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'Black Intellectuals in the Age of Crack': Organic Responsibility, the Race-Class-Gender Nexus, and Action Paralysis in the *Boston Review* Roundtables, 1992–1993

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ABSTRACT



The existing research on the role of intellectuals in alleviating suffering has overlooked contributions by prominent Black intellectuals from the United States in the early 1990s. Two roundtable debates co-organised under the auspices of the *Boston Review* at Harvard and MIT in 1992 and 1993 in response to Eugene Rivers' essay "On the Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack" were central to these contributions, counting a star-studded line-up of Black intellectuals including bell hooks, Cornel West, and Glenn Loury. Participants explore the role of Black intellectuals in the US, debating what they can and should do to combat oppression and domination. In this article, I recover the context of the debates, reconstruct their arguments, and make a case for their major historical and political significance. I comparatively interpret the two roundtables, identifying three major points of convergence. First, participants begin from a Gramscian conception of organic intellectuals, developing this further to defend the need for collective intellectual praxis. Second, the race-class-gender nexus plays a central role in structuring the very possibility of intellectuals affecting social change. Third, these intellectuals subscribe to a significantly pessimistic action paralysis, indicative of the relative powerlessness of intellectual debate in addressing structural oppression.

KEYWORDS

Responsibility of intellectuals; Black intellectuals; *Boston Review*; 1990s; race and class; race and gender

1. Introduction

A dual process marked Black communities in the early 1990s United States of America.¹ On the one hand, the period saw a precipitous wave of social ills including a so-called crack epidemic, unprecedented levels of gun violence, persistent police brutality, and record levels of incarceration and exploitation in the prison industrial-labour complex. On the other hand, the period saw an immense intellectual and cultural renaissance, which counted the growing influence of intellectuals like Toni Morrison, Cornel West, and bell hooks as well as the Golden Age of hip hop with N.W.A., Nas, Wu-Tang

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Clan, and Notorious B.I.G entering the mainstream of American culture. As Patricia Hill Collins laments on these two processes,

many of these new academic super-stars resemble African-American musicians who want to “cross over” beyond “race music” by finding a way to broaden their appeal to a mass (white) audience. For artists and intellectuals alike, the real money lies not in black markets but in white ones.²

Nevertheless, at the confluence of this dual process, an all-star line-up of influential Black intellectuals in the United States converged around a series of debates organised under the auspices of *Boston Review* (*BR*) and led by Reverend Eugene Rivers Jr, III, a Black pentecostalist pastor from Dorchester, Boston, MA, to address how the latter could be brought to bear on the former – in other words, how Black intellectuals can address, alleviate, and abolish oppression and suffering. Insofar as Hill Collins is right to problematise the rarity of ‘black thinkers producing intellectual work for black audiences of black-controlled media’, and given the roundtables were organised by the chiefly white *BR*, the all-Black line-ups in two of the most elite universities in the world do mark a certain kind of milestone even if the promises were not fully redeemed, particularly as liberal ideas of a post-racial society began to take hold at the time.

In this article, I reconstruct these debates, focusing in particular on a comparative reading of two roundtables organised by *BR* at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1992 and 1993, respectively.³ The debates overall comprise a much wider set of contributions, spurred on by Rivers’ 1992 *BR* essay ‘The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack’, which provoked about a dozen responses from key American intellectuals, mostly but not exclusively Black.⁴ While the initial essay has been the subject of recent scholarly attention, the wider debates remain even more underexplored in the academic literature, even though partial transcripts of both were published in *BR*.⁵ I consider them a vital historical document and contribution to intellectual history, asserting their position as ‘texts’, which invites further scholarly attention. This article thus contributes to the study of the rich and multifaceted history of Black intellectual discourse and debate at the turn of the twentieth century.⁶ Importantly, such a task should not be confined to African-American intellectual historians nor demand Black scholars to do all the required work. As a white scholar, I take the serious engagement with and dissemination of key Black interventions, texts, and histories – particularly those which contain emancipatory potential and can teach broader lessons for movements across the production of racial difference – as a necessary corrective if the social sciences and humanities are to truly contribute to the knowledge and emancipation of society.

The wider context within which this article sits is thus one of an unfortunate under-emphasis in the mainstream literature on specifically Black intellectual history. Indeed, Brandon R. Byrd points out how this is ‘a field of study long relegated to the margins of the general field of US intellectual history’, the picture looking even worse once zoomed out from US intellectual history to intellectual history and the history of political thought more generally.⁷ Yet the picture is improving, with important work contributed in the last few years on various important aspects of Black intellectual history by a new generation of scholars, centred around but not restricted to the new African American Intellectual History Society (AAIHS). Some of the most important work includes

Ashley D. Farmer's research on Black women in the Black Power era, founding AAIHS president Christopher Cameron tracing the role of secular thought on Black intellectual history, and Byrd's magisterial research on the linkages between Haiti and Black internationalist political thought.⁸

Yet as one of the most prominent roundtable participants, feminist theorist bell hooks, underlines in the Harvard roundtable, 'so much of Black intellectual thought is shared in written discourse, in forms that are apart from a diversity of Black presence and experience'.⁹ In order to heed this important point, I uncover and reconstruct the *BR* roundtables as an important and overlooked part of debates around race and power in the United States and beyond, following Abdul Alkalimat's understanding of Black Studies as containing a normative dimension to document the contributions of key scholars, study the 'major social institutions and movements of the Black community', and to centre the crucial intellectual resources provided by Black intellectuals.¹⁰ In the contemporary context of pressures on the teaching and study of racism and white supremacy in the United States, this is a pressing concern with which all – not just Black – scholars must reckon. Indeed, as Regina Austin concludes in the MIT roundtable,

we as intellectuals really need to stress how terribly important it is for us to analyze the problems of black people, to think critically, and then to try to respond in a way that we can share with other people. Our contributions won't always be received well; they may not make us famous.¹¹

She continues:

But as long as somebody reads the stuff and gets something from it, you've probably done something to make the world a little bit better a place for black people. So I would urge you all to engage in intellectual activity of that sort and to try to help other intellectuals do the same thing.¹²

This article contributes to such the task Austin proposes.

In order to do so, I first introduce the wider context of Black American intellectual debate in the early 1990s as the backdrop against which Rivers and his interlocutors intervened. I then provide a brief overview of the roundtables, situating them in relation to wider debates. Finally, I present a substantial comparative reading of the two roundtables, drawing out key themes and issues which illuminate contemporary scholarship on the role and responsibility of intellectuals, the role of public debate in democratic politics, and the specific demands on Black intellectuals to alleviate oppression and domination among fellow Black citizens. Crucially, the participating intellectuals disagree substantially across the themes of the roundtables, meaning that simplistically extracting a unified message or take-away point is not only undesirable but untenable. Nevertheless, I argue that the roundtable debates centre around three key issues: organic responsibility, the race-class-gender nexus, and the fundamental paralysis as to what should be done on the part of the intellectuals.

2. Context

While many components contributed to the state of Black American intellectual culture and public debate in the 1990s around which to frame the *BR* roundtables, the Los

Angeles (LA) Riots – as the eruption of discontent with racist police brutality –, an unjust justice system, and the so-called ‘crack epidemic’ all played a key role.

The state of racism and white supremacy in the early 1990s in the United States reached a central point of the national consciousness. Most infamously, Rodney King was repeatedly and brutally beaten by a group of LA police officers – Laurence Powell, Stacey Koon, Timothy Wind, and Theodore Briseno – on 3 March 1991 and all four perpetrators were subsequently acquitted in court on 29 April 1992. Court proceedings revealed how Powell alone struck King over 45 times, Koon ordering strikes on King’s joints, and Briseno stepping on King’s neck even as he was in ‘compliance mode’ on the ground, hog-tied, choking, spitting blood.¹³ What is more, as Kimberlé W. Crenshaw and Gary Peller noted at the time, the events surrounding King and the riots ‘flashed Race across the national consciousness and the gaze of American culture momentarily froze there’.¹⁴ The police violence against King catalysed frustrations with systemic racism and police brutality and contributed significantly to the 1992 LA riots, one of the largest outbreaks of non-state-perpetrated political violence in US history. To be sure, the events surrounding King did not occur in a vacuum but came shortly before the fatal shooting of Latasha Harlins as well as Anita Hill’s testimony of sexual harassment by Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas.¹⁵ What is more, these high-profile cases represented only the tip of the iceberg of widespread racial injustice and white supremacy in the United States as a whole. In the long-term, the riots contributed significantly to changing both public discourse and popular attitudes in a more liberal direction, and increased the political participation among Black Americans more generally.¹⁶

The riots should be understood in relation to the massively increasing incarceration rate of Black Americans in a steady way from the 1970s into the 2000s. In the early 1990s, around the time of the riots, a Black male had a 1 in 4 chance of going to prison in their lifetime, a consequence of both direct state and federal racial discrimination and bias as well as the emergence of the prison industrial-labour complex with its associated political economy of profit and, the growth of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore terms a ‘golden gulag’ to exploit and manage surplus populations.¹⁷ It should come as no surprise that the zenith of the prison industrial-labour complex coincided with the broader racial political economy of the time contributing to the dispossession of livelihoods of Black Americans. This was most perniciously seen in the closure in 1992 of the General Motors auto plant in Willow Run, Michigan, which precipitated decades of ‘white flight’ and the destruction of inner-city Black dignity and subsistence as part of the larger decline of US industrial production.

A second crucial element disproportionately affecting Black Americans in the early 1990s was the so-called ‘crack epidemic’.¹⁸ The increasing supply of crack cocaine harrowed poor communities across the US, particularly inner-city Black areas.¹⁹ It should thus come as no surprise that gun deaths and other violent gun crimes reached an all-time peak in the US in 1993, contemporaneously with the crack epidemic.²⁰ The perniciousness of the crack epidemic was thus the simultaneous government sanctioning if not sponsoring of the flood of crack onto the market alongside the racialised policing of its users.²¹ While the crack epidemic cooccurred with a cocaine epidemic, the race and class differences of the users of each drug contributed to a difference in media coverage, policy response, and police violence and crackdowns. However, the difference in policing by

class and race was hardly new: the era of alcohol prohibition was possibly even more inequalitarian in terms of policing by race and class.²² The labelling of the rise in crack use as an ‘epidemic’ happened shortly after President George H. W. Bush founded the Office of National Drug Control Policy as part of the War on Drugs, which served as a key instrument in whipping up anti-Black racialisation of drug use and policy at the time.²³ Indeed, drug use was decreasing around the turn of the decade, leading scholars to question the ‘epidemic’ framing as a media-driven sensationalist narrative that created a moral panic targeting poor communities, particularly poor Black communities.²⁴ In fact, Hortense Spillers even explicitly disputes Rivers’ summarising of the ‘age’ as one of ‘crack’:

Isn’t it also the ‘age’ of e-mail and the deadly ‘virus,’ inscribed along various fault lines, from the immunodeficiency syndrome to computers? Isn’t it also the age of armed kids and the first open and dramatic signs of society’s return to the rule and the law of the patronne, the pimp, as an intermediary and prophylactic device against rape and hunger, and “sewered” through the nation’s underground of drugs and firearms? The sign of the Father that is missing? What does it mean to sum up the age under the rubric of crack? Why not flight, or fantasy and the peculiar turn of the screw that black population brings to it? And who said that the black creative intellectual could even begin to know how to fix it?²⁵

Such a context further clarified the need for the development of intellectual resources to understand, analyse, and interpret the peculiar constellation of forces of how race and power intertwine in a country founded on genocide and built on slavery.²⁶ Spillers, a key Black feminist theorist, rose to prominence partly through her critique of the Moynihan Report, which placed a major part of the blame and responsibility for Black suffering with so-called absent fathers and the breakdown of the traditional family unit.²⁷ Crucially, Rivers defended Moynihan’s conclusions, placing him at odds with the view of the majority of Black intellectuals at the time, including Spillers.²⁸

Yet it was only decades after the Moynihan Report’s controversial claims that critical race theory (CRT) emerged as a research programme – namely, around the time of the King, Harlins, and Hill events, as well as at the height of the moral panic about crack in the early 1990s. Although Black Studies had existed for a good three decades prior to the emergence of CRT, the period around these events saw a growing space for discussion and debate around issues of race – and its intersection with class – in the public domain.²⁹ The early 1990s were thus a period of substantial changes to both political action on the ground as well as the way scholars theorised the state of racism and white supremacy. More specifically, just a year before Rivers’ essay, bell hooks and Cornel West co-authored an important dialogue of interviews on the role of Black intellectuals in affecting revolutionary change in the US, building on West’s 1985 intervention *The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual*, highlighting the emergence of a renewed and flourishing discourse on the role of the intellectual after earlier eras of W.E.B. Du Bois and Harold Cruse in particular.³⁰

Right until her untimely death in 2022, hooks featured as one of the most prominent and influential public intellectuals and Black feminist theorists in America with a wide reach outside the narrower confines of academia. For instance in her later work *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, hooks retells her autobiographical story of a Black working-class woman entering the ivory tower of elite US academia, in the process explicating the intersections of race and class in the US context. Here, she recounts how ‘As a student I read Marx, Gramsci, and a host of other male thinkers on the subject of

class. These works provided theoretical paradigms but rarely offered tools for confronting the complexity of class in daily life'.³¹ Thus, while the idea of an organic intellectual in Gramsci provides key resources (for hooks and the present author alike), what really stands out for hooks is the need to bring to life such resources in a practical and applied manner.

West, likewise, is one of the most revered and authoritative Black public intellectuals of the past half century, synthesising Christian and Marxist commitments into an emancipatory religious approach. Indeed, in his 1985 text, West concludes that

the future of the black intellectual lies neither in a deferential disposition toward the Western parent nor a nostalgic search for the African one. Rather it resides in a critical negation, wise preservation, and insurgent transformation of this black lineage which protects the earth and projects a better world.³²

In other words, the Hegelian-Marxist – a tradition West was ‘seduced by’ during his years as a student at Harvard – tool of critical negation helps navigate the perilous and often false dilemmas with which the Black intellectual is confronted – either total rejection or total acceptance, akin to the strongest formulations of either assimilation or isolation vis-à-vis white society.³³ West’s view also critically negotiates between Afro-pessimism and Afrofuturism – by inserting a radical historicist analysis anchored in an emancipatory reading of Christian scripture, first outlined in *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, a reworked version of West’s PhD thesis at Princeton under the tutelage of Raymond Geuss and Sheldon Wolin.³⁴ His criticism of the ‘moderate historicist’ view of most of the Marxist tradition shares many features with Gramsci’s radical historicism, a figure West had not yet engaged with at the time.³⁵ Yet the ineradicable role of Marx and Marxism more broadly in West’s thought must not be understated: ‘despite its blindnesses and inadequacies—especially in regard to racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and ecological abuse—Marxist thought is an indispensable tradition’.³⁶ In fact, Charles Banner-Haley considers this dimension to be the chief chasm between West and Rivers.³⁷

It should therefore come as no surprise that the *BR* roundtables took place at precisely this moment when hooks and West rose to prominence in the American public sphere. While racist police brutality, the unjust justice system, and the ‘crack epidemic’ overall frame Rivers original essay and the first roundtable, one particular event explicitly motivated the second roundtable. Between the first and second roundtables, the Mayor of Washington, D.C., Sharon Pratt Kelly, put a controversial demand to recently elected President Bill Clinton to temporarily deploy up to 3,000 National Guard troops in D.C. in an anti-drug operation targeting street-level drug dealers.³⁸ This was meant to mirror the Operation Crackdown in Sumter, South Carolina, where national guardsmen were brought in to arrest street-level drug dealers during five days in December 1992.

The ramping up of the War on Drugs by mayors and federal agencies alike clashed with Rivers’ call for reducing gun ownership and for community-based policing, and Kelly’s demand for inserting the National Guard showed that ‘the state of black America has become increasingly desperate’, according to Rivers, and ‘raised some very important questions about black political leadership, and the state of the black community’.³⁹ Specifically, it spurred Rivers and his wife Jacqueline Rivers to author a ten-point plan called ‘The Reconstruction of Black Civil Society’ as a non-police-centred response to the problems facing Black Americans focusing instead on ‘new models of

intellectual engagement that transcend the politically limited inflation of celebrity status, and produce true intellectual leadership'.⁴⁰ This all stands in stark contrast to the earlier period of '20 or 30 years ago when we were winning independence in the colonies and when civil rights struggles were in their early, vigorous days', as Selwyn Cudjoe puts it.⁴¹

The landscape of Black intellectual debate around the time of the roundtables contains faint echoes of Du Bois's notion of a Talented Tenth that should rise from within Black America to provide a kind of moral and intellectual leadership that contribute to the genuine Black emancipation beyond merely abolishing chattel slavery. Yet Spillers questions the commitment to a 'myth of representation' undergirding such a vision, in other words that the path to emancipation is through further representation, already at the times of Du Bois and Cruse but to an even greater degree at her time of writing in the first half of the 1990s.⁴² Furthermore, Spillers emphasises that

central paradox of this social formation nearly thirty years later: African American intellectuals as a class have gained greater access to organs of public opinion and dissemination ... its critical enterprise has opened communication onto a repertoire of stresses that traverse the newly organized humanistic field

yet this has not been mirrored in the 'African American life-world [which] generally is quite grim', underlining Rivers' key message.⁴³ Furthermore, as Patricia Hill Collins asks, 'Du Bois was a public intellectual, but who was his public?'⁴⁴ A similar question can be asked here. The roundtable participants variably were or are all public intellectuals, but who were and are their publics? There are likely many different kinds of publics to which these intellectuals address their claims. A fundamental challenge here is of one-dimensionality, that is to say a situation in which Blackness is flattened to refer only to a highly circumscribed elements when presented to white audiences and interlocutors. Hill Collins asks rhetorically: 'if there is room for only a few black public intellectuals at the top, what happens to the larger number of black intellectuals who never become stars?'⁴⁵ These are crucial questions but extend beyond the scope of my present inquiry. I now therefore turn to the roundtables as an instantiation of Black public intellectuals addressing problems in concert, before drawing out three key running threads across both roundtables.

3. The Debates

The debates comprise Rivers' opening essay in *BR*, two roundtables at Harvard and MIT in 1992 and 1993, respectively, and about a dozen response pieces in *BR* at various points during the period 1992–1995.⁴⁶ The roundtables were put together by Rivers and Joshua Cohen, then MIT professor and newly appointed editor-in-chief of *BR* who sought to bridge the gap between high-brow intellectualism and concrete political issues of the day by transforming the *BR* from a niche academic-oriented magazine in the Boston area to a publication with wider relevance and reach across New England and beyond, aided in part by the advent of the internet and other digital technologies.⁴⁷ Cohen is a white philosopher whose scholarly work focuses on the ways liberal capitalist society can become more egalitarian and fair, reckoning with the constraints capitalist interests place on social change.⁴⁸ Furthermore, he influenced the later left-liberal work of John Rawls around reasonableness and political justification, a figure who has been much-

scorned for his blind spots around race.⁴⁹ While the response pieces contribute to the overall debate and could be read as texts forming part of the larger whole, here I focus on the two in-person debates. A full video recording exists of the Harvard roundtable, while unfortunately the MIT roundtable was not recorded. Transcripts were published in *BR* of both events yet do not capture the multi-sensorial dimension of the unfolding debates. This means I only interpret and include the extra-textual dimension of the Harvard roundtable and remain confined to the textual dimension of the MIT roundtable.

The rallying call of Rivers' 1992 essay was to motivate intellectuals, particularly Black intellectuals, to take action and show leadership in the face of the crack epidemic, poverty, and suffering haunting the United States, particularly Black communities.⁵⁰ Drawing on Noam Chomsky's 1967 *New York Review of Books* essay 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals', Rivers argues that

Chomsky's points now apply with particular force to the responsibility to tell the truth about the condition of the black poor. And that responsibility bears especially heavily on black intellectuals at elite universities. For, as a privileged minority, black intellectuals 'have the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying behind the veil of distortion ... ideology, and class interest through which the events of current history are presented to us',

quoting Noam Chomsky in the final sentence.⁵¹ As I document in a recent article on the original Rivers essay, 'the starting point of Rivers' thought is a concern for the poor – ending poverty, especially the poverty haunting Black Americans'.⁵² Rivers' call to action emerged from concrete engagement on the ground with poor Black communities in and around Dorchester, particularly through his founding of the Ten Point Coalition, an initiative comprising over 300 members of the Boston clergy united around a ten point action plan to end gang violence specifically caused by guns. By turning to the *BR* to address Black intellectuals in the form of an open letter, he wants to delineate a moral and political responsibility to use their class position to address the problems facing Black Americans.

In the original essay, Rivers paraphrases Thomas Hobbes' description of life in the state of nature to argue for the depth of the 'tragedy' causing untold suffering among Black Americans:

More than 10 million Americans now face a crisis of catastrophic proportions. Life in the major post-industrial centers in the United States is genuinely poor, nasty, brutish, and short. It is often a choice between suffering and abject misery. The prospects for black males are perhaps a bit more exciting. There is, of course, death due to homicide or drug-related HIV infection; and then there is incarceration, which provides an opportunity to refine the skills required for a career of criminality.⁵³

This depiction sets the scene for the entire debates. What is more, poor Black Americans are excluded from political discourse and can therefore be discursively constructed in whichever way that suits those in power. He argues:

Because inner city blacks are politically vulnerable, the right can blame them for anti-Semitism, crime, riots, the Republicans, the Democrats, David Duke, sin, sex, and AIDS. Because the American political arena is in such an advanced state of decomposition, the absurdity of the argument will carry no political costs.⁵⁴

The irony, in Rivers' view, is that these poor Blacks have a lot more political consciousness than they are credited with, in part due to the misalignment between dominant political discourse and the voices of the oppressed. Indeed, he chastises intellectuals in particular for failing to live up to their responsibility in this context: While admitting that 'the life of the mind is, to be sure, hard, and it must follow its own rhythms', he emphasises that 'I must confess, friends, that I see no emerging, constructive theory, no nascent political program, no intimations of a plan of action. Just piles of denunciation of all conceivable "isms" and "phobias"'.⁵⁵ His is therefore a call to action on the part of wealthy and highly educated intellectuals to use their class position to agitate for the improvement of life for poor Blacks and poor people more generally.

In characteristic poignant and polemical style, Rivers draws a comparison between drug dealers and intellectuals. He posits:

it is far from clear what substantive differences there are between the moral decay of the young drug dealers on the block and that of the elite intellectuals who prostitute themselves while contributing to a moral and ideological framework indispensable to the justification of inequality.⁵⁶

In fact, he goes further, arguing that in contrast to intellectuals, at least drug dealers are honest and straight-talking:

young drug dealers are generally more candid about the nature of their game. Unlike our cosmopolitan intelligentsia, they freely admit to being self-centered hustlers. No rhetoric about integrity, humanity, or sweet reason. And, perhaps oddly, their analysis of contemporary political affairs features more insight and less jargon.⁵⁷

Intellectuals, particularly Black elite intellectuals, have failed to take up their responsibility to address and combat the misery and suffering poor Black people have to endure.

Yet Rivers is careful not to squarely blame the political and economic establishment, or intellectuals. He points out how poor Blacks themselves bear part of the responsibility for their abject conditions of living:

Unlike many of our ancestors, who came out of slavery and entered this century with strong backs, discipline, a thirst for literacy, deep religious faith, and hope in the face of monumental adversity, we have produced 'a generation who [do] not know the ways of the Lord' – a 'new jack' generation, ill-equipped to secure gainful employment even as productive slaves.⁵⁸

In this sense, according to Rivers, poor Blacks have lost the way of being morally and mentally upstanding individuals with self-respect and dignity, which in part is tied to the loss of faith and religion. The crisis of Black America is thus a crisis of both material and moral degeneration, caused both by a white supremacist society and perpetuated by Black Americans.

4. The Roundtables

These issues are probed further in the two roundtables. In what follows, I first give an overview of the roundtables and Rivers' rationale for organising them before developing a three-part interpretation that captures the key issues and arguments at stake in the roundtables: First, participants disagree about organic responsibility of intellectuals, building on Rivers' distinction between responsibility *for* and responsibility *to*.⁵⁹

Second, the centrality of the tensions, affinities, and intersections between race, class, and gender. Class plays a major role in delineating the roles and responsibilities of intellectuals while gender problematises simplistic notions of the intellectual. Third the entire line-up of participants subscribe to a fundamental paralysis, which points to the immense difficulty of concretely delineating what intellectuals can actually do. The roundtables thus both literally and thematically conclude on a sombre note about the powerlessness of intellectuals.

The first roundtable was ‘packed’ and took place at the ARCO Forum, named after a donation from the petroleum company, what is now known as the John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum within the Institute of Politics at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard, on 30 November 1992.⁶⁰ The participants were Eugene Rivers, bell hooks, Cornel West, Henry Louis ‘Skip’ Gates, Jr., Glenn Loury, and Margaret Burnham, with Anthony Kwame Appiah as moderator. The second roundtable took place at the Department of Politics, what is now known as the Department of Political Science, MIT, on 17 November 1993. The participants were Eugene Rivers, bell hooks, Regina Austin, Randall Kennedy, and Selwyn Cudjoe, with Margaret Burnham serving as moderator and Joshua Cohen introducing the event. Glenn Loury was supposed to have participated but was absent due to illness and submitted a written piece to *BR*, which was published shortly after the event.⁶¹ Cohen justified the second roundtable with the sustained contributions on the issues by a dozen authors in *BR* across multiple issues, which indicated a persistent demand for continuing the conversations.⁶²

Rivers argues that the key purpose of the debates is to focus on the role and responsibility of intellectuals, more specifically ‘elite black intellectuals’, in the face of major social problems facing US society and in particular Black communities.⁶³ Rivers expands on the crux of his specific contribution in the opening round of the Harvard roundtable, identifying three basic issues. First, he emphasises the need for tighter labour markets and increased public spending e.g. on transport infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and tunnels, which would help bring down unemployment to the benefit – in part – of Black Americans. Yet Rivers insists this is insufficient because of the ‘depth of the crisis and the destruction of the social infrastructure’.⁶⁴ Second, he therefore proposes social programmes that specifically target ‘racial discrimination and exclusion’ such as affirmative action. Yet once again, Rivers contends that this will be insufficient, particularly because the benefits are uncertain especially for those at the ‘bottom of the social ladder’.⁶⁵ Third and finally, Rivers outlines the need for ‘efforts *within* the communities most adversely affected themselves’, alluding to the ‘defenceless’ inner city Black poor ‘whose lives are being crushed’, stressing how these communities are plagued by the twin danger of nihilism and decay, a claim first elaborated by Cornel West in an essay published a year before the first roundtable.⁶⁶

4.1. Organic Responsibility

A key theme of both roundtables is the status of individual intellectuals within the larger processes of social transformation which need to be effected to alleviate or abolish oppression and domination. Although Rivers eschews scholastic academic debates in his *BR* essay, he nonetheless speaks in the language of calling for ‘discourse and critical examination of the basic normative presuppositions which govern our thinking and

affect our social policy orientation and outlook’, thus echoing Alkalimat’s point about the normative dimension of Black studies mentioned above.⁶⁷ Yet this must be rooted in the concrete ‘concerted action on the ground, not simply distant exhortation and example’, what West calls ‘a dialectic’ and Cudjoe a ‘dialectical relationship between ideas and practice’.⁶⁸ In sum, Rivers calls for ‘the reconstruction of civil society in the Black community’.⁶⁹ Part of this involves Black intellectuals using their class position to improve the conditions of Black people in the US, taking on a collective responsibility.

Hooks, in concurrence with the entire Harvard roundtable line-up and made explicit by West and Cudjoe as charted above, proposes a Gramscian role of the organic intellectual as embedded within their own social class, avoiding the distancing that can come with income and privilege. Organic intellectuals, for Gramsci, are not distinct from the social class about whom they theorise but emerge from – and retain a connection to – that class. He contrasts this with traditional intellectuals, who transcend class to attain an ivory tower-like presence that permits thinking abstracted from social conditions. This distinction recurs in the critical theory tradition, where Max Horkheimer distinguishes between traditional theory and critical theory on similar lines – critical theory is self-reflexive, for instance, rather than a view from nowhere.⁷⁰

In line with such a conception of the intellectual, hooks recounts how when paid large sums of money to speak to primarily or entirely white audiences, she would reach out to local Black communities and meet Black people where they are in their daily lives, e.g. local restaurants, to share her critical thinking and intellectual experience and how the plight of working poor or working class Black people can be linked to building ‘critical consciousness’.⁷¹ She further proposes for intellectuals to speak ‘the truth of their lives, not just the truth of their knowledge’, echoing Gramsci’s call for addressing not just knowledge or understanding but the feelings of ordinary people.⁷² This aligns with her interventions across the two roundtables and her overall radical Black feminist oeuvre going beyond liberal race politics yet without committing herself to Black nationalism.

Yet Burnham emphasises the importance of intellectuals having the space to think critically, which is not resolved or even aided by adopting Black orphans as Gates and Loury plead for.⁷³ In an impressive legal career beginning at the NAACP before turning to academia, among Burnham’s major achievements was becoming the first ever African American woman judge in Massachusetts and an appointment in 1993 by Nelson Mandela to investigate alleged human rights violations within the African National Congress, a precursor to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. When an audience member in the discussion stresses the need to speak to the hearts of people, West bemoans most intellectuals for failing – or being unqualified – to speak to the heart.⁷⁴ Likewise, Loury argues for the need to be in a relation with the subject of concern – placing oneself as an intellectual within the context of the problem, rather than simply looking from an external vantage point. He elaborates: ‘it’s not just a process of thinking or organizing or being engaged in activity, it’s a question of being present ... of knowing some of the people who are the object of the inquiry’.⁷⁵ The importance of direct, personal experience and connection as opposed to a distant intellectual is thus crucial for all roundtable participants.

Loury is an influential conservative academic figure and a self-described ‘economic theorist of neoliberal orientation’, often occupying an antagonistic or at least oppositional role vis-à-vis the other roundtable participants who by and large belong to

radical left-wing traditions.⁷⁶ Indeed, Loury is well-known for subscribing to the behaviourist explanation of absent fathers leading to single-mother households as the major cause of Black suffering in America:

The advocacy of a particular conception of virtuous living has nearly vanished from American public discourse. And it is unthinkable that it would be evoked in the context of a discussion of race. Marriage as an institution is virtually dead in inner city communities. The vast majority of poor black children are now raised by a mother alone. But who will say that black men and women *should* get together and stay together for the sake of their children? Who will say that young people of any race *should* abstain from sexual intimacy until they consecrate their relationships by marriage? These are no longer fitting matters for public discourse. Government, it appears, is not to take up moral issues directly, but to confine itself to dealing with the consequences of moral lapses.⁷⁷

In other words, Loury places a major responsibility on individuals and propagates marriage and abstinence. This stands in stark contrast particularly to the views of hooks, West, Burnham, and Gates, with hooks and West the major exponents of structuralist explanations of Black suffering.

To such an end, hooks emphasises the need for prefigurative politics and the embodiment of the critique put forward by intellectuals – living up to the principles expounded by scholars. Thus, when Loury and others point to the gap between the principles extolled by Black intellectuals and the practice of those principles, hooks interjects that she feels ‘this binary’ does not adequately represent her practice and that she does not identify with Gates’ point about the guilt of leaving the community behind.⁷⁸ In the MIT roundtable, hooks argues that

the discussion here is hard for me – and this will be the last of this kind of panel I’ll go on – because I feel that I don’t know that estrangement. I feel that a lot of black women don’t. We nurture both in the academy and beyond.⁷⁹

This is in part because of her care for her brother who battled an addiction to crack – the issues raised by Rivers are therefore not separate from her reality, for which reason she demands conversations begin from the point of ‘how we live our lives’.⁸⁰ For these reasons, intellectuals must lead by example.⁸¹ ‘What do we do with our money?’, hooks rhetorically asks.⁸² Echoing this, Loury complains the conversation is ‘too abstract’ and Burnham warns against the ‘armchair intellectual’ and calls for a distinction between the kind of ivory tower thinking that does not aid those suffering and then the empowering role that intellectual work can have to bring people out of the age of crack.⁸³

Pushing the organic intellectual idea further and making it explicit, West lauds Rivers as ‘on the one hand one of the most brilliant intellectuals I have ever met, on the other hand full of anxieties about that’.⁸⁴ West concludes that no matter how ‘organically linked’ intellectuals, particularly Black intellectuals, are to the plights and struggles of ordinary people, they will take the tension identified in Rivers with them to their grave.⁸⁵ Burnham responds that this tension, between intellectuality and the gap to ordinary people, is also productive, ‘a tension out of which your best work is created’.⁸⁶ The serious, honest, and never-ending reckoning with the ethical and moral obligations and responsibilities of intellectuals of wealth and fame is one of the lodestars upon which the entire Harvard panel agrees. Indeed, one audience member comments that the roundtable should be followed by similar events in poor Black neighbourhoods

such as Rivers' Dorchester community.⁸⁷ West praises Rivers for not just visiting poor Black neighbourhoods like he and hooks do, but for living in them – the pinnacle of being an organic intellectual who bridges the faith and feeling of people with the resources of intellectual work.⁸⁸

What transpires from the discussions on the role of intellectuals is that the atomised, elevated intellectual who has no connection to the social struggles on the ground which they seek to address, is a cul-de-sac for emancipation from that oppression and suffering. All the participants agree on this, even if they have differing perspectives on the precise character of that responsibility. This insight builds on Rivers' claim in the original *BR* essay, where he implicitly distinguishes between two kinds of responsibility: responsibility *to* and responsibility *for*. The former conceives of responsibility as a kind of culpability whereas the other conceives of it as an obligation. Culpability implies blame or complicity in the oppression of Black people whereas obligation implies an expectation of action toward ending this oppression; a 'positive moral duty to alleviate suffering'.⁸⁹ Rivers is advocating for a model of intellectual responsibility that sits within the camp of obligation, not culpability. In other words, he is defending the view that Black intellectuals have a moral duty to do something rather than the blame for the situation to begin with. However, once intellectuals are complacent in the face of oppression, they begin to become complicit. Therefore, intellectuals should be embedded and close to the social suffering they aim to address.

4.2. The Race-Class-Gender Nexus

This importance of embeddedness and closeness emerges in the recurring emphasis on the need for combining the analysis of race, class, and gender, which is a second major theme of the roundtables. Rivers decries 'class segregation' and Gates points out the 'compounding effect of race and class', referring to how hooks and West are already doing this work, a theme that Angela Davis centred with her landmark *Women, Race, Class*, and which plays a central role across hooks' work, too.⁹⁰ Indeed, Gates emphasises the gap in time between the publication of Karl Marx's *Capital* and the Bolshevik Revolution – over half a century – to suggest that 'everything that we do does not have to have a hand-grenade effect to slay the dragon tomorrow', echoing Theodor W. Adorno's lament against how his philosophy was practiced with 'Molotov cocktails'.⁹¹ Gates repeatedly argues that the civil rights era produced a bifurcation in the class composition of Black Americans, such that a large Black 'underclass' is counterposed by a Black middle class.⁹² He claims that 'each of us has a tendency to speak of the black community as if blackness is a class and we have to decide if blackness really does constitute a class and if it does how it does and if it doesn't how it doesn't and what that means'.⁹³ This has fatal consequences for the role of Black intellectuals, since these belong almost exclusively to the second category, as Burnham points out and with which Rivers concurs.⁹⁴ Yet as West points out, there is a marked difference between income and wealth disparities by class, such that the issue primarily is one of wealth and proximity to capital as opposed to one of disposable income.⁹⁵

In line with Gates' claim, Rivers argues that the issues of the roundtable(s) 'speak to issues of class, race, identity, moral obligation, and the responsibility of intellectuals'.⁹⁶ In his characteristically trenchant way, Rivers urges a move beyond

campus politics, ugga-bugga [*sic*] nationalism, [and] Afrocentrism to talk about the ways that those of us who have extraordinary class privilege can coordinate and use some of our resources to alleviate some of the irrational and unnecessary suffering of, in particular, people of African descent.⁹⁷

He thus foregrounds the crucial intersection between race and class, which is an important and recurring subject in the roundtables. Indeed, West's opening remarks in the Harvard roundtable highlight how

to start with, I think we have to acknowledge the degree to which we live in a market civilization, which affects all of our values and sensibilities. That makes it so very difficult to talk about ways of life that can serve as countervailing forces against the market moralities and market mentalities.⁹⁸

The specific character of a racialised capitalist post-slavery but prison industrial-labour society cannot be ignored, such that these debates at the roundtables are specifically American.

Despite the importance of theorising race and class together, hooks criticises the failure to reckon with the role of women – particularly the ‘many voiceless Black women’ in the formation of a Black intellectual praxis.⁹⁹ She points to the tendency of the Harvard roundtable to descend into ‘homosocial bonding’ when West and Rivers dominate the discussions, leaving particularly Burnham on the fringes.¹⁰⁰ ‘We have to talk about sexism’, hooks continues, criticising this skewed character of the debate.¹⁰¹ At the MIT roundtable, she argues that ‘a lot of the kinds of bridges that have been built between various black communities have been formed by black women thinkers. But our work does not receive attention’.¹⁰² The spectre of Ella Baker hovers quite clearly over these claims, with her grassroots organising outside the spotlight so instrumental to the struggle for Black liberation, particularly in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee alongside more public-facing figures like Stokely Carmichael. Baker argued for the importance of ‘develop[ing] the capacity for leadership’ of the oppressed – in other words, she took on the responsibility for a long-term strategy of building emancipatory movements rather than simply leading them from the front.¹⁰³

In the roundtables, hooks continues along a similar line:

When people say there is a lack of intellectual leadership, part of that lack is the refusal of masses of people to take on the work that many black women have already done, and raise us to the level of leaders. Let's face it, certain black men haven't raised themselves; they've been lifted up by other people, and we need to ask why.¹⁰⁴

This points to a basic rift in the debates that challenges the supposed unity of the Black intelligentsia – one of gender, whereby Black women intellectuals are marginalised and sidelined. As one MIT audience member, Carmine Graff, exclaims: ‘to the brothers: I don't see any respect, like bell mentioned. You keep on dissin' each other’.¹⁰⁵

This speaks to wider themes in hooks' work, made emblematic in the roundtable when she points out how ‘there are a lot of forms of knowledge that Black women have in all diverse classes that we don't hear from because we don't listen to those voices even when they speak’.¹⁰⁶ This argument is found particularly in the work of Audre Lorde, too, raising the importance of poetry and other forms of expression

that may be side-lined in conventional academic debate.¹⁰⁷ The most heated point of the Harvard roundtable occurs toward the very end where Rivers disagrees with hooks' point about sexism and distances himself from feminism.¹⁰⁸ Here, Rivers returns to a recurring theme in his intellectual life, namely what West calls the 'conservative behaviourist' approach to absent Black fathers and the ubiquity of Black single-mother households in the United States. Across his life, Rivers pleads for Black men to resolve themselves the issues of decay and nihilism in the US, and not to blame structures, what West calls the 'liberal structuralist' view.¹⁰⁹ This highlights Rivers' idiosyncratic position vis-à-vis Black radical intellectual traditions to which West, hooks, and others belong, particularly on questions of feminism, sexism, and patriarchy.¹¹⁰

A fascinating moment in the Harvard roundtable occurs when an audience member identifies herself as a Black lesbian woman, where Rivers vigorously nods in affirmation of her when she brings up her fear of homophobia in the Black Protestant community.¹¹¹ This is notable since Rivers is somewhat infamous for his views on LGBTQ rights. In particular, Rivers has chastised the Black Lives Matter movement for supporting an LGBTQ agenda – he is against gay marriage and abortion alike (although he does support same-sex civil unions), placing him awkwardly in relation to progressives and radicals in the US.¹¹² Rivers belongs to the pole of Black leadership that sees the absence of Black fathers as a core explanation for the problems facing the Black community.¹¹³ When Loury takes the word in response shortly after, asking 'how do we get these homophobes to behave right by people who have a different sexual preference?', Rivers is once again expressing strong agreement.¹¹⁴ Finally, when West complains that 'most churches we know defer to the status quo, most churches we know [are] thoroughgoing homophobic [and] misogynist right across the board', Rivers vigorously nods and exclaims 'amen!' and 'that's right'.¹¹⁵ Likewise, at the outset of the roundtable Rivers non-verbally indicates his agreement with West criticising Black Christian communities for being patriarchal and homophobic.¹¹⁶ Rivers thus occupies an ambivalent and perhaps contradictory position vis-à-vis questions of LGBTQ rights – in fact, Rivers sees the LGBTQ liberation struggle and the Black liberation struggle as in tension. He argues that the proposed extension of the 1964 Civil Rights Act into the 2021 Equality Act by expanding protections for sexual minorities comes into conflict with the rights of Black people because it denies Black religious people the right to live in accordance with their faith, as well as proposes a false equivalence between the oppression of Black Americans and LGBTQ Americans.¹¹⁷ Thus, Rivers views the LGBTQ struggle with suspicion and is an explicit and vocal advocate of not extending the rights of sexual minorities today, at odds with the other roundtable participants.

While Rivers proposes tensions between sexual and racial rights, the picture is somewhat more congruent when refocused on the relationships between race, class, and gender. Here, the concrete ways in which these intersect to constitute the problem also point to how a reckoning with this intersection can contribute to the solutions. Following the basic insights of the Frankfurt School, the task of critical theory is enlightenment and emancipation: solving the problem requires understanding and transformation alike, such that concrete and precise knowledge of the problem is what paves the way for changing the situation in an emancipatory direction.¹¹⁸

4.3. Paralysis?

Unfortunately, while reckoning with the race-class-gender nexus is crucial for clarifying and specifying the collective responsibilities of intellectuals, it can also contribute to a dangerous emergence of paralysis whereby intellectuals do not know if and how they can contribute to social struggles, which is the third theme I explore here. A marked despair emerges toward the end of each roundtable in this regard. As Burnham laments toward the end of the MIT roundtable, ‘we’ve now had a definition, a re-definition, and a re-re-definition of the question. And now what people are looking for is some direction towards an answer’.¹¹⁹ This points to the immense difficulty of overcoming the problem. That there are precisely no concrete and obvious solutions – it is a structural problem that requires structural solutions beyond the actions of individual intellectuals, what hooks calls ‘the paradigm of collective struggle for self-determination’ – points to an action paralysis on the part of intellectuals.¹²⁰

One way out of the paralysis emerges when legal scholar Regina Austin raises an important corollary in the MIT roundtable of the need to specify who the enemy is: ‘poor black people need to know whom to blame and whom to be mad at besides themselves. Who exactly is the enemy?’ Likewise, Gates calls for the need for further understanding that can home in on precisely what it is that oppresses Black people, and consequently lead to organisation-building and eventually social transformation. Austin continues:

What *are* the sources of the oppression and exploitation poor black people endure? If your response is ‘the system,’ then tell me exactly how the system does its number. How do intellectuals help poor black people address their subjugation in sophisticated macroeconomic, macropolitical, and macrosocial terms?¹²¹

This is made even more poignant later in the roundtable when Austin insists on returning to this same question after a lot of diversion:

Why don’t we have penetrating analyses of the economic conditions of the black urban poor coming from folks who are interested in programmatic issues and in making those conditions explicable to people so that people will have some sense of who the enemy is? I think it’s very important for people to understand who they ought to be angry at, because far too many people are turning that anger against themselves, or against other people who look like them.¹²²

In other words, Austin points out the importance of a multiplicity of avenues of research and debate to ascertain in more clear terms precisely who or what the source of white supremacy and Black suffering is. To be sure, since the roundtables a wealth of important work has tried to do this, both inside and outside Black studies.

However, Austin is quick to emphasise that the problem is not merely one of insufficient knowledge of who the enemy is:

But I think it’s very difficult for black intellectuals to deal with the question of who the enemy is, either because they fear that the enemy will turn out to look like themselves, or fear that the enemy will turn out to look like the white people who are their colleagues.¹²³

Here, she returns to the question of the race-class-gender nexus, with particular emphasis on class composition, pointing out how the class status of Black intellectuals might make them part of the problem, if the problem is one of economic class leading to massive

divergence in social capital between a tenured Ivy League professor and a worker on minimum wage. Yet she continues:

But I suspect that that's not exactly who the enemy is. Why is it that we don't go further to try to identify the enemy and understand how we can intervene in the system to defeat or at least stifle the enemy? It is beyond me.¹²⁴

She discounts a rushed narrative of simply assigning enemy status based on economic class or social capital.

Likewise, West stresses that the issue is not one of lack of knowledge which experts could provide. He draws out the distinction between experts and intellectuals, suggesting that 'experts aren't intellectuals. Some are. But most aren't. Experts are something else'.¹²⁵ West does not expand, yet presumably he is alluding to the Gramscian notion of the organic intellectual, which most experts would not adhere to. Yet by claiming that 'to be an intellectual, to cut against the grain of a business civilization, means that intellectuals actually surface precisely when they are experts', he is emphasising how intellectuals must have a degree of expertise, of knowledge, and of understanding that takes them beyond merely hypothesising and explaining toward agitating, organising, and providing what Gramsci calls 'intellectual and moral leadership'.¹²⁶ Yet as explicated above, hooks in particular is uncomfortable with these academic distinctions – such as the one between intellectual and expert – precisely because her intellectual practice and her academic expertise are so intertwined that it makes little sense to think of them as separate.

Taking a turn toward despair, Burnham posits whether intellectuals may not just be paralysed but actively making things worse. Phrasing this as a genuinely open-ended question rather than a rhetorical one, the other participants do not take up this point, thus perhaps implicitly quelling Burnham's fears. However, Rivers does bring up this idea in the Harvard roundtable:

to what extent have we *contributed* to the negative social forces in our community by segregating *ourselves*, leaving a weak social group *defenseless*; left to their own devices they do all these negative things that we *then* turn around and lecture them against as we *ensure* that they never get close to us.¹²⁷

This connects directly to the importance of class explicated above. Rivers denounces the classism of elite intellectuals:

So, one part of this discussion has to do with our class identity, and how we *distance* ourselves. We talk in theoretical terms about emancipating the poor, for the sake of humanity; just don't let the unwashed and the illiterate rub shoulders with me.¹²⁸

West cautions against such a pessimistic view, arguing instead that Black intellectuals *do* engage with the poor, as hooks repeatedly reminds the other participants. West summarises the problem thus: 'part of what we are talking about is the difficulty of being an intellectual in a business civilization'.¹²⁹

This speaks to the issue of paralysis that resurfaces multiple times across the roundtables, i.e. the sheer difficulty of knowing what to do about the 'age of crack'. Even if one could ascertain and consent on what the responsibility of (Black) intellectuals looks like, that does not necessarily imply a concrete plan for how to use that responsibility. It also raises the issue of to whom the Black intellectual speaks – are they speaking

truth to power or speaking truth to the powerless? Or, perhaps the goal for Black Americans across class is rather to ‘speak frankly to itself’ as a community, as Amia Srinivasan raises in a different context.¹³⁰ Yet this also highlights, particularly through hooks’ contributions to the roundtables, that such paralysis emerges chiefly *because* of the atomised, siloed character of individual intellectual responsibility. Once it is thought in collective and organic terms, such responsibility becomes much more nuanced and complex. Through a more embedded role whereby the organic or grounded intellectual is not separate from the mass of people whom they seek to help, it is possible to imagine a richer picture of intellectual activity, straddling and problematising the divide between pure abstract thought and concrete action. To be sure, this is not a new vision: it can be found in the work of Gramsci as well as the private correspondence between Adorno and Herbert Marcuse on the German student movement of the late 1960s.¹³¹

As Rivers begins in his 1995 essay that followed the two roundtables,

no series of analyses, papers, discussions, and books will stop the slaughter in our streets, or children from having children, or men from beating up women. The role of intellectuals is limited; excessive expectations will only produce disappointment. But that limited role is crucial, and fears of disappointment should not serve as an excuse for continuing along the current course.¹³²

This suggests that the above paralysis is unwarranted – pessimism, fine, but paralysis, no. Therefore, even the ‘limited role’ of intellectuals must be clarified, including an affirmation of future-oriented possibilities in contexts of widespread pessimism and despair.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have brought the debates further into the orbit of academic study, raising them as worthy of scholarly study. Building on recent attention paid by academics to the initial Rivers essay, here I argued that three key points of convergence characterise the two roundtables which form a key part of the debates: First, I argued for a differentiation between individual and collective responsibility of intellectuals, which builds on long-standing scholarship on Gramscian conceptions of the organic intellectual. Second, I emphasised the centrality of the race-class-gender nexus for theorising the intellectual, particularly in the context of a white supremacist society such as the US. Third, I highlighted a fundamental action paralysis as to what intellectuals can do concretely – a kind of pessimism if not outright despair. Particularly, the promising character of the debates as a fresh intervention into the public debate whose agenda is often set at American elite institutions like Harvard and MIT was not fully redeemed in the ensuing period. Liberal ideas of a post-racial society soon became hegemonic in the US, whereby race was seen as a resolved question. With 9/11 and the War on Terror, a shift in focus whereby the racialisation and marginalisation of Arabs and Muslims further entrenched the view that questions of Blackness were ‘solved’, sometimes even placed in service of this new political discourse around Islamic terrorism. Yet with the unredeemed hopes of the first ever Black presidency, the return to prominence of racialised police brutality in public discourse, and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement to address this, raising questions of how race, class, and gender affect the livelihoods of Black Americans continues to be of utmost importance for scholars and political alike today.

Once again, debates considered to be particular to Black communities or issues speak to a much wider set of problems in society. Bringing the debates into mainstream intellectual and scholarly orbits is of prime importance for ameliorating the marginalisation of Black intellectuals, adding to the crucial recent work of scholars like Byrd, Farmer, and Cameron.¹³³ To this end, the roundtables offer useful resources for thinking about the place of collective public deliberation today. The peculiar character of ‘roundtables’ has escaped attention as a particular constellation of public discourse and deliberation and a site of intellectual production. I have not attempted to shed general light on this character, which is a crucial avenue for further research. However, I have embraced roundtables as a form of *text*. The demise of public intellectual debate and the dire prospects for the very possibility of a shared public sphere of communicative action point to the need for a reevaluation of how critical scholars engage with the wider public. The demandingness of roundtables involves careful sustained attention as well as generous and good faith engagement which are put under strain in the commodified mass entertainment economy.¹³⁴ As West laments, ‘there is no escape from commodification’, which turns intellectuals into celebrities.¹³⁵ Even if escape from commodification requires a radical rupture with the economic system producing such commodification, the role intellectuals can play in such rupture must be further studied and debated.

Notes

1. Across this article, I use ‘America’ and its cognates to refer to the United States of America.
2. Hill Collins, “Black Public Intellectuals,” 26.
3. The Harvard roundtable was video recorded and is available online Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*. An edited transcript was subsequently published in Boston Review, *The Responsibility of Black Intellectuals*. The MIT roundtable was not video recorded but an edited transcript was subsequently published in Boston Review, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*.
4. The contributions came from Eugene Genovese, Eric Foner, Cathy J. Cohen, Noel Ignatiev, Harvey Cox, Clyde N. Wilson, Askold Melnyzcuk, Robin D.G. Kelly, Tony Martin, and Martin Kilson.
5. Slothuus, “Eugene Rivers and the Responsibility of Intellectuals.”
6. Some of the key texts on this topic include Banner-Haley, *From du Bois to Obama*; Watts, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual Reconsidered*; Hill Collins, “Black Public Intellectuals.”
7. Byrd, “The Rise of African American Intellectual History.”
8. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power*; Blain et al., *New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition*; Cameron, *Black Freethinkers*; Byrd, “The Rise of African American Intellectual History”; *The Black Republic*; Cameron, “Haiti and the Black Intellectual Tradition, 1829–1934”; Farmer, “Black Women’s Internationalism.”
9. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, hooks 52:43.
10. Alkalimat, *The History of Black Studies*, 6, 8–9, and *passim*.
11. Boston Review, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Gooding-Williams, *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*. Patricia J. Williams’ visceral recounting serves as an excellent entry-point for those readers unfamiliar with the sequence of events.
14. Crenshaw and Peller, “Reel Time/Real Justice,” 283.
15. For more on the Harlins murder and its connection to the LA Riots, see Stevenson, *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins*.
16. Enos et al., “Can Violent Protest Change Local Policy Support?”

17. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*. For detailed statistics, see Bonczar and Beck, “Lifetime Likelihood of Going to State or Federal Prison.”
18. As former Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) undercover agent Michael Levine documents, the crack epidemic was perpetuated and sustained by key US government institutions, particularly the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Levine and Kavanau-Levine, *The Big White Lie*.
19. Stuntz, “Race, Class, and Drugs.”
20. Center, *Gun Homicide Rate Down 49% Since 1993 Peak*; Evans et al., *Guns and Violence*.
21. Levine and Kavanau-Levine, *The Big White Lie*.
22. Stuntz, “Race, Class, and Drugs.”
23. Tonry, “Race and the War on Drugs.”
24. Reeves and Campbell, *Cracked Coverage*. For more on the impact of the prison industrial complex on Black Americans, see Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*
25. Spillers, “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual,” 101.
26. Crenshaw and Peller, “Reel Time/Real Justice.”
27. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”
28. Rivers and Johnson, *God’s Gift*.
29. I follow Alkalimat’s use of the term Black studies to encompass the porous field of what has variably been known as Afro-American studies, Africology, African American studies, and Africana studies, among many others. Alkalimat, *The History of Black Studies*. See also Okafor, “Africology, Black Studies, African American Studies, Africana Studies, or African World Studies?”
30. hooks and West, *Breaking Bread*; West, “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual.”
31. hooks, *Where We Stand*, 43.
32. West, “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual,” 124.
33. West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, xix.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, 167.
36. *Ibid.*, xiv.
37. Banner-Haley, *From du Bois to Obama*, 81.
38. Bousian, *D.C. Mayor Wants National Guard to Help Fight Crime*.
39. Boston Review, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*.
40. For more on Jacqueline Rivers and her significance on Eugene Rivers’ praxis, see Slothuus, “Eugene Rivers and the Responsibility of Intellectuals.”
41. Boston Review, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*.
42. Spillers, “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual,” 87.
43. *Ibid.*, 68–69.
44. Hill Collins, “Black Public Intellectuals,” 24.
45. Hill Collins, *On Intellectual Activism*, 26.
46. Joshua Cohen provided primary source material for the context within which the debate emerged.
47. The participating intellectuals repeatedly thank Cohen for his efforts, and Cohen and Rivers had known each other for a long time prior to the roundtables.
48. Cohen and Rogers, *Associations and Democracy*.
49. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*; Mills, *The Racial Contract*; “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology”; “Rawls on Race/Race in Rawls”; *Black Rights/White Wrongs*.
50. The essay has received only scant attention in the literature, confined to Slothuus, “Eugene Rivers and the Responsibility of Intellectuals” as well as more limited reflections in Hanchard, “Cultural Politics and Black Public Intellectuals”; *Party/Politics: Horizons in Black Political Thought*; Spillers, “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual”; Jaramillo, “Toward Transformative Critical Race Theory”; Ralph, “Theoretical Ramifications of Django Unchained.”
51. Rivers, *On the Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*; Chomsky, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals*.
52. Slothuus, “Eugene Rivers and the Responsibility of Intellectuals.”
53. Rivers, *On the Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*.

54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. The latter distinction is elaborated in Slothuus, “Eugene Rivers and the Responsibility of Intellectuals.”
60. Kurnick, *Scholars Debate Responsibility*.
61. Loury, *The Poverty of Reason*.
62. Boston Review, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*.
63. Ibid.
64. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, Rivers 8:13. References include surname of contributor and timestamp ((hh:)mm:ss) that marks the end of the sentence or point in question.
65. Ibid., Rivers 8:48.
66. Ibid., Rivers 9:00. West, *Nihilism in Black America*.
67. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, Rivers 9:48.
68. Ibid., Rivers 10:20, *ibid.*, West 12:56. Boston Review, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*.
69. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, Rivers 9:55.
70. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*.
71. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, hooks 54:13.
72. Ibid., hooks 01:04:16. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.
73. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, Burnham 01:02:44.
74. Ibid., West 01:59:20.
75. Ibid., Loury 17:00.
76. Loury, *Why Does Racial Inequality Persist? 2*.
77. Loury, *The Poverty of Reason*.
78. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, hooks 19:00, 44:46.
79. Boston Review, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*.
80. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, hooks 24:51.
81. Ibid., hooks 26:10.
82. Ibid., hooks 37:26.
83. Ibid., Loury 40:55, Burnham 27:38.
84. Ibid., West 59:38.
85. Ibid., West 01:01:40.
86. Ibid., Burnham 01:01:50.
87. Ibid., 01:27:10.
88. Ibid., West 01:29:10.
89. Slothuus, “Eugene Rivers and the Responsibility of Intellectuals.”
90. Boston Review, *The Responsibility of Black Intellectuals*; Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, Gates 22:37, 23:07. Davis, *Women, Race, Class*; hooks, *Where We Stand*.
91. Leslie, “Introduction to Adorno-Marcuse Correspondence,” 120.
92. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, Gates 21:56, 44:22.
93. Ibid., Gates 43:58.
94. Ibid., Burnham 30:15, Rivers 30:35.
95. Ibid., West 47:10.
96. Ibid., Rivers 6:38.
97. Ibid., Rivers 7:27.
98. Ibid., West 11:30.
99. Ibid., hooks 36:59.
100. Ibid., hooks 36:00.
101. Ibid., hooks 01:40:01.

102. Boston Review, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*.
103. Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement – A Radical Democratic Vision*, 273.
104. Boston Review, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*.
105. Ibid.
106. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, hooks 01:40:26.
107. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.
108. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, hooks and Rivers 01:46:16.
109. West, *Race Matters; Nihilism in Black America*. For a longer discussion of these themes, see Slothuus, “Eugene Rivers and the Responsibility of Intellectuals.”
110. This speaks to a larger trend in Black scholarship, represented most clearly by Tommy Curry’s work on Black masculinity and racist misandry, which provides a prism through which Rivers’ arguments can be better understood in contrast to more conventional feminist narratives around gender. See Curry, *The Man-Not*; Smith et al., “You Make Me Wanna Holler and Throw Up Both My Hands!”
111. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, 01:55:46.
112. MSNBC, *The New Civil Rights? Same-Sex Marriage in America*, 6:15. Rivers and Rivers, *Black Lives Matter and the Church*.
113. Chadwick, *Day to Day*.
114. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, Loury 01:58:40.
115. Ibid., West and Rivers 02:00:05.
116. Ibid., West 13:40.
117. Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies, *How the Equality Act Harms the Black Church*.
118. Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*.
119. Boston Review, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*.
120. Ibid.
121. Ibid.
122. Ibid.
123. Ibid.
124. Ibid.
125. Ibid.
126. Ibid., Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 57.
127. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, Rivers 31:00.
128. Ibid., Rivers 31:22.
129. Ibid., West 31:14.
130. Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, xv.
131. Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence on the German Student Movement.”
132. Rivers, *Beyond the Nationalism of Fools*.
133. Watts, *The Crisis of The Negro Intellectual Reconsidered*, 2.
134. One particularly welcome scholarly initiative to treat roundtables as texts is the Critical Exchange series in the academic journal *Contemporary Political Theory*.
135. Institute of Politics, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack*, West 35:32.

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