

First Draft

Status of Africana Studies in the U.S.

by

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According to Robert L. Harris, Jr., "Africana studies" is the multidisciplinary analysis of the lives and thought of people of African ancestry on the African continent and throughout the world. It embraces Africa, Afro-America, and the Caribbean, but does not confine itself to those three geographical areas. Africana studies examines people of African ancestry wherever they may be found--for example, in Central and South America, Asia, and the Pacific Islands. Its primary means of organization are racial and cultural. Many of the themes of Africana studies are derived from the historical position of African peoples in relation to Western societies: emancipation, self-determination, liberation, and socioeconomic political development."¹ While the past organization of Black Studies was dominated by race and culture paradigms, new analytical factors such as gender and region, and different comparative methodologies command increased attention.

Even today, however, scholars continue to wrestle with the distinction between the idea of Africana Studies and the historical movement of Black Studies. In their text, Introduction to Afro-American Studies (p. 14-15), Abdul Alkalimat and Associates define Black Studies by contrasting it with traditional or "mainstream" disciplines. They hold that, "In general, the mainstream disciplines have focused on the black experience by emphasizing race relations from the point of view of the interests of white people. They have lacked the theoretical perspective that is dynamic and is focused on the politics of social change. The mainstream disciplines thus were unprepared to deal with both the intellectual concerns of black people and the political actions of the masses of black people."

In 1969, the chair of the Black Studies Department at the University of Pittsburgh, Jack L. Daniel, maintained in another definition that "Black Studies constitutes an attempt to understand the human experience using Black experience as both a focal point and a platform from which to preview...Black Studies is not a matter of empirical versus descriptive, historical, and intuitive, nor is Black Studies a matter of politics and economics versus culture and consciousness. Black Studies in this sense is not a matter of "versus," and at a minimum Black Studies is concerned with the integration of these "approaches."² Similarly, Black Studies is concerned with the integration of the objective and subjective, the material and the spiritual, or the visible and the invisible...Black Studies is for all human beings.

In 1969, Nathan Hare and Jimmy Garret at San Francisco State organized the first Black Studies program in the country. Hare offered the following assurances as to the purpose of Black Studies, "The main motivation of Black Studies is to entice black students (conditioned to exclusion) to greater involvement in the educational process. Black Studies is, above all, a pedagogical device." (Hare quoted in Sims, p. 9) His view was consistent with those of the students whose demands were intended to make Black Studies a pedagogical instrument. The twin pillars of student demands called for the teaching of black history and the hiring of black faculty. Out of this oppositional black consciousness emerged a two-decades long critique of institutional racism in higher education. As one scholar has described the impetus, "Black college students recognized the urgent necessity for Black Studies in the nation's higher education institutions as one way to make schools more understanding of diversity. These students had marched in Mississippi, been spat upon in Alabama, survived attacks in the inner cities of Chicago, Detroit and Newark, and they were ready to revamp higher education and rid it of its racist policies. One way to do this was to insist on intellectual treatment of the black American experience."³

In 1987, the Ford Foundation asked me to visit a select number of Black or Africana Studies programs, departments, centers, and institutions to prepare a report that would help to determine and direct the nature and extent of foundation involvement over the next few years. After I completed the project, the Foundation decided to publish in essay format the

report's introduction, appropriately edited to protect the identities of those interviewed. The report became a basis for distribution of over three million dollars in grant monies in the ensuing years. The report addressed in particular one essential question. Inasmuch as sufficient time has passed since the modern incarnation of Africana Studies as an intellectual enterprise, what are we to make of its accomplishments, contributions, and shortcomings? In other words, this presentation seeks to reflect on past successes and future directions in Africana Studies with particular focus on the issue of gender and the entrenchment of comparative perspectives and methodologies.

The pioneering generation of Black Studies scholars who entered the academy in the post Civil Rights Movement era have amassed clearly impressive publishing records. The production and dissemination of new knowledge constitutes the most notable success of the first stage of the modern Black Studies movement in the United States. The intellectual challenge to traditional conceptions of race left no discipline untouched. Suffice it to say that virtually every established social science and humanities discipline in the United States academy has had to incorporate fresh interpretations and perspectives, innovative methodologies, new sources, and probing questions that characterize the best of traditional Black Studies scholarship. The previously muted voices and actions of slaves, agricultural workers, urban migrants, industrial laborers, writers, artists, musicians, reformists, radicals, and nationationalists have found new vigor. History is a representative example of the methodological

and interpretative transformations that rocked the academy in the past twenty years.

In slavery, emancipations and urbanization studies, historians have broken much new ground by placing black people themselves at the center of their investigations and discussions. Thus the shift of emphasis, perspective, and angle of vision remains a potent legacy of the modern Black Studies movement that has also helped to frame current debates on multiculturalism, diversity, and Afrocentrism. The innovative scholarship on slave communities, slave religion, slave health, and slave families not only provided more factual data but deepened our appreciation of non-traditional sources. We know, thanks to the new social history methodologies and to reclamation black history, that even the most oppressed and downtrodden people who did not leave manuscript collections, write diaries, or build monuments, nevertheless created and sustained significant institutions, developed an oppositional consciousness while fashioning a remarkably resilient culture reflected in song, folklores, dance, food and in quilts. Their essential humanistic values and belief in the sanctity of life and their world views grounded largely upon a theology of hope ~~and~~ helped to ensure the survival of African Americans in slavery and in freedom. It is important to underscore that the centering of black people in the history of the United States concomitantly forced serious consideration of the concept of agency. As black people moved from being perceived as total victims we began to see with fresh insight how they became agents for social change and social justice.

It is well to remember that members of other excluded or distorted minority, or emerging majority groups, and women took cues from the Black Studies movement and made their own demands for curriculum revision and faculty diversification. Thus on the heels of, or in some instances, contemporaneously, Ethnic Studies and Women Studies appeared on college and university campuses. On one point there exists consensus. Most Black Studies scholars agree that the field is distinguished from other academic endeavors because of the tension between theory and practice. In other words, Black Studies has always responded to the needs of two masters, the academy on the one hand, and the black community on the other. Due to the political underpinnings surrounding the birth of the field and a persistent, though often muted and intangible academic racism, however, some Black Studies scholars nurture an oppositional consciousness to the very mainstream institutions that employ them, and from the more established disciplines in which they received their graduate training. Within recent times the debates surrounding Afrocentricity has illuminated the multiple tensions plaguing Africana Studies.

In the Ford Foundation report in 1987, I concluded that Black or Africana Studies was alive and well and was indeed flourishing at those institutions that boasted a critical representation of academically respected, highly visible scholars. Five years ago, it was an easy task for me to "roll call" the names and titles of the books authored by historians James D. Anderson, Thomas Holt, Barbara Fields, Nell Irvin Painter, Earl Lewis, John Blassingame, Leslie Owens, Joe Trotter, Albert Raboteau and the late Nathan I.

Huggins. Among the scholars of African American literature the stellar roster included Houston Baker, Henry Louis Gates, Nellie McKay, Arnold Rampersad, Deborah McDowell, Michael Awkward, Valerie Smith, Mary Helen Washington, Hazel Carby, and Barbara Christian. Similarly the acknowledged leaders among black sociologists and psychologists included Aldon D. Morris, William Julius Wilson, Elijah Anderson, Lois Benjamin, William Cross, Bart Landry, and Walter Allen. New works by anthropologist Joseph Holloway reopens the Africanism or African survival discussions that were so heated a generation ago. Neither time nor space permit the listing of all the scholars of African descent who have enriched intellectual discourse and through their works have challenged old paradigms that diminished, distorted and dismissed the meaning and essence of black thought, culture, and history.

In spite of the nuanced contributions of the first generations of Black Studies scholars, there remains two extant needs. There is the critical need to engender black history in particular and Black Studies in general. The engendering of Black Studies does not mean that we add black women and stir; but rather I am calling for the fundamental re-conceptualization of American history and society that fully embraces, indeed pivots on the experiences, exploitation, and agency of black women. The best way to undertake the engendering process is to revise curriculum in Black Studies and to encourage and support research efforts of scholars interested in and committed to eliminating racist and sexist exclusion in academic discourse and texts.

The coming generation of Africana Studies scholarship must focus more sharply on black women, both as subject and as agents. As I see it, the engendering of the entire Black Studies enterprise is critical to the future vitality and survival of Black Studies and Black scholars. The future of African American Studies rests upon those Black Studies scholars, black and white, who will join in the launching of sophisticated explorations into and those who are already engaged in audacious confrontations with the tensions, concerns, and issues arising out of the intersection of race, gender, and class oppression.

The voice and experiences of the black women too often remains mute, unexamined precisely because they stand at the intersection of race, class, and gender. For example, in most of the studies, both the slaves and the masters were male or at least discussed in masculinist terminology. Few questioned this construction of the most transformative experience Africans in the Diaspora endured. As the silence is shattered we must ask: Were not black women captured and enslaved on the West Coast of Africa? Did not black women suffer the Middle Passage and participate in the often futile rebellions on board the slave ships? Did not black women bear the responsibility of reproducing the entire slave labor force after 1808 and the close of the African slave trade?

From the perspective of black women's history that places her securely at the intersections of class, race, and gender, all slavery studies and labor studies of the late 19th and 20th centuries, must be re-examined and rewritten. To study black

women is to raise basic questions about the fundamental power relations that shape life in the African diaspora. The theoretical work of Patricia Hill Collins is most critical at this juncture. Because of their unique status as blacks and as women, the black woman occupies the eclipses between Black Studies scholarship on the one hand, and women's studies scholarship on the other. By definition, any discussion of black studies scholarship and scholars necessarily requires comment on the nature of academic racism or from the black women scholar's perspective, the combination of academic racism and sexism.

To date the Schomburg Library-Oxford Press collaboration under the leadership of Henry Louis Gates stands as the only effort to publish the creative writings of dozens of 19th century black women. The only large scale, federally funded effort to collect and preserve the primary documents pertaining to the lives of community black women was the project that I launched, that Bob Harris mentioned, entitled, "Black Women in the Middle West." I would like to pause for a moment and describe for you the "Black Women in the Middle West Project" or rather than describe it to you, I would like to tell you what I learned from working with 1,500 black women in the Middle West from all walks of life, who helped me over a period of five years to do this reclamation work.

Three motives fueled the project. First and perhaps foremost was the urgent desire of black community women to have their stories told, to lift the veil and to shatter the silence. Moreover, these women recognized the power imbedded in history. Only an accurate and inclusive history, they reasoned, one which

gave to them a distinct historical identity as black women, could combat the ignorance about and misrepresentation of their actual contributions to the development of midwestern communities, to the survival of families and the creation of institutions. Third, these women believed that the true lessons of the past and the dynamics of the on-going struggle against racial and sexual oppression needed the record of their lives and deeds. A black woman's history archive would not only provide inspiration for self actualization but ~~to~~ serve as strategic models for present and future generations of African Americans. In other words, they acted out of a sense of urgency to reclaim a past for themselves in order that the future could be rewritten by their children and grandchildren.

Any act of reclamation is an implicit indictment or rejection of the status quo. The women on the Black Women in the Middle West project rejected all prevailing notions concerning the nature of history and their worth as historical agents. They evidenced little patience with those writers and scholars who argued that black women were included in women's history and black history and therefore did not need a separate and distinct history. Nor did it matter to them that many continue to insist that history should be a chronicle of universal ideas, and illustrious thinkers, or that it should only recount great accomplishment and concentrate on the lives and careers of major political and military leaders, captains of industry and moguls of business and finance. They remain undaunted in the face of ~~these~~ objections because they knew that most American history, as taught and written today, concerned

at best only about 20 percent of the total population. As historian Gerta Lerner has acutely observed, and I quote, "...The truth is that history as written and conceived up to now is the history of a minority who may well turn out to be the sub-group..."

But I have one item that I want to insert here, in submitting the analysis and the call for more black women reclamation work, I in no way suggest that all black women in the Middle West region were super-human, transcendent survivors and that only survivors should be studied. It serves us ill to substitute one stereotype with another. In reality, many midwestern black women managed barely to maintain positive self images and some failed altogether to protect their bodies and minds from abusive men. Still others continued to find the burden of too many children, inadequate health-care, scarce employment opportunities, insufficient education and reprehensible public policy neglect too much to bare. To be sure, their ill-fated encounter with the devastating combination of institutionalized sexism, racism and class oppression warrants separate discussion and sustained investigation.

Inarguably, there is a great need for more reclamation work in black women's history. While editing the 16 volume series of articles and books on black women in United States history, for Carlson Publishing, I discovered that substantial amounts of scholarship pertaining to black women still exists in the form of Doctoral dissertations. The dissertations invariably completed by black and white women in disparate disciplines have addressed

virtually every aspect of black women's lives including; employment, health, family structure, creativity, rituals and traditions, along with exploitation and resistance and the various institutional building activity.

History, notwithstanding, in at least two areas within the black studies enterprise, race relations sociology, and literary theory, the treatment of black women as subject and agent has moved into the interpretive realm far beyond work of basic reclamation. During the immediate post-World War II "Negro problem" era, social science scholars portrayed blacks as an aggrieved mass of tangled pathologies. In numerous books, blacks were viewed as so many socially deviant aliens permanently marked by color, living in dark ghettos and pathological family structures dominated by emasculated matriarchs seeking higher welfare payments to support unemployed alcohol^{ic} lovers and a bunch of ineducable juvenile delinquents headed for prison.

Sociologist Aldon D. Morris, in his Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, has enriched and altered our understanding of social change by focusing on the activities and efforts of countless unsung heroes and heroines who placed their lives before the awesome machinery of state sanctioned subordination and valiantly confronted police dogs and water hoses to bring down the walls of white supremacy. For Morris there is something else that was especially significant. He gave considerable attention to the careers and contributions of black women activists including Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker and in so doing, he made them essential as opposed to peripheral to the Civil Rights

Movement. The memoirs of Joanne Gibson Robinson and the collection of papers delivered at a recent conference of "Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement" are important indicators of changes in Civil Rights scholarship. While it is unlikely that any one of them will assume the stature of Martin Luther King, Jr., it is certain that a more balanced analysis of the role of both black men and women is in the making.

Sociologist, William Julius Wilson has taught us to look at social structure and to see the intersection of race and class as forming an interlocking system of oppression of the truly disadvantaged. And although some blacks made tremendous strides, as sociologist Bart Landry revealed in his recent study of a black middle class, sociologist Walter Allen cautions against undue optimism. Overshadowing the gains of the black middle class is the alarming growth of what scholars have termed the black underclass. Poor black women and their children are excessively represented in the underclass as was expected. The continued intransigence of racism and the manifest and inequitable distribution of economic and informational resources and power between racial, ethnic groups and white middle class America speak ill for the future of peaceful race relations in this country.

The research of black political scientists and urban studies scholars has proven critical in revealing the strategies and schemes that urban development, business and educators employed to circumscribe aspirations of early generations of black migrants and their children. The children and grandchildren, indeed, of these migrants continue to suffer insensitive and destructive

public policy and police harassment. But not all of the violence against blacks comes from the outside. Black women, as is true of their white counterparts, have been abused and victimized within their homes. Thus to the extent that black women's studies necessarily beg analysis of power, there is a strong connection between race relations scholarship and the study of gender relations. At heart, the study of black women within the social sphere should force greater scrutiny on what it means to be a black man in this capitalistic, patriarchal society.

But this work is just beginning to take off in a serious fashion. What is worth watching, however, is the slowly emerging scholarship focused on black men and the construction of male identity especially among men in the working and underclasses. This work will form the basis for our great understanding of male uses of, and the consequences of violence against women for the larger black community. Black Studies should lead the way in this area.

The outstanding work of some of the major figures in literary theory is the most recent and dramatic manifestation of intellectual fervor generated by Black Studies scholarship. The books and articles by Houston Baker, Henry Louis Gates, Michael (Ackward), Hazel Carby, Mary Helen Washington, Hortense Spillers, Valerie Smith, Debra McDowell and Nellie McKay have shattered traditional perspectives on the shape and content of American literary canons. Again, as did their slavery studies counterparts, these literary scholars placed black men and women at the center of their lens and gave us an entirely new definition

and appreciation of what should constitute good American literature.

Inarguably the remarkable commercial and aesthetic success of creative writers and novelists, including Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshal, Terry McMillan, Marita Golden to name only a few, effectively lit and inflamed a still raging interest in such things as domestic violence and female friendship. The significance of the current black women's literary renaissance to a resurgence of demand for Black Studies courses on college campuses cannot be exaggerated.

There are strong parallels between the evolution of a black feminist voice in literary discourse and that of black women's history. Valerie Smith observed, and I quote, "marginalized within Afro-American literary discourse and ignored in similar ways in Anglo-America feminist writings, the black feminist voice emerged in the late 70s with increasing insistence." Smith captures succinctly, the process of engendering black literary discourse. And because I am talking about the process of engendering black history, I think it is useful to quote her at length as this process may very well serve as a blueprint for completing the engendering of Black Studies.

"...Their experience of having been omitted from or *marginalized within the tradition* has prompted them to call attention to the masculinist assumptions of the canon and its custodians. Their bibliographical and editorial projects have expended and diversified the body of texts talked on and written about by members in the scholarly community. In critical books

and essays they complicate the concerned ideas about the contours of the Afro-American tradition by exploring suppressed ritual, conventions and narrative strategies in the writings of black women. In their most recent work, they theorize the interconnections between cultural constructions of race, class and gender in both the language and ideological assumptions of black texts."

Further exploration upon the relationship between gender, race and class hold great promise for enriching the field of Africana Studies. The engendering of Afro-American studies is the worthy enterprise that promises to strengthen and sustain the field. Let me wrap this up by giving you what I consider to be the six things that we need to do in order to engender Black Studies.

First, we need to continue the reclamation work, especially the reclaiming of source material pertaining to the lives of black women. We need to continue the reclamation work, the editing of paper projects, the finding of new collections of sources by working closely with people in the community especially those of ~~the~~ *the* academy. Secondly, in addition to or simultaneous with the reclamation work, *we need to develop and* refine our theoretical analysis concerning the intersection of race, class, sex, region, and agency, so that our intellectual and political work becomes more sophisticated and balanced. Third, we need to reconceptualize our curriculum and revise all of our individual courses within Black Studies and throughout the academy. And we need to put black women at the center of that.

Fourth, we need to assist and indeed demand that grammar school and secondary school textbooks reflect the new scholarship, and reflect it not only by including images of blacks in marginalized portions of the page, but throughout the narrative. Fifth, we need to increase the pool of new graduate students in order to insure diversity in the academy, which means that we need to go out and reach as many of the bright male and female undergraduates as possible and provide the resources, the encouragement, the mentoring needed to successfully navigate them through Ph.D. degree programs in order that they may become members of the academy. And finally, we need to continue to develop imaginative ways to serve our diverse communities. And by diverse communities, I mean all people who have experienced oppression within American society. So we are opening up the definition of community ^{to include} not just black community, but as Vincent Harding said, "Vietnamese communities, Native American communities, poor deluded white communities," and we need to communicate the fresh new scholarship that we have created in the field of Black Studies back to the people who live the lives that we earn our living studying. And if we do all of that we will have successfully engendered Afro-American Studies.

In sum:

- Black Studies in the United States is flourishing*
- 1. Enrollments in courses are at all time highs.*
 - 2. Black Studies scholarship is burgeoning.*
 - 3. New Ph.D degree programs are being inaugurated.*
 - 4. Comparative and truly diasporic work has taken root.*
 - 5. Resources, especially from the Ford Foundation has revitalized and reenergized the field.*

Problems:

- 1. Critical shortage of Black Ph.D students* ¹⁷
- 2. Need to engender Black Studies.*

Endnotes

¹ Robert L. Harris, Jr. "The Intellectual and Institutional Development of Africana Studies," Three Essays: Black Studies in the United States by Robert L. Harris, Jr., Darlene Clark Hine, and Nellie McKay (New York: Ford Foundation, 1990): 7-14.

² Quoted in, Charles, A. Frye, The Impact of Black Studies on the Curricula of Three Universities (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1976) p. 12-13.)

³ William E. Sims, Black Studies: Pitfalls and Potential (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1978) p.4.)

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