

Make Revolution Irresistible: The Role of the Cultural Worker in the Twenty- First Century

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I WAS INTRODUCED TO THE TERM *PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL* ALMOST TWENTY YEARS AGO WHEN I WAS AN UNDERGRADUATE IN A LITERARY course on African American music taught by the cultural critic Farah Jasmine Griffin. The class conversations began with readings of jazz and hip-hop artists as “organic intellectuals” in the sense developed by Antonio Gramsci. We quickly moved to the debates sparked by Edward Said’s *Representations of the Intellectual* (1993) and to the rise of the black public intellectual as demonstrated by the formation by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., of an academic “dream team” in African American studies at Harvard, Cornel West’s publication of *Race Matters* (1994), and Robert Boynton’s March 1995 article in the *Atlantic* entitled “The New Intellectuals,” which added Toni Morrison, Stanley Crouch, Patricia Williams, Michael Eric Dyson, Derrick Bell, June Jordan, and many others to that category. By the time I arrived at Harvard in 1999, for graduate study in African American literature, the idea of the black public intellectual served as a backdrop and a blueprint for how my generation of scholars could live inside and beyond the campus walls. As beneficiaries of that era, my peers and I did not necessarily have to prove that our work belonged in the public; instead, we had to wrestle with newer questions of format and forum in the digital age.

The recent return to the question of the public intellectual on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* and on Web sites like *The Atlantic* and *The Feminist Wire* has recalibrated the terms of such debates, even if the writers share a sense of resignation. There are, as Nicholas Kristof complained, “fewer public intellectuals on American university campuses today than a generation ago.” In response to Kristof’s critique, the *New Yorker* writer Joshua Rothman lamented that academic writing is “knotty and strange, remote and insular, technical and specialized, forbidding and clannish . . . because academia has become that way.” Absent from such debates were some basic questions: What types of public figures are considered public intellectuals? Who and what make up the public? And which issues

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do we care enough about to legitimate and recognize in the public sphere? Or, in more colloquial terms, Who gets put on and why? As the cultural critic Brittney Cooper reveals, “the fundamental problem” with these critiques “is not the lack of sufficient academic models, but rather that when they say ‘intellectual,’ they mean ‘white male intellectual,’ and in a few instances, white women, too.”

So when Emily Lordi penned “Why Is Academic Writing So Beautiful? Notes on Black Feminist Scholarship,” I was grateful for her noting of the racial and gender politics associated with the resurgence of the category. “We should be highly suspicious,” Lordi warns, “of claims that humanities scholarship becomes ‘unreadable’ at the very moment when black women’s voices enter that realm with the painstaking clarity I have sought to reveal.” And yet, despite these important interventions, I have always felt that the term *public intellectual* both sort of worked and felt a bit tight. It is not quite the right word for the kind of mark I hope to make in the world. The term appeals to me because it assumes that academics can (and perhaps should) directly engage and shape public thought, attitudes, and policies. To interject the semi-public intellectual as this section in *PMLA* promises is to suggest something more: academics who strive to reach many publics or, for that matter, multiple counterpublics.

At the risk of sounding a bit contrarian, I would like to introduce another term into this dialogue. Because I seek to bring my academic training as a cultural critic to my online writing and political organizing, I am drawn to the phrase “culture worker” as used by the writer and filmmaker Toni Cade Bambara in an interview: “As a culture worker who belongs to an oppressed people my job is to make revolution irresistible” (3). For Bambara, African American cultural production was an extraordinary strategy for change and resistance. To this I would add the cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s concern that at a time when people “are

dying out there,” “anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we’ve been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything.” Hall continues, “If you don’t feel that as one tension in the work that you are doing, theory has let you off the hook” (285). Throughout my professional career, I have taken Bambara’s and Hall’s mandates seriously. The attempt to bring black girlhood to the forefront of public consciousness at a time when organizing, theorizing, and imagining black girlhood are still invisible to the vast majority of policymakers, academics, and activists is my form of cultural work.

There are summers that change a nation, and, if you are lucky, they radicalize you too. The summer of 2014 was one such season for me. Since the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, we have been in a time of protest, black mourning, and proving once again that black lives matter. In late August, right before I boarded a train from Penn Station to Columbia University to attend a planning meeting for a conference tentatively titled Black Girls Movement and slated for April 2016, a most peculiar photograph stared at me. At a newsstand, I saw the cover of *Bloomberg Businessweek*, a magazine that strays right and I almost never read. The image was of an African American girl with her hands up: her eyes, staring dead into the camera, and her baby-girl grin, frozen, contorted in a straight line, betray the gravity of the moment (fig. 1).

Our view of her bedazzling orange shirt is partially blocked by two containers—an unopened bottle of spring water and a mostly empty baby bottle of colored syrup, Gatorade, Kool-Aid, or Pedialyte. It matters little what is inside the second bottle, for the bottle’s symbolic work is clear. This girl is holding up her hands, presumably before a white police officer, because she is poor and denied the most basic nutrients. The image of her depri-

vation is reinforced by those who flank her: to her right, a black boy or girl sporting gray long shorts and well-worn black high-tops; to her left, another boy or girl, wearing red, white, and blue Air Jordans and ripped jeans.

Her face is our focus, while her race and gender present an androgyny that serves another function. Her race and gender could be anyone's yet are decidedly black; they are anonymous yet a stand-in for the entire black population of Ferguson, Missouri. The poverty of her race and gender is not just sartorial but also structural. And whatever empathy we would transfer from her to those standing next to her is thwarted. They stand together—dismembered, displaced, and dispossessed—to explain to *Bloomberg Businessweek* readers the history and present of racial inequality and violence in America.

Scott Olson, who took the photograph, has explained how he came across the five-year-old Gabrielle Walker, her two brothers, and her parents at a protest for Michael Brown.¹ The editors of the magazine give us a less detailed explanation of the image. In an attempt to stave off criticism, perhaps, they offer their “cover trail,” a semi-intimate insight into their decision making:

“The cover story is about Ferguson and goes into the historical factors that played into what’s happened.”

“It should be a photo.”

“It should.”

“But it can’t feel familiar.”

“No, it can’t.”

“So we should avoid photos of any kind of rioting.”

“Correct.” (“Cover Trail”)

I found the image off-putting (an evident product of the editors’ striving for unfamiliarity), but, more important, I was deeply



confused by it. There I was on my way to a planning meeting for a conference on black girls created by a coalition of black feminist academics, artists, and activists who were partly inspired by a summer of organizing for gender equity in the president’s only racial-justice initiative, My Brother’s Keeper, and I had to confront an image that should have made sense to me but didn’t. Here was a black girl who appeared to stand front and center in America’s most recent racial melodrama.

At first glance, her position suggested that we had arrived at a new moment. This was, after all, the summer of Ferguson and of the lethal shooting of the unarmed eighteen-year-old Brown by Darren Wilson, a white police officer. Two years had barely passed since the murders of the teenagers Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis, and only a few weeks earlier a New York City police officer had applied a fatal choke hold to Eric Garner. While these deaths blur the line between racial violence sanctioned by the state and that of the private citizen, they also summon up the peculiar vulnerability of black life in America—what the literary critic Karla Holloway calls a “cultural haunting, a ‘re-memory’ along the lines of that found in Toni Morrison’s novel *Be-loved*, which insists that ‘not a house in the country ain’t packed to the rafters with some

FIG. 1

Scott Olson / Getty Images, 2014.

dead Negro's grief" (3). For the most part, our narrative of black dying is constructed as one of grieving mothers and sons gone too soon—a line that goes from Emmett to Trayvon. And while there is a grave truth to that lineage, it means that the children are not equally counted. It means this could not be the summer of Renisha McBride.²

In this photograph, however, the little girl seems caught in the maelstrom and initiated into the ritual of black vulnerability. But as I paid closer attention to the image, I realized it was never really about her; the action is happening just above her head. She is a prop, a model, that hints at black suffering while embodying black pathology. Her life matters little in the prose of the magazine story and in the small caption ostensibly explaining the picture. Our eyes are drawn to hers, but then we have to look away.

I am using this picture (as opposed to the many images of protests and grief in Ferguson) to highlight how black girlhood functions in the national imaginary. My return to black girlhood is neither accidental nor incidental but comes from concern and longing. It comes from lack and necessity. We need to have more tools and narratives, more arsenals and archives, to stave off black girls' deaths and resurrect their stories.

In February 2014, President Barack Obama announced My Brother's Keeper (MBK), a five-year, two-hundred-million-dollar public-private program with investments from a variety of foundations and businesses that aims to provide mentoring and improve educational and professional opportunities. He confessed that the idea for the initiative occurred to him in the aftermath of the killing of Trayvon Martin. Ensuring the success of young men of color is a "moral issue for our country," one that was deeply personal for him. He continued, "I didn't have a dad in the house. And I was angry about it, even though I didn't necessarily realize it at the time. I made bad choices. I got high without always think-

ing about the harm that it could do. I didn't always take school as seriously as I should have. I made excuses. Sometimes I sold myself short." Then he ticked off some familiar statistics: black boys are more likely than any other group of young people to be suspended from school and to be unable to read, and they are almost certain to encounter the criminal justice system as a perpetrator or a victim (Shear).

As Obama hoped to focus this initiative on boys and young men of color who he said "are having a particularly tough time," it was for many, as the journalist Noah Remnick writes, "perhaps the purest distillation of how the first black president in our nation's history navigates the ever-intractable question of race." The fanfare that surrounded the announcement yielded a rare bipartisan moment in Washington and, as a result, little public criticism. Several commentators noticed that by emphasizing the plight of boys and young men of color, the initiative naively presumed or intentionally overlooked the shared and specific racial disparities that affect girls and young women of color—who, for all intents and purposes, grow up in the same households, attend the same schools, and live in the same communities as their male counterparts. To make black girls not matter, MBK hung itself on a far-reaching and familiar racial trope: it is an example, claims the anthropologist Aimee Cox, "of the self-consciously anxious political moves that use a rhetoric of failed Black masculinity, primarily evinced by tropes of absentee fathers, to demonstrate the federal commitment to the rescue of the Black community while effacing the state policies that do real work to decimate Black life."

Under the umbrella of the African American Policy Forum, a nonprofit founded by the critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw and the political scientist Luke Harris, the most vocal and vigilant critique of MBK came from a collective of artists, academics, organizers, and philanthropists in the form of two petition letters, a series of op-eds, and community

meetings. The first petition was “Letter of 200 Concerned Black Men and Other Men of Color Calling for the Inclusion of Women and Girls in ‘My Brothers Keeper,’” which asked, “In short, in lifting up only the challenges that face males of color, MBK—in the absence of any comparable initiative for females—forces us to ask where the complex lives of Black women and Black girls fit into the White House’s vision of racial justice?” The second letter, “Why We Can’t Wait: Women of Color Urge Inclusion in ‘My Brother’s Keeper’”—which I helped edit, along with Kristie Dodson, Joanne Smith, Cooper, Cox, and Crenshaw, and distributed with a core team of feminist activists—built on and expanded the momentum of the former. This letter, signed by one thousand women of color, including Anita Hill, Alice Walker, Angela Davis, Rosario Dawson, and Mary Francis Berry, makes appeals through the rhetoric of a shared racial fate and disenfranchisement. The authors of the letter explain that one reason black girls could be so easily ignored is that their lives are “underresearched”: “Although the exclusion of girls has been justified as data-driven, the fact is that little data is gathered on them. This situation creates a vicious cycle in which the assumptions that girls are not in crisis leads to research and policy interventions that overlook them, thus reinforcing their exclusion from efforts like MBK to bring successful programs to scale.”

But it seems the problem was a lack not only of data but also of narratives on black girlhood. Every summer, I travel to Chicago to work for A Long Walk Home, a nonprofit I cofounded with my sister, Scheherazade Tillet, that uses art to educate and heal young people and inspire them to end violence against girls and women. The disparities that African American teen girls who participate in our Girl/Friends Leadership Institute face in their everyday lives are the subject of my essay “Why Girls of Color Should Be Included in My Brother’s Keeper.” I state in the essay that

I signed the petition for gender equity in MBK “because I do not believe our community should have to make an impossible choice—between our daughters and sons—and tell the world, ourselves and our young people that one child matters more, deserves more attention and, therefore, should be saved.”

However, it was when I attended the exhibition *The Secret Lives of Black Girls*, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, that I truly understood the transformative effect of having these girls tell their own stories and own their own terms. A photograph in the exhibition stood out to me: a self-portrait by My’kya Cooper, a fifteen-year-old who is our youngest Girl/Friend leader. She joined the program because she lost her mother a few years ago and, as a result, experienced and witnessed domestic violence. She was given a simple directive: “Take a photo that represents you” (fig. 2). She is training in our program to become a dating-violence prevention advocate for other girls in her community, and part of her training is to capture “Girl/Culture” in narrative. Despite the chaos right outside her door, the sunrays in the photograph are the only evidence of her outside world. They provide just enough light for her eyes to pierce through the darkness, but she is both center and frame of the image. A big fuzzy blue stuffed animal sits in the middle, a throwback to a lighter time, perhaps, and a mark of her playfulness in the present. Her stare is not about us, the audience seeing the photograph, but about the camera, the pose that she chose, and a place on her bed in the room, her room, which can now be a space of safety, defiance, and childhood innocence. The violence of her life has not ended—a few months after this photograph was taken, she and her siblings had to move out of this apartment for their welfare—but she pushes back against it.

Despite being left out of My Brother’s Keeper and forgotten in dominant narratives of racial justice or racist harm and in most philanthropic initiatives and public policies,



FIG. 2

My'kya Cooper,
self-portrait, 2014.
Courtesy of A Long
Walk Home.

My'kya and her fellow Girl/Friends artist-activists use photography, dance, and poetry to transform their communities and change public consciousness. Helping to politically organize African American girls to improve their lives is labor. It is love. And it is to see them as public intellectuals and give them space to theorize their lives, tell their stories, so they can make themselves subjects of history and of the present. To give black girls their due attention is to make the private public and to hold the state and community accountable for the intersections of racial and gender-based violence, including new and unforeseen ones. This is the type of work I imagine Bambara meant when she longed to make revolution irresistible. This is what I think Hall demanded we do while people are dying in the streets. And I believe that if we see, listen to, and write about these girls, we might not only move beyond the too easy and too lazy language of personal responsibility and black pa-

thology but also get closer to a just, fair world in which black girls' lives really matter.

NOTES

1. In an interview, Olson explains the context: "There were three kids there, brothers and a sister. She was just going along with her family. It's interesting, because it's either the kid has no clue what she's doing and just mimicking, or the parents are explaining to them and saying "This is important. This is what we're doing and why we're doing it.""

2. Theodor Wafer, a white homeowner, shot Renisha McBride, a nineteen-year-old African American woman, in Dearborn Heights, Michigan, in November 2013. Wafer claimed that his shooting was accidental and that he thought his home was being broken into after he heard her banging on his door.

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