



On the Corner: African American Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis

Daniel Matlin

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In July 1964, after a decade of intense media focus on civil rights protest in the Jim Crow South, a riot in Harlem abruptly shifted attention to the urban crisis embroiling America's northern cities. *On the Corner* revisits the volatile moment when African American intellectuals were thrust into the spotlight as indigenous interpreters of black urban life to white America, and examines how three figures--Kenneth B. Clark, Amiri Baraka, and Romare Bearden--wrestled with the opportunities and dilemmas their heightened public statures entailed. Daniel Matlin locates in the 1960s a new dynamic that has continued to shape African American intellectual practice to the present day, as black urban communities became the chief objects of black intellectuals' perceived social obligations.

Black scholars and artists offered sharply contrasting representations of black urban life and vied to establish their authority as indigenous interpreters. As a psychologist, Clark placed his faith in the ability of the social sciences to diagnose the damage caused by racism and poverty. Baraka sought to channel black fury and violence into essays, poems, and plays. Meanwhile, Bearden wished his collages to contest portrayals of black urban life as dominated by misery, anger, and dysfunction.

In time, each of these figures concluded that their role as interpreters for white America placed dangerous constraints on black intellectual practice. The condition of entry into the public sphere for African American intellectuals in the post-civil rights era has been confinement to what Clark called "the topic that is reserved for blacks."

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