of serious scholarship. That has changed. There are many respected black scholars on hundreds of college campuses. Many have tenured positions, have access to libraries, can secure grants, and have an ample supply of student researchers. Mainstream publishers publish more books by blacks than ever.

But the critics were wrong in expecting black scholars to publish books that pass rigorous intellectual muster. They are still mostly non-existent.

Many of the books by black

authors published by mainstream publishers fall into these predictable categories: Crime and violence, family breakdown, male-female relationships, poverty, evil black conservatives, popular (mostly rap) culture, and spirituality. Nearly all are thin volumes of the author's recycled essays, or newspaper articles. The writers offer little or no documentation, reference notes or bibliography to support their opinions. The only unifying theme of their book is "racial matters."

Most of them smack of crass intellectual masturbation hastily tossed together to make a quick buck. The abysmal failure of black intellectuals to (See Hutchinson, Page 14)

A VOICE FROM THE HILL

When will we ever learn?

By George Wilson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

There is an old saying which goes something like this, "If a dog bites you once, it's the dog's fault; if it happens twice, it's your fault." This seems to ring true when you observe some of the most recent actions of the nation's oldest civil rights organization.

After many had left the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for dead, the group miraculously came to life to voice concern about the hiring practices of many of the nation's hotels and the Payless Shoe Source stores.

In March of 1996, the NAACP sent a questionnaire to the leading hotels asking them about the number of African Americans that they employed in management positions.

The vast majority of these hotels didn't think enough of the organization to even respond to the written inquiry. Those who did respond gave only partial answers. The non-response of the hotels prompted the NAACP to hold a press conference where it presented its grading system for the hotels. Just as students can expect a failing grade when they don't do assignments, most of the hotels also received a failing grade for non-participation, as well as poor performance.

As NAACP President Kweisi Mfume stood before reporters, he was joined by representatives of several dozen African-American organizations. The overall theme was that if these hotels don't change their practices, they wouldn't continue to support them with their patronage.

Being the skilled linguist that he is, Mfume stopped short of calling for a boycott of these hotels and instead opted for a strategy that has been used not so effectively in other

instances.

Mfume and the others seem to think that these businesses will "do the right thing" after a meeting with them. Using history as a guide, what usually happens is that the business makes a couple of token hires, we celebrate a victory and bring our dollars to that business in record numbers.

To be honest, the owners of the hotels know that African Americans of a certain status enjoy spending their money in these types of hotels and that we have no facilities of our own to turn to. What an indictment on us.

The case against Payless Shoe Source is like a song that we have heard all too often. Payless generally sets up shop around African-American communities. Nationally, the chain operates 4,300 stores. Of this number very few African Americans are found in the chain's hierarchy.

In fact, 14 African-American store managers have filed suit alleging hiring discrimination, failure to promote African Americans even though less qualified whites are routinely promoted, and retaliation is taken against any African Americans who dare to complain.

The Washington, D.C. branch of the NAACP is throwing its support behind the plaintiffs. I listened attentively as Rev. Morris Shearin, president of the Washington NAACP, voiced his support for the action undertaken by some of the stores' managers.

What he didn't say was that African Americans have the power to virtually shut Payless down if they would simply stop patronizing the stores.

Participants in the press conference indicated that Payless derives 60 to 70 percent of its profits from African Americans. If we have that type of economic clout, why are we asking of a few jobs?

The situation with most of the nation's hotels and Payless Shoe Source point in one direction. That of self-reliance. As I watched representatives of African-American organizations stand before a bank microphone to express their concern for the lack of jobs of Africans, I wondered when will we learn that "God blesses the child who has his own"? Why don't the NAACP and other organizations use their resources to build a hotel or two? In the case of Payless, it seems quite clear that it doesn't require any real genius to make an inexpensive shoe and offer it to our people. The only thing that seems to be lacking is the will to break the mind-set of being a consumer instead of a producer.

When the majority culture wouldn't provide opportunities, we created our own. That spirit must be reinvigorated or else we will continue to eat appetizers while someone else enjoys the main course.

George Wilson is a 16-year Capitol Hill correspondent for the American Urban Radio Network.

THIS WAY FOR BLACK EMPOWERMENT

Life without control, life without morals

By Dr. Lenora Fulani
Special to Sentinel-Voice

We look at the front page of the newspaper or turn on the nightly news, and there it is: yet another "unimaginable" display of inhumanity. Some of us go on reading or watching with a sort of sickened fascination. Some of us may turn the channel or the page, not wanting to know anymore. All



DR. LENORA FULANI

of us are bewildered; we ask ourselves and each other: "How can such things happen?" Obviously, this moral unraveling does not have a single "cause." Some say it's located in the breakdown of the family. Others point to the skewed distribution of the wealth and privileged, even though nowadays violence and brutality cross class, ethnic and racial lines.

All of these may be factors, but at a more fundamental level, the rise of violence and inhumanity has to do with the belief that we do not control our lives, our communities or, indeed, our country.

Without that ownership and control, it becomes increasingly difficult to take personal responsibility. And once people stop taking responsibility, the rest of mortality begins its inevitable decline.

As a development psychologist, I have seen this pattern over and over. When a husband and a wife are having marital problems and each has a list of "grievances" against the other, there is no way out of the troubles unless they can find a way to take

ownership of and responsibility for their relationship rather than just for themselves. Think of parents telling a youngster who keeps a messy room or leaves dishes in the sink: "Just wait until you have your own home and you'll see what it's like." They know it takes having your own home to want to keep it clean.

This is likewise true for a community or a nation. When people feel that they do not have a stake in their community or country and they cannot find a way to change that the conditions are ripe for moral decline.

How do we create this sense of ownership: To start with, our young people need a way to take some control over their own lives, some power and initiative, sometimes even in small ways. One such small way is the New York City-based All Stars Talent Show Network.

With funds donated by private citizens, the All Stars have built over the past 12 years a permanent talent show network run entirely by inner-city youth, they perform, run all the technical equipment, staff the box office even provide security.

The results are promising; the communities where it has taken root all have seen a drop in youth crime. But it will take more. With kids you can start small, but as kids grow up they need to continue to feel power in their lives, not just in politics, but in their work and their community lives. We've already seen what happens when they don't.

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