

On Books:

The 'new' black intellectual - part of an old tradition

By MATTHEW BUDMAN
Special to The Times

While respect for the American intellectual may have reached a new low, notable exceptions are a handful of increasingly prominent African Americans — William Julius Wilson, bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates, Cornel West et al. And though this coterie may have been, as is often charged, a bit too eager to endorse characters and causes past the pale, there is no question that the esteem in which they are held comes of their efforts to forge links between public action and the proverbial ivory tower in grappling with America's stickiest questions: those of race.

Lest anyone take the black intellectual to be a recent innovation, Berkeley professor William M. Banks has developed a history of black American thought as it has

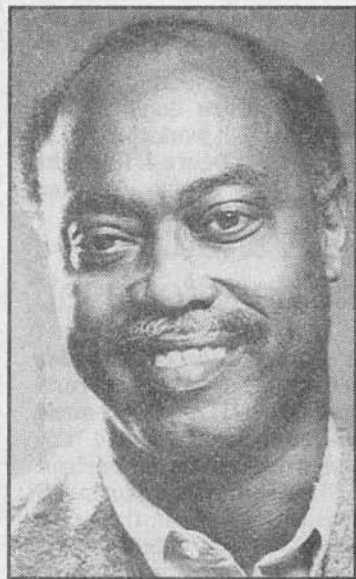
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BLACK INTELLECTUALS: Race and Responsibility in American Life

By William M. Banks
Norton, 335 pages, \$29.95

unfolded over the last two centuries. His stated purpose is "to chart the contours of black intellectual life across American history and to chronicle its fluctuating fortunes."

Black Intellectuals is a mixed bag: Banks doesn't so much "chart the contours" of African-American thought as spotlight its high points. The book is too much a history of black intellectuals and not enough a history of black intellectualism; even nonscholars will notice curious omissions and oversights. Yet despite its flaws, *Black Intellectuals* is important in that it tells the story too seldom told — of how black thinkers have overcome nearly insurmountable barriers: first slavery, then no education, then inferior segregated education, and then discrimination in open education. Though Banks does not overdramatize and



William Banks

refuses to clutter his analysis with unnecessary rhetoric, we are nonetheless left to wonder how, prior to the civil rights movement, any black American managed to procure an education and a job in academia.

Discrimination against intellectuals funneled learned blacks into teaching and the ministry, Banks writes; at the turn of the century, more than half of black college graduates were working as teachers. But even the education establishment narrowly restricted blacks' prospects. Black colleges were substandard, expecting little from students and faculty and delivering less, and, he writes, "The white academic world was as inhospitable to blacks as were all other sectors of American life."

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SHUT OUT of white intellectual circles, 19th-century black thinkers held their own conventions, painstakingly crafting statements and resolutions that they realized would be ignored by state and federal authorities. Even in the glory days of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, black writers and artists found themselves hampered by the particular agendas and interests of well-meaning white patrons whose financial support was crucial. Banks describes how writers like Zora Neale Hurston were compelled by patrons to steer their work in directions that often made them uncomfortable.

It is also true that black thinkers were capable of making questionable moves all by themselves, and Banks lends credibility to his work by acknowledging those occasions when their opinions and actions were suspect: Frederick Douglass when he disparaged black women writers; Booker T. Washington when he used political clout to "squench black papers that crossed him"; Langston Hughes in his disavowal of his leftist poetry before the House Un-American Affairs Committee.

And Banks observes how many self-appointed authorities fell short when the media trained attention on black militants in the late 1960s. "By virtue of their race, not their training or interests," he writes, "all

black intellectuals were considered experts on race and the meaning of the black movement. . . . Quite a few dubious intellectual pronouncements flowed as black sociologists analyzed literary texts and black psychologists explained economic history." By exploring the full range of African-American ideas (including, strikingly, dissenters like the 19th-century blacks who "resisted the principle of separate institutions and insisted that the public schools be integrated"), Banks places thoughts and thinkers in the context of history's vagaries.

IT'S FRUSTRATING, THEN, when *Black Intellectuals* does not deliver on its substantial promise. Profiling a plethora of thinkers is insufficient: Banks fails to draw black intellectual history in broad strokes or make connections between thinkers and thoughts. Summarizing ideologies in a couple of sentences, neglecting to set those views in a continuum, he makes it difficult to recall who thought what, and what difference it made.

Banks notes scholars' positions on various political topics but does so without actually exploring the issues or weighing the various positions taken. And he's scrupulously nonpartisan with regard to those topics; he gives dissenters equal space, muddying his goal of explaining how currents of thought developed.

Myriad small omissions leave misleading impressions. Alex Haley rates a photo and a passing reference to his *Autobiography of Malcolm X* — but there is no mention of the groundbreaking *Roots* (and,

therefore, none of his plagiarism). Even more bizarre, the word "Afrocentrism" — that wishful thinking so perversely popular among black intellectuals as well as the solace-seeking masses — waits to make an appearance until the book's appendix.

The appendix itself is odd: 54 pages of "selected biographies," discrete paragraphs on each of dozens of writers, activists and other figures, from Benjamin Banneker to Spike Lee to Richard Wright. They are generally too selective and sketchy to be of much use, giving more space to college graduation dates than to ideas and achievements. And many characterizations are strange: James Baldwin's bio dubs the novelist/essayist "a sensitive boy." Why in this, of all books, must we resort to code to say "homosexual"?

While sociologist and activist W.E.B. Du Bois is the book's key figure, Banks devotes but a handful of sentences to his 1903 book *Souls of Black Folk*, still the single most important work of African-American thought. More significantly, Banks dramatically underplays the classic protest vs. accommodation struggle between Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, which today's writers on race, from Cornel West to the odious Dinesh D'Souza, employ to explain the intellectual paths that civil-rights activists have chosen and the arguments they have wielded.

The Du Bois-Washington debate, still salient and alive today, provides a useful lens through which to view 20th-century race thinking; without it, Banks leaves us viewing black intellectuals somewhat, well, myopically.