

# Held in Trust by History: Lerone Bennett Jr., Intellectual Activism, and the Historical Profession

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Lerone Bennett, Jr., social historian, Black Studies architect, and intellectual activist spent over four decades at *Ebony* magazine, arguably the premier African American lifestyle magazine of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, founded by John H. Johnson in 1945. This essay seeks a reappraisal of his role as contributing editor, which brought to the magazine a sense of the importance of recovering and celebrating African American history and contributions to American society and the world. However, this author argues against the view that Bennett's work was purely celebratory, preferring instead to interpret Bennett's contributions as forms of critical popular education that cut across an increasingly volatile publishing industry and an aspirant black middle class. Additionally, the author credits Bennett with influencing the magazine's attention to issues including African Americans' relationship to and embrace of African independence and Afro-diasporic culture that embraced a wide range of trans-Atlantic intellectual and political concerns. Though such issues were taken up with force in the pages of another Johnson Publications outlet, *Negro Digest/Black World*, Bennett nonetheless was able to pique the interest of a more mainstream black reading public on a range of critical socio-political registers in the pages of *Ebony*, as well as in several other widely circulated published works. Lastly, this essay places Bennett's oeuvre and contributions alongside scholars, bibliophiles, and lay historians such as Arthur A. Schomburg, Dorothy Porter, John Henrik Clarke, Hubert Harrison and others who made their careers outside the walls of the academy, yet whose contributions to the study of history remains foundational to African American Studies and the historical profession.

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On the morning of December 11, 2016 a notice in the Chicago area news read as follows: “Author Lerone Bennett Found Safe After Being Reported Missing.” As it turned out, the 88-year old Bennett decided to go for an early morning walk, without telling anyone. The notice continued,

*“Author Lerone Bennett, who was missing Saturday morning from the Kenwood neighborhood on the South Side, has been located.*

*The 88-year-old scholar, journalist and historian was reported missing after he was last seen at 5:05 a.m. near the 4800 block of South Lake Shore Drive, according to a missing person alert from Chicago Police.*

*Police said Bennett was located and safe Saturday afternoon, but did not provide additional information. Bennett is the author of multiple books, including “Before the Mayflower” and “Forced into Glory.” He previously worked as an editor at JET and Ebony magazines.”<sup>1</sup>*

The brevity of this note calls attention to the fact that Bennett, recently passed, is still known mostly for his work at *Ebony* and for the publication of two critically acclaimed texts, though he wrote over ten.

This essay seeks to look closer and more broadly at Bennett’s intellectual life, though certainly much of that was spent at the offices of *Ebony*. In addition to *Ebony*, Bennett maintained a rather full organizational life as well, holding memberships and associations in such organizations as the short-lived Black Academy of Arts and Letters, the Race Relations Information Center, the Institute of the Black World, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and the MLK Memorial Center to name a few. Renewing the interest in Bennett’s life opens us to several objectives: to give a sense of African American historical expertise and craftsmanship, to gain an expansive definition of intellectual history and the social function of the historian, to contextualize Bennett’s productivity, motivations, and range as a thinker, to achieve a view into his philosophy of life, and lastly to hopefully arrive at the disruptive and reparative dimensions of history, which we can discern in Bennett’s robust body of work.

Though his career was built on the work he produced in from the early 1960s through the 1980s, his work experienced a renaissance within Black Studies in the 1990s as *Before the Mayflower* returned to high school history courses and became a fixture of the Black Studies curriculum across the country. By that time, the book was in its 6<sup>th</sup> edition. As the heated debate surrounding Afrocentricity peaked, scholars and students alike looked to Bennett’s work of history first published in 1962 for its accuracy, sophistication, and widespread accessibility.

The mainstream press took note. In 1993, the *Washington Post* Style section featured Bennett under the heading “Against the Drift of History: Lerone Bennett’s passionate investigation of Black America’s past.” Years later, in an interview for the Morehouse College *Alumnus Magazine*, Bennett seemed to underscore the standard he set to achieve, when he told the interviewer: “I don’t think you can separate the demand for excellence [from] the demand for freedom.”

Bennett’s work has garnered the attention of at least a few historians in the 1960s John Henrik Clarke was the first to call Bennett a “social historian” in an article in the journal *Freedomways*, and in the 2000s the historian Pero Dagbovie sought to resurrect Bennett’s impact on the discipline of Africana Studies.<sup>2</sup> In 2012, the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University acquired a large chunk of Bennett’s papers. This acquisition has thus inspired renewed interest in Bennett.

The questions that animate the essay include: What was Bennett’s life up to his time at *Ebony*? What sorts of training and exposure did he have that ignited his interest in history? How did his early life as a journalist at the *Atlanta Daily World* shape his approach to African American history? How did Bennett see himself, that is, who are the scholars that impacted and inspired him? How might we describe his philosophy of history, education, and knowledge production? What work was he part of outside of the Johnson Empire and off the pages of *Ebony*?

## **Family History as Black History**

Anyone remotely familiar with Bennett’s writing will observe that themes of “endurance” and “triumph” ran through all of his work. This included the recording of his family history. Bennett located his family in relation to history in this way: “The first Johnson and the first Reed were born in Africa, a continent of great kingdoms and cultures and the birthplace of humanity. The first Reed and the first Johnson were citizens of countries and principalities on the west coast of Africa, and they were descendants of a great people who gave the world fire, tools, and cultivated grain.” The branches of his family tree record that, “The founders of the Reed/Johnson family were among the Africans defeated—primarily because they lacked gun powder—during the 400 years Slave Trade war. Transported to America, they not only endured—they prevailed. In one of the greatest flights of the human spirit in recorded history, X Johnson and X Reed and millions of other X’s transcended the cruelties of the Slave Trade and created the foundation of American wealth and culture.” The document goes on to trace his recorded family history in the U.S. south from c. 1838—late 1920s. Bennett seemed to be tracking his family history as far back as possible. He was fully aware and certain of his and his family as part of the living history of the African American experience.

Bennett's speech at a University of Mississippi event in 1997 honoring him was tailored from his family history written in 1991 for the Reed/Johnson family reunion testifies to this facet of his approach. He entitled the speech "Lucy Reed's Award" in honor of his grandmother. Indeed, his first book, *Before the Mayflower* would be dedicated to his grandmother, his mother Alma Love, and his wife Gloria S. Bennett: "For the Black Woman."

At the time of this writing, little is known of the Bennett side of Lerone Bennett's family tree, that being his father's side. He traced his personal narrative through his mother's lineage, the Reed/Johnson family. A family chronology dates the earliest members of his mother's family back to 1838 in rural Alabama and Virginia. In the mid-1850s his great grandparents relocated to Mississippi, where his grandmother, the aforementioned Lucy Johnson, was born in 1874 or 1875. She was married to George Reed in Fannin County, Mississippi, by a "minister of Gospel" on December 14, 1892. His mother Alma, was born in 1906. She appears as "Alma D." on the 1910 U.S. Census at age 4, along with eight other siblings. The family relocated to Jackson, Mississippi in 1912. Bennett was born in 1928 in Clarksdale. His grandmother Lucy Reed died in April, 1943; Bennett was 15 years old. He went on to dedicate his life's work to honoring her legacy.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of living black history, he perhaps adopted a style of history pioneered by Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*. Throughout the Family history Bennett crafted were references to key historical events—the attack on Fort Sumter, the Emancipation Proclamation, Union Army's capturing of Vicksburg, Yazoo City, and Jackson, the First Reconstruction governments, the emergence of Jim Crow—and were placed alongside the births and movements of individual family members. Family history and personal history were part and parcel of the general history of African Americans. As the historian Pero Dagbovie accurately noted, "Bennett deemed black history a "living history," a series of ongoing interactions between various generations of blacks, living and deceased," and even unborn.<sup>4</sup> Bennett was intentional throughout his career about locating himself in relation to the vast and complex movement of humanity throughout world history.

### **Insert Family Photo and College Photos**

By the time Bennett left Jackson for Atlanta to attend Morehouse College, he carried the spirit of Lucy Reed who raised him. This was the inspiration he carried to college. Bennett was active in campus life; he played the saxophone in the college band, and pledged Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity. He was also a good student who demonstrated promise in his coursework. One essay written for professor Robert Hughes Brisbane<sup>5</sup> was entitled: "Karl Marx's Doctrines of the Class Struggle and the Economic Interpretation of History." Brisbane's comments seemed to anticipate Bennett's future endeavors and offered a bit of wisdom to the young scholar stating, "Your thinking and writing are somewhat mature—but you must be careful in your choice of words as well as in your reproduction of quotations."

Bennett received an A- on this assignment.<sup>6</sup> Bennett took his writing seriously. Obviously education was a core requirement of Lucy Reed's rearing of young minds. Upon graduating college in 1949, the classmate of the future "Apostle of Peace" took a job at the *Atlanta Daily World*, which during the time Bennett worked there (1949-1952) was the one of the only black daily newspapers in the country. The experience at the *Daily World* was sufficient training needed in order to land a job at *Jet*, his first introduction to the Johnson publishing empire. Bennett left the south in 1953, and headed north to Chicago where he would make his name.

## ***Ebony* and the Long Black Freedom Struggle: Civil Rights to Malcolm X, 1960-1965**

Bennett was named Associate Editor at *Ebony* in 1954, responsible for writing and recruiting content. Bennett's time at *Ebony* was unique. Starting out slowly, he later emerged as a trusted advisor of Johnson—he eventually co-wrote Johnson's autobiography. He used the prestige of one of America's most successful black entrepreneurs to teach and disseminate black history. The common association of Bennett with popularizing of history reduces his impact. His record shows that far from watering down the African American experience in the United States, he sought to forge a reparative, justice-centric, visionary account of past human endeavor and the stakes of social disequilibrium. For Bennett, history looks backwards and forwards simultaneously. A brief survey of *Ebony* issues over this period reveals several principle social concerns, including: African American struggles over rights, passionate interest in the decolonization of the African continent, the uncovering or rediscovering key contributors to Africana intellectual life, and measuring the growing discontent with the prospects of American democracy. On one hand, *Ebony* emphasized high-life aspiration, and on the other it cultivated a devoted and deeply engaged readership.

### A Bennett Timeline

Jan., 1960— Bennett's "What Sit-downs Mean to America"

Feb., 1960—Sekou Toure cover

Oct., 1960—"Nigeria Unshackled"

Feb., 1961— Bennett's Review Essay of William Leo Hansberry, acknowledging him as "world's best African authority"

\* Sept., 1961— Bennett's "Before the Mayflower" (seminal article that would develop into a book of the same title in 1962) With the publication of *Before the Mayflower* in 1962, Bennett's place in history was established. As he would say later, "the historian is historical and has an obligation to the history he writes and the history he inhabits."<sup>7</sup> One might say with some irony that Bennett's career is split into two halves: before and after *Before the Mayflower*.

Nov., 1961—Carl T. Rowan, “How the U.S. looks at Africa”  
 Feb., 1962—Albert Luthuli, “If I were Prime Minister” (South Africa)  
 March, 1962—coverage of AMSAC  
 Feb., 1963—Allan Morrison, “Dark Faces in the U.N.”  
 \* Nov., 1963—Coverage of the March on Washington, Bennett’s “Masses were  
 March Heroes” (not his former classmate King, but the masses were the heroes)  
 \* 1964 – Publishes *The Negro Mood*  
 July 1964— Bennett’s “Pioneers in Protest Series: Founders of the Negro Press”  
 Feb., 1965—Bennett Senior Editor, “Independence Comes to Zambia”  
 March 1965—Hansberry and E. Harper Johnson’s “Africa’s Golden Past”  
 March 1965—Bennett’s “Pioneers in Protest: WEB Du Bois”

However, Bennett’s career took off upon the publication of *Before the Mayflower* in 1962. Mainstream press outlets such as the *Chicago Tribune* favorably reviewed the book. Moreover the *Tribune* also carried book reviews written by Bennett while he served as associate editor at *Ebony*. Historian and activist John Henrik Clarke’s review essay for *Freedomways* in the fourth quarter of 1965 locates Bennett in relation to the Civil Rights upsurge carried out by “A new generation of restless black Americans.” For Clarke, Bennett was part of a new generation who, like himself, could be called participant historians. In other words these were historians who not only documented history, but were themselves poised and principled activists in their own regard. Clarke offered readers a glimpse into Bennett’s background before diving into a review of key sections of *Before the Mayflower*, and several of his seminal *Ebony* articles. Accompanying the piece was a dapper portrait of a 30-something Bennett drawn by the Baltimore-born illustrator and author Elton Fax. Clarke’s essay was followed in the issue by two poems written by Bennett, showcasing a multitalented intellect.

Clarke received *Before the Mayflower* glowingly, however it was his opinion that “Lerone Bennett’s best book is *The Negro Mood*,” published in 1964. Of this book, Clarke wrote, “If this were Lerone Bennett’s only book, his status as a social historian would still be secure.” Clarke took to this book in particular because it seemed to look unflinchingly at American racism, while not absolving African American middle class elitism (what was then called by Bennett and others “The Black Establishment”) for getting theirs at the expense of black workers and working class poor. Bennett persistently searched and uncovered new interpretive lenses that came from the deep well of Black experiences. He achieved a keenness and punctuality informed by history and intellectual (and biological) ancestry. As Clarke put it, “The dilemmas are old, but Mr. Bennett’s insight into it is new and vital.”<sup>8</sup>

## Insert Image From *Freedomways*

Clearly, Clarke saw in Bennett something of an “A-alike,” to borrow from the parlance of the Five Percenters among whom I studied as a youth. In other words, this is someone in whom you see yourself, or better yet, someone in whom you see God, a quality which should be also discernable in ones self. A mutual reflection of sorts, like looking into a mirror. In any case, such recognition was well deserved. Perhaps Clarke noticed that Bennett possessed the will and stamina to continue the path that he had set out on. Bennett himself certainly appears to possess a firm belief in his abilities. He had arrived becoming a reliable a thinker, commentator, and historian, but he was just getting started. As Clarke put it, even if his career had ended in 1965, he would have still left a considerable imprint. The careers of these two historians, activists, and public intellectuals would intersect and overlap well into the 1980s.

August 1965—“The White Problem in America,” special issue of *Ebony*, published as a book in 1966. Bennett’s introductory essay opens with a bang:

“There is no Negro problem in America. The problem of race in America, insofar as that problem is related to packets of melanin in men’s skins, is a white problem. And in order to solve that problem we must seek its source, not in the Negro but in the white American (in the process by which he was educated, in the needs and complexes he expresses through racism) and in the structure of the white community (in the power arrangements and the illicit uses of racism in the scramble for scarce values: power, prestige, income)...We mean that the white American created, *invented* the race problem and that his fears and frailties are responsible for the urgency of the problem.”

The issue included articles from Carl Rowan, Kenneth Clark, Martin Luther King, Jr., Hans Massaquoi, Era Bell Thompson, John O. Killens and James Baldwin, among others tackling all aspects of the white problem in America. So important was this issue, *Ebony* also published it in book form in 1966. This version also includes an opening statement signed by publisher John H. Johnson and states in part: “We...look at the white man today with the hope that our effort will tempt him to look at himself more thoroughly.”<sup>9</sup> This was a rarely expressed sentiment by the publishing mogul, whose personal attitudes towards social issues were largely shrouded by his capitalist pursuits. Bennett’s longtime colleague and editor Herbert Nipson explained Johnson’s enthusiasm and eagerness to continue the dialogue: “The reaction was quick and to our great delight, positive...College professors used it in classes. Ministers preached from it in their pulpits. And many whites who had never seen the magazine before bought it, read it and searched their souls. The sales climbed far above those of anything we had published and, strangely, the issue is still selling although it has already gone above a million.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1965, Bennett delivered one of the keynotes at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary gathering of ASNLH, assembled in New York City. This same year, owing in part to his wide range of contacts and the self-styled intellectual activism, Bennett drew admiration and critical praise from nearly every sector of black life, though not without some criticism. The great irony of Bennett's career, perhaps, is found in his relationship with *Ebony*, a magazine known for its dependency on advertising that peddled skin lighters, platform shoes, cigarettes, scotch, the latest styles, and promoted the wonder of wigs.<sup>11</sup> Bennett was bent on using the popular magazine of the black high life as a reputable platform to document and forecast black struggle, and he succeeded. Still, this did not mean he went unquestioned about what some perceived to be a contradiction. At the Second Annual Writers' Conference at Fisk in April, 1967, a conference attendee put the question squarely to Bennett, and according to Hoyt Fuller, his counterpart at the *Negro Digest/Black World*, Bennett's answer—that Johnson's business approach met a wide range of black social desires and his bottom line—could not assuage the questioner.<sup>12</sup> This conference, organized by John O. Killens, then a literature professor at Fisk, would be a critical gathering in the evolution of Black Arts literature. In addition to Bennett, Killens and Fuller, speakers included Margaret Danner, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ron Milner, Amiri Baraka, and John Henrik Clarke.

### **Black Writer/Artists at Fisk Gathering**

Without question, *Ebony* was a critical platform for Bennett. In the front matter of every book he published for JPC, he earnestly thanked Johnson for allowing him the massive platform, time, and resources to research and write. He could reach larger audiences than professors at exclusive colleges or universities, but he could also keep relationships with those institutions that had no effect on his work. *Ebony* thus emerges as a premier, if unlikely, site of black cultural knowledge production. In this sense *Ebony* was a different kind of public institution. Bennett certainly benefitted from this unique arrangement and never took it for granted. Not only could he be in the thick of key debates as sage and journalist and historian, but also *Ebony's* book publishing gave him a direct line to the national book networks. Among their many publishing pursuits, Bennett and Johnson had plans for an *Ebony Encyclopedia*, which the staff writers at *Ebony* would each compose a section largely extensions of pieces they'd already published in the magazine. Another of Bennett's colleagues, Phyl Garland wrote that this was an ambitious project but one that she could not pass up, even though the proposed deadline was a little tight.<sup>13</sup>

Bennett's approach to publishing was methodical and systematic. Lectures and speeches became articles, articles became books, or anthologies. *Ebony* therefore was unparalleled in its disruption of American consumer trends and U.S. based intellectual work. Bennett had the best of both worlds in terms of institutional credibility among all sectors of the black community. Bennett's work ethic and standards of excellence had earned the trust of John H. Johnson. The two carved out what was an enviable relationship. Bennett had access to the publishing mogul, and Johnson needed Bennett's intellectual heft to bolster the magazine's reputation and commitment to sincere and earnest coverage of black life beyond the simple demands of capitalist advertising and an aspiring black middle class's dogged pursuit of the high life.

But Johnson was no fool. And although he refused to wear his politics on his sleeve, Bennett viewed Johnson as a sincere and chief advocate of black life. Effectively, Bennett was the bridge between across a rather full spectrum that stretched from petty capitalist, black bourgeoisie, churchgoing, assimilationist community, to grassroots militants and middle- and working class intellectuals with nationalist proclivities, to full expressions of black elite aspiration. No matter the segments of the black community and their ideological shadings or capitalist accouterments, in Bennett's view, their fates were linked, and moreover, they all had to answer the call of history and the demand of time.

### ***Ebony* and the Long Black Freedom Struggle: From Malcolm to Black Studies, 1965-1980**

*Ebony* coverage of Malcolm X up to and after his assassination is perhaps telling of the magazine's overall view towards Black Nationalism, even as it traded in its own form or brand, if you will, of black nationalism. As Malcolm burst onto the national stage, he received steady stream of coverage in *Ebony*. These were not all feature pieces but it was not as if the periodical was averse from even mentioning his name on its pages, as was the case, for different reasons for the black left journal *Freedomways*. Allan Morrison's *Ebony* article "Who killed Malcolm X?" shows the magazine was sympathetic towards Malcolm as a galvanizer of black discontent, but as an institution was wholly committed to the March on Washington's decided position of protest and pressuring the federal government for specific protections. Although Bennett himself was deeply moved by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech at the historic gathering, it was the communities of black folk who had traveled to Washington demanding their rights who emerged as movement heroes.

*Ebony* coverage of Malcolm could be found up to and long after his death either in full-length articles or referenced by an author or interviewee. A brief list of articles in this regard includes: "Mystery of Malcolm X" (September 1964); letters to the editor (Nov., 1964); "Violence versus Non-violence" (April 1965) accompanying pictures of a slain Malcolm; the aforementioned Allan Morrison's "Who Killed Malcolm X?" (Oct. 1965); Bennett's "Stokely Carmichael Architect of Black Power (Sept. 1966); David Llorens' "Black Separatism in Perspective" (Sept. 1968); arguably the crowning moment of this coverage was Betty Shabazz's article "The Legacy of My Husband, Malcolm X" (June 1969); and Bennett's "Of Time, Space, and Revolution" (Aug., 1969) which kicks off the entire issue themed "The Black Revolution."

Bennett (b. 1928) was Malcolm's (b. 1925) peer though three years older and he therefore would not have necessarily been among Malcolm's devotees, who were typically younger than he was and most certainly were Muslims, which Bennett was not. Perhaps Bennett didn't necessarily look favorably at Malcolm's public ridicule of his fellow Morehouse Man.

Bennett, however, could not mistake or overlook Malcolm's energy, poise, and consistent demand for reparative justice. Nor could have Bennett ignored Malcolm's appeal amongst younger activists and intellectuals who had grown tired of pressuring the U.S. government while they continued to be killed, threatened, and brutalized in almost all areas of their lives. Bennett fully understood Malcolm even if he was not a follower.

#### Another Bennett Timeline

1967 – Fisk Conference

June 1969 – Betty Shabazz *Ebony* Cover and essay

1972—Bennett and Johnson host Black Arts and Letters conference at *Ebony* HQ in Chicago.

1972—Bennett/JPC publishes *The Challenge of Blackness*

1974—listed as U.S. delegate 6-PAC

August 1976—Africa: Continent of the Future (special issue)

Sept., 1980—Du Bois Papers dedication

Cornell Africana Conference

*Freedomways* Tribute to Charles White

Bennett maintained a wide number of contacts and commitments throughout his career. In 1969, while still an editor and writer at *Ebony*, at the height of his influence at that periodical Nathan Hare invited Bennett to serve as a contributing editor at *The Black Scholar*. Bennett characteristically was enthusiastic about his acceptance.<sup>14</sup> In this same period Julian Bond reached out to Bennett asking him to consider an idea for a journal on black politics that would focus solely on policy and black electoral concerns. Though the political, social, and educational debates were captured on the pages of *Black World* and *The Black Scholar*, Bond thought there was space for one more publishing outlet focused on black political fortunes in the U.S. Later, James Turner sought Bennett's advice for the establishment of bachelor's and master's degree programs in African American studies at Cornell. Subsequently, Bennett would play a pivotal role in providing a historical basis for Africana Studies.<sup>15</sup>

By any measure, he kept a seriously thick speaking itinerary and maintained a publishing pace that surpassed many of his peers. Bennett was a highly sought after speaker, attending and headlining gatherings at churches and church-related events and schools and colleges at all levels. He spoke at local YMCA's, at academic bodies (ASNLH) and professional organizations (National Association of Black Journalists), all branches of NAACP, and at nearly all HBCUs. He went where the people were, garnering respect from all corners of the black community: lay people, workers, religious communities, fraternities and sororities, academics, activists, artists, and many others. He was also beloved by professional and lay historians—in fact Bennett's work helped to collapse the distinction between these two designations. Bennett regularly received letters from folk who “could not attend college,” as one letter to the editor described, and came to rely on *Ebony* and particularly Bennett's strategic effort to mainstream African American history was especially well received.

Black communities besieged by what is now called the carceral state also sought Bennett's help. A letter dated Sept 24, 1971, from a Berkeley, California couple introduced themselves then made a request: "We are writing on behalf of Brother Ruchell Cinque Magee...being tried with sis. Angela Davis following the Marin County rebellion." The letter asked if Ruchell could be allowed space in the increasingly important pages of *Ebony* to explain his case. Another letter dated January 3, 1971 from a prisoner in a New York state prison concerned Bennett's writing on black cowboys and introduced Bennett to writing of his own from behind the walls, remarking proudly: "not only are my books unpredictable. But they deal with the "people's revolutionary aspirations of yesterday, today, and the sunrise of tomorrow." An inmate in SCI Atmore in Alabama wrote to the president of Morehouse, Hugh M. Gloster, requesting the school send him a copy of *Before the Mayflower*. Gloster sent the letter to Bennett, asked him to honor the request and guaranteed he would cover the expense.<sup>16</sup> Prisoners and prisoners' organizations such as the Black Berets of America (SCI Huntington, Pennsylvania) reached out to Bennett for personal and institutional support. This group, for one thought of itself as a defense organization on behalf of the black poor in terms that would be attractive to Bennett: "Not champions of some of the people some of the time but champions of all of the people all of the time."

Schoolteachers regularly sought Bennett's advice during the long *Ebony* years. One teacher wrote of his fondness for Bennett's work, saying: "I am convinced that your concern for America, our children, and the search for black identity is genuine..."<sup>17</sup> This activity is evidence that Bennett was viewed by many as a trusted advisor and advocate; a reliable resource and most importantly as evidenced by his writings, he was someone in solidarity with peoples' causes for justice. In 1971, Bennett was asked by Baraka to serve on the National advisory Board of the short-lived African Free School, one of Baraka's efforts to institutionalize cultural nationalism and instill self-pride through education.<sup>18</sup> In 1972, John O. Killens, Bennett, and Johnson hosted a conference to "Assess the state of Black Arts and Letters in the United States," demonstrating a pivotal role *Ebony* played in explicitly advancing Black Arts activity.

By the end of the 1970s, as African Americans were still locked in a persistent struggle for rights, recognition, and political and institutional visibility, Black Studies emerged as a site on which many of these issues cohere. Two of the signature moments of a long and acclaimed career was Bennett's invitation to deliver the keynote lecture for the dedication of the W.E.B. Du Bois papers at the University of Massachusetts in the Fall of 1980, on September 20<sup>th</sup> and his presentation at the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Africana Studies at Cornell the following week. These two events offer great insights into Bennett's life's work. "I have lived within the gravitational field of Dr. Du Bois' genius, and it is an enormous honor for me to salute him here in Massachusetts," he began, and later continued, saying that "when historians come a hundred years from today to set down the names of men in our times who served freedom and peace and truth, the name of W.E.B. Du Bois will be at or near the top."

In many ways, compared with his writings in *Ebony*, this speech gives a clear sense of Bennett's philosophy of history, his philosophy of teaching and his philosophy of life. The original version of the speech was entitled "A Fine and Finished Thing: Homage to W.E.B. Du Bois."<sup>19</sup> Du Bois, said Bennett, was a "fighter and a hunter of truths" who "left here fighting poverty, injustice, economic inequities, stupidity and greed." Bennett believed Du Bois to have left the inheritors of his legacy at least four challenges. The first was the challenge of the new land and the production of democracy on these lands, which he said was "something that has never been tried in the United States of America: political democracy, economic democracy, and cultural democracy." The second challenge in Bennett's view concerned the purpose of scholarship and intellectual productivity. This challenge was captured by several questions: "What's the meaning of scholarship? Can it address itself to the problems of bread and peace and racism and militarism? Can it serve the poor and the lowly? Or is it destined to go on forever serving the rich, white, and powerful?"

The third challenge Bennett discerned from Du Bois' body of work concerned a somewhat abstract idea of a "new world order." This particular challenge concerned "opening of doors of the world and the petals of our minds to Africa and Asia and the First (not Third) world. This ultimately meant that democratic citizenship must commit itself to a world without war; a world without militarism and racism; a world in which the resources of this earth are distributed fairly and equally among all the peoples of the earth." Then, Bennett turns to pull a quote from Du Bois' WWII era seminal text, *Color and Democracy*: "Most of the peoples of the world are colored people. A belief in humanity is a belief in colored people." This statement lent itself naturally to what Bennett believed Du Bois' ultimate challenge, and that was the challenge of creating a New Humanity.<sup>20</sup> Du Bois continued to be a reference point for Bennett throughout his career. In his *Ebony* article "What is Black Beauty?" he opens with an epigraph from "The Damnation of Women" from Du Bois's classic 1920 text, *Darkwater* and describes Du Bois as "probably the most astute and the most eloquent connoisseur of Black beauty."<sup>21</sup>

Merely a week after anointing the archives of the preeminent Du Bois, Bennett was in Ithaca as part of the ten-year anniversary of the founding of Africana Studies at Cornell. There he shared panels and stages with expert thinkers whose task it was to assess where Africana Studies had emerged from and to point in the direction of its success and expansion into the subsequent decades. Other presenters included John Henrik Clarke, Shirley Weber, Stephen Henderson, Mike Thelwell, Ronald Walters and, of course, James Turner who headed up the proceedings as host. Bennett and Clarke, as senior historians in attendance, along with Vincent Harding and Robert Harris, were viewed as indispensable to the formation of Africana Studies. Africana Studies organizers deemed historians crucial to not only the development of the field, but the starting point, its genesis. It is no coincidence then that when selections from the proceedings were collected into an anthology, Bennett and Clarke's presentations were the first two—in that exact order.<sup>22</sup>

Bennett's essay entitled "Listen to the Blood: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Meaning of Black History" in many ways built on the analytical and philosophical praise offered Du Bois while at the University of Massachusetts dedication of Du Bois's papers. This essay is critical for a deeper understanding of Bennett's influences and approach. As he had done earlier, he opened the essay in conversation with a personal favorite of Du Bois's work, *The Gift of Black Folk*. Early on however, Bennett acknowledges other seminal historians who had something to teach African American communities and Africana historians in particular. If Africana historians were to reach their greatest impact and the fullest maturity of their ideas they would need to "go outside the boundaries of America," which he discovered when he "started thinking about meaning and history" in preparation and while working on *Before the Mayflower* and long after. He then continued "And it is my belief, for what it is worth, that if Black historiography wants to widen its boundaries, it will have to go to school with [French Sociologist] Raymond Aron (1905-1983), [French Philosopher] Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), C.L.R. James, Jean Paul Sartre, E.P. Thompson, and of course, the Black masses."<sup>23</sup> Bennett was a student of global history, and black people's extensive and expansive place in the making of the modern world. As historian Robin D.G. Kelley has noted, Black historians did not have the luxury of an exclusively national focus in their work. Black history's vision has always been a global one.<sup>24</sup>

### **Insert image from Cornell Conference**

Bennett is often marginalized as if he was not in conversation with professional, i.e. trained historians, as if there was no methodology, no systematic or deliberate approach in his work, that by virtue of his love for black life, that he was a historian, but only a particular kind of historian. Essentially, the thinking suggests that what he was doing was celebration, not history. That he was not burdened with testing out his own views and assumptions ("Black historiography, my own works included, is still organized around a "Jacob's Ladder" reading, that it posits linear progress toward a largely undefined goal," "Listen to the Blood," pg. 14), or worse that black historians were not burdened with such matters of meaning, deliberation, and deep reflection. The speech at Cornell shatters that view of Bennett. It shows him not only conversant with a range of historians, but shows the training, facility, and esteem with which he accepted the historian's purpose and function.

This speech is important as it is one of the few places where Bennett is able to elaborate his approach to history, whose work he read, who had an impact on his thinking about history and the relationship between history, meaning, and progress. In other words, Bennett sought to know not just facts, but the meaning of those facts, and those facts in the production of "an act of faith in one kind of future rather than another."<sup>25</sup>

Black history was organized around what he called “two germ cells: the concept of the debt and the doctrine of challenge,” by which he underscored his departure from the narrow view that Black history presents a challenge to American civilization. From Bennett’s view, “Black history is first and foremost a challenge to Black people,” or those he termed the “Insider Outsiders”<sup>26</sup> elsewhere he called African Americans the “essential inessentials.”<sup>27</sup>

Typically, in ordering his thoughts and his propositions, he divvied them up into five categories or challenges, much as he’d done in his Du Bois dedication. In the Cornell speech Bennett laid the future of Black historiography out in the following manner, characteristically plain, but not at all simple:

- I. “Black history is history and must be interpreted historically against the unfolding stream of world history.”
- II. “Black history is real...” it is “the ground of our being...” and that “history is to us what water is to fish”
- III. “Black history is a totality in the process of becoming. It is the sum total of the micro- and macro-projects of *all* Black people”
- IV. “Black history is a real moment in the history of two larger and contradictory histories—the history of the American people, an entity in the Western world, and the history of Africans and other peoples of color, who are by definition outsiders in the Western world.”
- V. “Black people have a mission, a world-historical mission, by virtue of their historical situation.”<sup>28</sup>

Here was a preeminent historian, an architect of the historical knowledge at the heart of Africana Studies assisting the discipline in framing its task on the dawn of the Reagan era, and the general white backlash to the dramatic protests and limited achievements of the Civil Rights era. African American history’s institutionalization and Africana Studies development within the academy came to represent a disruption of the American status quo of knowledge production. Bennett, and others represent the merging of these two intellectually insurgent historical forces, striking at the very meaning of western society. As he wrote, “For it is only through us that the dreams of the past can be fulfilled. It is only through us that the first slave can reach the finish line.”<sup>29</sup>

Bennett was a catalytic figure for Black/Africana Studies, and an early architect. Coordinators and architects of black scholarship all relied on the writing, speeches, and thinking of the *Ebony* editor. His reputation as a keen editor with his eyes and ears open to the directions of hundreds of local black communities facilitated his crafted reputation as a trusted scholar. Each vocation reinforced the other such that the two were inseparable. In the role of journalist Bennett kept the pulse of protest and self-assertion, as a historian he could historicize where all the impulses of agitation first emerged.

The roots of protest were as if not more important than the present day outbreak of rebellion. Bennett regularly reminded readers and colleagues that the protests and demands and unrest of the 1960s and 70s did not emerge absent history. If one wanted to know why Watts happened or Harlem or Detroit, all they needed to do was read the history of black life in those cities decades before the tumultuous 1960s.

Bennett was consistently at work on essays, books, anthologies, speeches, many of which carried on themes in other of his writings, but were often written from scratch. It is easy to glean a sense of Bennett's consistency of thought, the creativity he was able to embed in his telling of history, and his skillful building of narrative. As he said in one of his prefaces his work was scholarly but not solely for scholars, i.e. professional historians of the academy. Yet he garnered the respect and admiration of many, including John Hope Franklin and Nell Painter.

What was Bennett's ideological bent? Aside from his early interest in the economic history of Karl Marx's works while a young man, what drove Bennett's thinking about history, about black people in American society? Though obviously a defender of civil rights expansion and black social excellence he was not a die-hard integrationist. He possessed a militant, defiant stance towards history and the progress narrative of triumphalism often used to describe the black experience. He was a principled investigator of history, but one who believed history to be a weapon against social oppression and ostracization. He wanted his words to do something in the world. In an essay draft on reparations Bennett offered a critique of the progress narrative in the telling of African American experience:

But the reforms of the fifties and sixties, important as they were, did not go to the heart of the essentially colonial relationship between the Black and white communities of America. By that time, moreover, the colonial idea had become so deeply imbedded in institutional practices not directly linked to race that the ending of legal segregation had little immediate impact on the functioning of the system. As a result, the *Black Colony of America* presents today the paradoxical picture of a rapidly growing army of unemployed and underemployed workers.<sup>30</sup>

Bennett asked readers to “understand the paradox of the essential inessentials” or “the paradox of that long line of Black men and women, the Du Sables<sup>31</sup>, the Kings, the Washingtons, the Thurgood Marshalls, the Ida B. Wellses, who were forced by history to redeem values their oppressors proclaimed and profaned in their own midst.” Going further, he wrote,

“History—not race—made African Americans guardians and guarantors of the American Dream...the real sanctuary of that Dream in the beginning was in the slave quarters, not in Monticello or Mount Vernon...It is one of the supreme paradoxes of our history that the only people who really believed the Dream with no ifs, ands, or butts were the only people almost totally excluded from its benediction.”

In other words, freedom had to be freed from the abstraction, and made concrete in the lives of the enslaved.<sup>32</sup>

There is clearly a different tone to his lectures and speeches than the measured pronouncements in his written work. In speeches he maintained a strident posture, leaving little doubt that his purpose, his calling as it were, was to rescue black life from the dustbins of history. He understood that racism was not simply interpersonal but succeeded in institutional structures that impeded broad black mobility. In this regard he is a blend of Du Bois and Woodson, both of whom he greatly admired.

## **Conclusion: An Endowed Intellectual-Activism**

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Bennett remained active. On April 26, 2000, Bennett testified in front of the “Joint Hearing of the Finance and Human Relations Committees of the Chicago City Council on Reparations for African-American Slaves and Their Descendants.” Needless to say, the sage historian took full advantage of the opportunity to underscore the unpaid debt long past due. Interestingly, atop the typed speech, in Bennett’s cursive handwriting are the words, “Held in Trust by History.”<sup>33</sup> It was as if Bennett was reminding himself of the duty to once again shine due light on the evidence and make plain the case. Or was the inscription an affirmation, a prayer of sorts, a talisman summoned to govern the effectiveness of his testimony, insuring not only the accurate relation of facts, but protection against foreclosed minds and hearts?

Based on the questions that I began this essay with, *what now are we to do with this man of history?* We could argue that like W.E.B. Du Bois his work is expansive and interdisciplinary yet rooted in history. A case can be made that in addition to intellectual activism and social history that Bennett is also a historian of race, i.e. *the idea*, the social construction of race, which he viewed as “The White Problem in America” and by extension the problem of the modern world. We have evidenced that Bennett was a towering architect of the institutionalization of African American history and Africana Studies. That he helped pioneer “A People’s History” before the term was in common use. Other observations point to a continuation of the reparative dimension of Africana Historiography. We might also state that Bennett was a conscientious observer, or what I like to call an intellectual co-conspirator, though he would likely shun that appellation. Moreover, that like Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson, he showed a commitment to “living history” and modeled a kind of public intellectualism that was both strident and sensitive. His time at *Ebony* suggests that a popular media platform could just as easily become a classroom. Importantly, we can conclude that History was not just a discipline, not merely a scientific, cold, process for Bennett. History had a feeling. For Bennett, History was obligation, memory, and art.

Finally, Bennett worked to do good work, not to be respected individually or liked personally though his work is a testament to his open personality and general likability, but he was not motivated by that. He was moved by the opportunity, calling, and challenge of doing good work on behalf of a people's struggle. Lerone Bennett, Jr. no longer needs an "All Points Bulletin/Missing Persons Report," he has been here the whole time.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> "Author Lerone Bennett found safe after being reported missing," CBS-Chicago local, online. December 11, 2016; viewed on December 25, 2016. <http://chicago.cbslocal.com/2016/12/11/author-lerone-bennett-found-safe-after-being-reported-missing/>

<sup>2</sup> John Henrik Clarke, "Lerone Bennett: Social Historian," *Freedomways* (Fall 1965, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter): 481-494; Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *African American History Reconsidered* (Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 39-41. Dagbovie's research into Bennett's work is also found in his "History as a Core Subject Area in African American Studies: Self-Taught and Self-Proclaimed Historians, 1960s-1980s," *The Journal of Black Studies*, 37, No. 5 (May, 2007): 602-629.

<sup>3</sup> Lerone Bennett Papers, Box 1, "The Reed/Johnson Family," filed under "SP/Reed," Emory University, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library. Hereafter "Bennett Papers."

<sup>4</sup> Dagbovie, 41.

<sup>5</sup> See Brisbane Obituary, *NY Times*, Feb. 9, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett Papers, Box 4, filed under "college and early/Ben articles."

<sup>7</sup> Bennett, "Listen to the Blood: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Meaning of Black History," presented at the Africana Studies and Research Center's 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Cornell University. James E. Turner, ed., *The Next Decade: Theoretical and Research Issues in Africana Studies* (Ithaca: Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell University), 1-29.

<sup>8</sup> Clarke, "Bennett: Social Historian," 481-494.

<sup>9</sup> John H. Johnson, "Publisher's Statement," *White Problem*, v.

<sup>10</sup> Herbert Nipson, "Editor's Preface," *White Problem*, vii.

<sup>11</sup> For more on *Ebony's* aesthetic politics, see Tanisha Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015), 20-27.

<sup>12</sup> "Second Annual Writers' Confab at Fisk," *Negro Digest* (July 1967): 90-93.

<sup>13</sup> Bennett Papers, Box 4, filed under "Ebony Encyclopedia;" also see Phyllis Garland Obit in *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Nov. 10, 2006, online.

<sup>14</sup> Bennett Papers, filed under "N.B. Letters", Box 1.

<sup>15</sup> N.B. only page 2 of Turner's letter is in the file.

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- <sup>16</sup> Bennett Papers, letter dated Dec. 30, 1968, filed under “letters and speeches 60-68.”
- <sup>17</sup> Bennett Papers, letter undated, filed under “letters and speeches 60-68.”
- <sup>18</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka to Lerone Bennett, letter dated August 25, 1971, Bennett Papers, Box 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Bennett Papers, Box 4, filed under “Du Bois.”
- <sup>20</sup> Bennett Papers, Box 4, filed under “Du Bois.”
- <sup>21</sup> See *Ebony*, Nov. 1980, p. 160.
- <sup>22</sup> James E. Turner, ed., *The Next Decade: Theoretical and Research Issues in Africana Studies* (Ithaca: Cornell University, Africana Studies and Research Center, 1984).
- <sup>23</sup> Bennett, “Listen to the Blood,” 2. See also, Jonathan Fenderson and Candace Katungi, “Committed to Institution-Building: James Turner and the History of Africana Studies at Cornell University, An Interview,” *Journal of African American Studies* (2011).
- <sup>24</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, “But a Local Phase of a Global Problem: Black History’s Global Vision, 1883-1950,” *Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, No. 3, The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History: A Special Issue (Dec., 1999): 1045-1077.
- <sup>25</sup> Bennett quoting The Committee on Historiography of the Social Science Research Council, in “Listen to the Blood,” 6.
- <sup>26</sup> Bennett, “Listen to the Blood,” 16.
- <sup>27</sup> Bennett Papers, Box 5 filed under “Reparations.”
- <sup>28</sup> Bennett, “Listen to the Blood,” 18-23.
- <sup>29</sup> Bennett, “Listen to the Blood,” 25-26.
- <sup>30</sup> Bennett Papers, Box 5 filed under “Reparations.” Emphasis added.
- <sup>31</sup> See, *Ebony*, Dec 1963.
- <sup>32</sup> Bennett Papers, Box 5 filed under “Reparations.”
- <sup>33</sup> Bennett Papers, Box 5, filed under “Reparations.”