
Manning Marable, ed. *Dispatches from the Ebony Tower: Intellectuals Confront the African American Experience*. NY: Columbia University Press, 2000. 333p.

JULIE BARAK
MESA STATE COLLEGE

The contributor's notes to Manning Marable's *Dispatches from the Ebony Tower: Intellectuals Confront the African American Experience* read like a who's who in African American Studies. Contributors range from the outspoken Afrocentrist Molefi Kete Asante to the popular, widely read Coronel West, with Amiri Baraka, Henry Louis Gates Jr., John Hope Franklin, Maulana Karenga and others sandwiched in between. The depth and breadth of the accomplishments cited in these notes is stunning. In and of itself, these notes make a statement about the progress of African American scholars and the development of African American studies since the inception and inclusion of the discipline in U.S. academic environments. These scholars and activists are ensconced in their field, many of them iconoclastic role models for up and coming African American studies students.

The book is divided into four sections, the first of which I will address last. All three of the latter sections serve as thoughtful and provocative introductions and/or surveys of the work and ideas compiled by African American scholars since the 1960s. From the introduction by Marable to the concluding interview with John Hope Franklin, the essays serve as an encomium to W.E.B. Du Bois and his call for the black intellectual to be also an activist, a link between ideas and action, on behalf of the oppressed blacks of the U.S.

In section two, "Mapping African American Studies," the contributors, with the obvious exception of the conservative Henry Louis Gates Jr., advocate for a strong activist involvement with the "people" by scholars. Maulana Karenga, for example, observes that "an Afrocentric critique, at its best, requires focus on contradictions in society, especially those of race, class, and gender, looking again not only for what is present and distorted in discourse, but also for what is absent, undiscussed, not only for codified ignorance, but also for canonized illusion" (67). James Jennings echoes this observation when he asserts that what is most important "in black intellectual thought [is] that scholarship must be in service to social democracy in civic life" (178). This section concludes with a debate between Gates and Marable in which Marable has the last word. He concludes that "scholars have an obligation not just to interpret but to act.... We should create new black 'think tanks,' bringing scholars together with representatives of civil rights, labor,

women's and poor people's organizations to develop public policy initiatives" (189).

Section three, "Afrocentricity and its Critics," continues to sound this theme. Lee D. Baker claims, "African Americans are consuming and reproducing notions of Afrocentricity to cultivate a collective identity and challenge the ascendancy of whiteness in U.S. society" (224). Melba Joyce Boyd believes that the African American Studies "movement to penetrate higher education has rendered an alternate intellectualism grounded in activism" (205), and asserts that African American intellectuals are in a position that "can effect change on and off campus, if we initiate it" (209). Those black academics "who are privileged to have the leisure to contemplate must place [their] skills at the service of social movements that critically reflect the lives, experiences, and history of our people" (214), avers Leith Mullings in her essay "Reclaiming Culture: The Dialectics of Identity."

In the fourth section, "Race and Ethnicity in American Life," Marable discusses ethnic studies more generally, describing the evolution of not just African American studies programs, but also of Native American, Asian American, and Latino Studies programs in our academies. In keeping with the theme of the essays from the previous sections, he observes that though

[t]raditional white racism, as configured by class and state forces over several centuries is certainly declining[, its] place is being taken by a qualitatively new color line of spiraling class inequality and extreme income stratifications, mediated or filtered through old discourses and cultural patterns more closely coded by physical appearance, legal racial classification, and language. What the critical study of racialized ethnicities can bring into focus is how and why these domestic and global processes are currently unfolding and what can be done to challenge them. (262)

That this theme of community involvement and activism is indeed being pursued by current African American scholars is purportedly supported by the essays in the first section of the book, entitled "Theorizing the Black World: Race in the Post Colonial, Post Civil Rights Era." Essays in this section address widely ranging topics such as prostitution in the Caribbean, crack cocaine use in Harlem, and Jamaican and Cuban politics. In collecting the essays in this section without introducing them to present a rationale for their selection, organization or content, Marable runs the risk of incoherence. When coming back to them after reading the following sections, it becomes clear that, though they are not thematically related to each other, they all address the central notion of those later essays —

these are African American scholars engaging with activist, popular, political topics.

But it is doubtful that these essays published here, or others like them published in Marable's journals, *Race and Reason* and *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society*, will reach the non-intellectual African American U.S. citizen outside of academe. How this gap between the elite printed medium of African American academics and the primarily non-print or popular press world of the streets can be bridged by African American scholars may be the key in determining whether or not the scholars writing here can fulfill what they claim to be their mission — a union of the intellectual with the worker, the community activist, the people. Even though their rhetoric calls for, even demands, such a link, *Dispatches* takes no initiative in style, medium or means of publication for bringing such a union into being.