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## THE INTELLECTUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICANA STUDIES

*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 and in the dynamics of slavery, oppression, colonization, imperialism, emancipation, self-determination, liberation, and socioeconomic and political development.

There have been four stages in the intellectual and institutional development of Africana studies as an area of scholarly inquiry. The first stage began in the 1890s and lasted until the Second World War. During this first stage, numerous organizations emerged to document, record, and analyze the history, culture, and status of African peoples. For example, the Bethel Literary and Historical Association of Washington, D.C., formed in 1881, sponsored lectures on numerous topics, such as the Egyptians, the Zulus, and various aspects of African culture, in addition to contemporary issues affecting African Americans. Other organizations functioned in a similar manner—for example, Philadelphia's American Negro Historical Society, established in 1897; Washington, D.C.'s American Negro Academy, also started in 1897; and New York's Negro Society for Historical Research, organized in 1911.

These early black literary and historical associations sought to preserve and to publicize the legacy of African peoples. They were superseded in 1915, when Carter G. Woodson formed the Association for the Study of Afro-American (formerly Negro) Life and History (ASALH), which still survives today. Woodson laid the groundwork for systematic study of African peoples through the association's annual meetings; the *Journal of Negro History*, launched in 1916; the national observance of Negro History Week (now Black History Month), started in 1926; publication of the *Negro History Bulletin*, begun in 1933; and the formation of Associated Publishers to print books on the Black experience in America and

throughout the world. ASALH has been the premier organization in promoting historical consciousness and in generating greater understanding of African heritage in the United States.

In 1897 W. E. B. Du Bois initiated an ambitious program at Atlanta University to examine various categories of African-American life in ten-year cycles. He proposed that such studies be continued for at least one hundred years to provide knowledge and understanding of the Black family, church, social organizations, education, and economic development in the United States. From 1898 to 1914, the Atlanta University studies produced sixteen monographs, which consisted of more than 2,100 pages of research. Du Bois, Woodson, Lorenzo J. Greene, Charles H. Wesley, E. Franklin Frazier, Ralph J. Bunche, Charles S. Johnson, Abram Harris, Sterling Brown, and other pioneering Black scholars produced an impressive body of scholarship to correct the errors, omissions, and distortions of black life and history that prevailed among white academics and the American public.

The second stage for Africana studies began with the study of Black America by Gunnar Myrdal. This stage was in some respects a setback. Myrdal, who began his project for the Carnegie Corporation in 1939, confined his analysis to the American social, political, and economic order. There was growing concern about the role and place of the Black population during the Second World War, as a majority of African Americans became urban. Black migration northward, which had begun in large numbers during the 1890s, had accelerated during World War I, and had slowed during the Depression of the 1930s, mushroomed during World War II, making the Black presence in America more a national than a regional or primarily southern concern. Believing that Black people in the United States were fundamentally Americans who had no significant African cultural background or identity, Myrdal accepted the formulation of the University of Chicago School of Sociology that ethnic and racial contact led not only to conflict but also to inevitable assimilation and absorption into the dominant society. His two-volume study, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, published in 1944, had an important influence on scholarship, especially the work of white academics during this second stage.

White scholars, by and large, had ignored Black people. The Columbia University historian John W. Burgess had boldly stated: “[A] black skin means membership in a race of men which has never itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason; has never, therefore, created any civilization of any kind.” After World War II, as the Black population in the United States became predominantly urban and as scholarship in general shed notions of inherent racial inferiority and superiority with the Nazi debacle, white scholars devoted increasing attention to African Americans’ status in the United States. They sought environmental rather than biogenetic explanations for African Americans’ inferior status.

In *Mark of Oppression* (1951), Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey hypothesized that African Americans emerged from slavery without a culture, with “no intra-psychic defenses—no pride, no group solidarity, no tradition.” They argued: “The marks of his previous status were still upon him—socially, psychologically, and emotionally, and from these he has never since freed himself.” Stanley Elkins in his book *Slavery* (1959) concluded that African Americans were not genetically inferior but were made inferior by the process of enslavement, which they internalized and passed on to succeeding generations. In *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (1963),

Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan attributed African-American status to the absence of middle-class values and norms among the Black population in general. Two years later, in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Moynihan wrote: “Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American.” He concluded that “the present tangle of pathology is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world.”

Whereas Burgess had implied that Africans had never created anything of worth and therefore African Americans were descended from an inferior people, post-World War II white scholars, in the main, identified African-American status not with an inglorious African past but with deficiencies occasioned by slavery, segregation, and discrimination. It is important to note that these scholars believed that the end of racial oppression would not immediately produce racial equality, not because of lack of social opportunity but because of the accumulated pathological behavior of Black people. In other words, Black people were not divinely created inferior but were made inferior over time. The sum of racial oppression and its alleged internalization by Black people dramatically affected their lives across generations.

Another significant post-World War II development was the creation of African studies programs that had no real link to Black people in the New World. Although Melville Herskovits, a white anthropologist and proponent of African studies, tried to join the study of Africa with the lives of Black people in the New World, African studies became wedded to a modernization theory that measured African societies by Western standards. African history, culture, and politics were explored more within the context of the colonial powers than with any attention to African cultural continuities in the Western Hemisphere. This compartmentalization of knowledge regarding Black people departed significantly from the scholarship of individuals such as Du Bois and Woodson during the first stage in the development of Africana studies.

The civil rights revolution, the Black power drive, and the Black consciousness movement initiated a third stage of Africana studies. During this era, larger numbers of Black students entered predominantly white colleges and universities. Most of these students were the first generation of their families to attend college. They encountered faculties that were almost entirely white and a curriculum that was primarily Eurocentric in perspective. The “melting pot” thesis prevailed as the paradigm of American society in which all groups, regardless of background, assimilated to an ideal that was primarily white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. Ironically, at a time when African nations were achieving independence from colonial rule, Africa seemed unrelated to Black people in the United States. If Africa was discussed in classes, it was generally as an adjunct to European imperialism. In large measure, Black people were seen as pawns rather than as actors, as victims more than as victors.

Together with many Black scholars from the first stage of Africana studies, Black college students challenged the prevailing orthodoxies on predominantly white campuses. They demanded the employment of Black professors and the establishment of Africana studies departments and programs. They pressed for the inclusion of African studies in the newly formed Africana studies programs. The inclusion of African studies was important for several reasons. First, African Americans have historically linked their destiny with the future of Africa. Second, the image of Africa has had significant consequences for the status of

African Americans. Third, African ancestry has informed the cultural heritage of African Americans as much as their presence in the United States. Fourth, the history, politics, and culture of Africa could stand as a counterweight to the dominance of Western culture in American education.

The Eurocentric focus of the college curriculum basically excluded people of African ancestry or studied them through a European filter. Eurocentrist scholars ignored the growth of civilization in Africa, especially in Egypt, or co-opted Egyptian civilization as part of a European rather than an African continuum. They also ignored the African heritage of African Americans, characterizing them as having begun their existence in North America as *tabulae rasae*—blank slates to be imprinted with Euro-American culture.

Although some colleges and universities were willing to establish Africana studies programs, they were less willing to organize Africana studies departments. Faculty within the traditional departments were reluctant to give up their prerogative of determining what constituted a course in history, literature, or government; who would take such courses; and how the professors teaching them would be evaluated for employment, promotion, and tenure. Advocates of Africana studies departments questioned how members of traditional departments that had not offered courses on the Black experience or hired Black faculty could sit in judgment on the nature and quality of work being done in this newly emerging field of study.

The third stage of Africana studies, from about the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, was a period of legitimization and institutionalization. Few scholars were prepared to teach Africana studies courses. The shift in perspective from Eurocentrism to Afrocentrism required the recovery, organization, and accessibility of research materials that made Black people, their lives, and their thoughts the center of analysis and interpretation. Many white scholars in particular had assumed that there was not sufficient documentation on which to base sound judgments about the personal and collective experiences of Black people in the United States. However, with the new interest in black life and culture, federal, state, and local archivists combed their collections for materials on the African-American experience and published several useful guides. Major projects began assembling and publishing the papers of Black leaders, writers, and organizations. It is now clear that there are abundant materials (print, visual, and sound) to reconstruct and to interpret the African-American past.

The prodigious research of Black and white scholars has dramatically changed the manner in which we now view African Americans. Most scholars today acknowledge the persistence of African culture in the United States. They no longer accept the idea that African Americans passively acquiesced to oppression, recognizing that, on the contrary, they actively resisted oppression in a variety of ways. In large measure, scholars have come to accept the United States as a pluralistic society with multiple viable cultures, rather than as a “melting pot.” We think more of acculturation, with give-and-take, than of assimilation—particularly in the form of total absorption into the dominant culture, which itself is now being redefined.

Africana studies has achieved legitimacy and has become institutionalized within higher education. It now has moved into a fourth stage of theoretical refinement and more sophisticated analysis and interpretation. The fundamental research tools have been developed, although there will certainly be a need to update and to supplement them as new

materials become available. In general, the field is in fairly good condition, but there are some problems, or perhaps opportunities to improve it.

Because the formats for multidisciplinary programs vary from campus to campus, there will probably not be a single method of organization for Africana studies. The ideal format is the department structure, which allows for selection of faculty and development of curriculum. Programs with faculty in traditional departments can also be successful, provided that they have some control of faculty lines. The program, however, becomes a more complex arrangement, especially in decisions for hiring, promotion, and tenure. Joint appointments carry similar problems, especially for junior faculty. They are less burdensome for senior faculty, whose tenure has already been established. Cross-listing of courses is one means by which departments and programs can take greater advantage of faculty resources on their campuses. However, before such cross-listing can be effective, there must first be a strong core faculty within the department or program. Otherwise, the Africana studies curriculum becomes too dependent on the priorities of other departments.

One goal for the fourth stage of Africana studies should be to broaden and deepen the field of inquiry. This prospect becomes somewhat difficult for those departments and programs with limited numbers of faculty. Small faculties are stretched thin when they attempt to offer a major and to cover Africa, Afro-America, and the Caribbean. Offering a comprehensive program in Africana studies has meant that some departments and programs play primarily service roles in providing introductory courses that are used to fulfill one or more distribution requirements for graduation. These efforts have little opportunity to supply depth in the field of study. Faculty become very much occupied with servicing large introductory courses and have little time for research and writing in an area of specialization. There is a tendency for faculty to become generalists familiar with a broad range of knowledge rather than specialists who advance the frontiers of specific areas of knowledge.

As Africana studies moves into its fourth stage, as well as its third decade on predominantly white campuses, there is a need to reexamine the curriculum on many campuses. Some departments and programs offer a hodgepodge of courses that have evolved over time in response to student interest and faculty availability. Many departments and programs, particularly those with small faculties, need to determine what they can do best with their resources. Some have specific strengths upon which to build; others need to reconsider where they want to concentrate their resources. Unless they have the faculty and the administrative support, many departments and programs cannot offer successful comprehensive Africana studies courses. In a 1986 report on the "Status of Afro-American Studies in the State University of New York," Dr. Kenneth Hall showed that the preponderance of students are attracted by courses on Afro-American history, the civil rights movement, film, music, and contemporary Africa. Courses on history and culture (literature, music, film, drama, and dance) seem to appeal most to a cross section of students (Black and white), with politics close behind.

In many respects, Africana studies faculty need to return to the basic question: Africana studies for what? There was much discussion and debate on this question during the early days of organizing, when the focus was on the quest for legitimacy and institutionalization. On many campuses, Africana studies was to provide the Black presence, to supply role models for students, to have an active advising and counseling function, to organize film series, lectures, and symposia, and to influence traditional departments in the composition

of their faculty and curriculum. This was a tall order that exhausted many Africana studies faculty. Having expended their energy on getting the new field off the ground, many faculty had not devoted sufficient time to research and publication and thus were caught short when evaluated for promotion and tenure.

Today, there is some debate about whether Africana studies faculty should play their former roles of counselors and mentors or give more time to research. Some of this tension would be eased if administrators supported campus-life specialists who would organize cultural activities for Black students in particular and for all students in general. Faculty development is an important element within the university, and it is especially important for Africana studies faculty, many of whom need to reorient themselves toward greater scholarship.

Public colleges that are clustered in metropolitan areas have a unique opportunity to foster scholarship in Africana studies by establishing master's degree programs and research institutes. Such projects might encourage Africana studies departments and programs to develop strengths in specific areas. These strengths could be drawn upon for graduate programs and research institutes to promote greater scholarship by identifying areas of investigation and by bringing together scholars with similar interests. Research institutes might also be a means to influence more students to pursue advanced degrees and expand the number of minority scholars.

Answers to the question of "Africana studies for what?" will have a significant effect on the shape and content of the curriculum. To address these issues, the National Council for Black Studies has already embarked on a program of summer institutes for college teachers. Such responses will also influence the role of Africana studies on different campuses. Africana studies will continue to vary from college to college. Ultimately, however, there is a need for greater clarification and understanding through more dialogue about its specific function on various campuses.

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## BLACK STUDIES IN LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

*Johnnetta B. Cole*

AS AN AFRICAN AMERICAN and as an educator, I turn with you to a critical assessment of Black Studies in liberal arts education.<sup>1</sup> I dare to do so not in conflict with but rather in concert with other scholars and activists in this process. The Curriculum Development Project of the Institute of the Black World; the Howard University Fifteen Year Assessment of Black Studies Conference; the symposium on Black Studies and Women's Studies entitled "An Overdue Partnership" organized by Smith College's Afro-American Studies Department and the University of Massachusetts' Women's Studies Program; and the ongoing work of the National Council of Black Studies are only a few of the many organized discussions of the state and potential of Black Studies. Thus my comments and analysis should be viewed as a part of this widespread and ongoing discussion.

This discussion of Black Studies is limited to liberal arts curricula in predominantly white institutions of higher education, but not because what takes place in Black colleges, elementary schools and high schools, and in community settings is unimportant. It is simply that clarity and conciseness require that we place some limitations on the boundaries of this discussion.

### THE HISTORY OF BLACK STUDIES ONE MORE TIME

"Any attempt to discuss the question of what has come to be called Black Studies . . . outside of a political perspective is futile."<sup>2</sup> This is very obviously the case for the late 1960s surge for Black Studies. It is equally so when we review the prolonged history of what is the minimal call of Black Studies: "the inclusion of our point of view and our cultural heritage in educational curricula on a basis of equality . . ."<sup>3</sup> A political perspective is essential to an understanding of the most comprehensive meaning of Black Studies: the development of a fundamentally new way for Black people to look at themselves and be looked at by others; and a fundamentally new way for Black people to be actively involved in effecting positive changes in their condition, and thus in their society and in the world.

African-American concern about their formal education and their role in that process goes back at least to the creation of the Freedman Schools at the end of the Civil War. During the period of Reconstruction, when there was blatant white control of segregated Black



educational institutions, Afro-Americans spoke out passionately for “a stronger, even a controlling voice in the process and institutions of education for our people.”<sup>4</sup> Such was the view of C. E. Becker, expressed in a letter to Henry L. Morehouse, dated November 17, 1882:

. . . we are willing to return thanks to the many friends who have assisted us in educating ourselves thus far, but we have now reached the point where we desire to endeavor to educate ourselves, to build school houses, churches, colleges, and universities, by our own efforts . . . ere we sacrifice our manhood.<sup>5</sup>

Today we would refer to our peoplehood, but the sentiment of this statement remains:

. . . the desire to establish curricula to serve the needs of our people—to provide skills training, to transmit our values, to pass on a dignified version of our history and culture in a world in which our very persons were met (and are met) almost without exception with condescension, scorn, and hostility.<sup>6</sup>

When we turn to the most recent expression of the long-standing drive for Black Studies, that which began in the late sixties, the importance of placing the issue in a political context is extraordinarily clear. For as Julius Lester puts it:

Black Studies carries the burden of its beginning. It was not invited into the curricula of colleges and universities because it was thought to have something new and vital to offer the humanistic body of knowledge. Indeed, it was not invited into curricula at all. It fought its way in through demonstrations in the sixties and seventies. Black studies was born because a man named King was assassinated.<sup>7</sup>

During the late sixties and early seventies, there was a substantial increase in the numbers of Black youths in American colleges and universities, two-thirds of whom were at white universities.<sup>8</sup> Their presence on college campuses was clearly related to the demands of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of that period.

In ways unprecedented in our history, these young Afro-Americans forced us to confront the relationship between what was going on “in the streets” of America and what was going on, and in their view should go on, in the classrooms of U.S. educational institutions. These Black students recognized a relationship between their lives and the lives of the masses of Black people who were expressing their anger and frustration in the burnings and lootings of urban rebellions.

Black scholars, few in numbers on white campuses, joined with their students. In Vincent Harding’s words: “When the students rose on the campuses and demanded our presence, or pressed for greater visibility and recognition for our work, we claimed, with them, indissoluble bonds to the heaving life of the Black masses.”<sup>9</sup>

Black Studies must be understood as a part of that Black Student Movement—“the takeovers of computer centers, academic buildings and student unions; the creation of Black Student Unions and Black Cultural Centers; [and] the emergence of Black nationalist ideology within the potential Black petty bourgeois stratum.”<sup>10</sup>

A full understanding of the rise of Black Studies also requires an appreciation of the influential interaction between the Black Student Movement and the general student move-



ment of the sixties and seventies, and between the student movements and the resistance and revolt of the “anti-war movement.”

### THE FIVE CHALLENGES OF THE BLACK STUDIES CRITIQUE

The beginnings of Black Studies in liberal arts institutions are usually dated with the establishment of an Afro-American Studies Department at San Francisco State College in 1968. However, programs in Afro-American Studies existed at other white institutions before 1968; for example, Cornell University had a functioning program in 1967. Intimately tied to the Black Student Movement, and fueled by the Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements, Black Studies is fundamentally a critique of educational institutions in American society and a set of proposals for beginning the long and difficult process of change in those institutions.

The Black Studies critique explicitly addresses shortcomings, omissions, and distortions in liberal arts curricula and institutions as they affect Afro-Americans. It also charges that the liberal arts curricula falls far short of what is required to correctly educate white youth.

The Black Studies critique has taken the form of volumes of written and spoken words: explained before white faculties and administrators, written in the paragraphs of proposals for initiating programs and departments, analyzed in scholarly journals and popular articles, and debated in the string of conferences and symposia that took place all over the United States.

I suggest that the major points of the Black Studies critique can be summarized in terms of five challenges. Black Studies challenges *what* is taught in the liberal arts curricula of America’s colleges and universities; *to whom* and *by whom* it is taught; *how* it is taught; and *why* it is taught. These challenges represent a sweeping critique, followed by plans, proposals, curricula, and projects designed to begin to correct certain fundamental problems in American higher education.

#### What Is Taught

Scholars and activists of Black Studies argue that a profound chasm separates the claim and the reality of what is taught in America’s liberal arts institutions. The claim, simply put, is that liberal arts education is an objective, value-free exploration of the range of human history, activity, knowledge, and creativity. The reality is that this education is based on a Eurocentric perspective of the world, reflecting a racial, gender, and class bias that distorts African and African-American experiences.<sup>11</sup> “The history of America looks very different viewed from a cotton patch.”<sup>12</sup>

There is no shortage of examples of these biases in mainstream scholarship. Among the examples frequently referred to are the notion in mainstream scholarship that Black culture is either nonexistent or merely a deviation from middle-class Euro-American culture; and the Moynihanian concept of the Black matriarchy. Another familiar example is the litanies of great classics that always refer to Mozart but never to Coltrane, to Conrad but not to Achebe, to Virginia Woolf but not to Margaret Walker, and to John Stuart Mill, but never to W. E. B. Du Bois.

The problem with the notions of “objectivity” and “value-free science” is that these sacred fetishes of Western scholarship are in reality, as Lewis King notes, “. . . a metaphor of the collective subjectivity of a particular group in history and the abstract representations

of a singular race, sex and economic class".<sup>13</sup> Thus Black Studies argues for a corrective approach that would negate the myths and distortions inherent in traditional "White Studies" construction of Black people and indeed the world; explore all of history (and her-story as well); consistently address racism; and institutionalize a Black presence in American education.

Black Studies challenges what is traditionally taught and introduces a different curriculum.

By its very nature Black Studies begins with the life and culture of Blacks, and in the American context that means a race of people brought into this country for one purpose and one only: to be slaves (I would not be in America if not for slavery, or if one of my ancestors had missed the boat). Thus the vantage point of Black Studies is qualitatively different from that of the traditional disciplines. Black Studies does not begin with the conquering of kingdoms, the decrees of monarchies, or the rhymed lines of a sonnet. It begins in a group experience of suffering and agony, of struggle and survival. When such is the crux of experience, definitions of life are vastly different.

Black Studies is not only the study of the history, culture, and lives of Blacks. It is the point of view that comes from a reality so tenuous that one did not own even the very breath of his or her life. This reality is the heart of Black Studies. As W. E. B. Du Bois said almost 50 years ago: Instead of the university growing down and seeking to comprehend in its curriculum the life and experience, the thought and expression of the lower classes, it almost invariably tended to grow up and narrow itself to a sublimated elite of mankind.<sup>14</sup>

### By Whom and To Whom

Black Studies during the 1960s and '70s took a critical look at the participants in American higher education. The ideal, often purported to be a reality, is that institutions of higher education choose professors because of their intellectual strengths and ability to contribute to the educational enterprise. Similarly, students are presumably selected because of their demonstrated abilities and intellectual potential. If this is indeed the case, Black Studies proponents ask, then why are almost all professors white male Ph.D.'s of a middle-class mind-set if not origin, who have been trained by scholars of a similar background? If intellectual potential really matters in the selection of students, and not simply demonstrated ability as indicated by culturally biased test scores and good grades in well-financed middle-class white schools, then why are there so few Black and other Third World students in America's colleges and universities? The truth, say the advocates of Black Studies, is that the overwhelming majority of the participants in liberal arts institutions reflect and reinforce the very streams of thought that dominate the curriculum: white, male, and middle class.

The reality of who teaches and who is taught in liberal arts institutions has led the proponents of Black Studies to make demands for a substantial increase in the number of Black faculty. They also ask that colleges and universities consider some individuals without academic degrees but with a wealth of practical and scholarly experience for faculty positions. Black Studies activists demand changes in admissions criteria, increases in financial aid, and expanded academic and other support services to give more Black students a fighting chance to go to college. Finally, advocates of Black Studies often fight for academic offerings for community residents to be held in community settings.

The call is very simply to bring about a Black presence in liberal arts institutions, such that Black students will have Black role models among their faculty and staff and all stu-

dents will have the possibility to learn experientially about peoples, cultures, histories, and ideas that differed from their own.

### How What Is Taught Is Taught

The Black Studies critique of liberal arts education also addresses questions of pedagogy. In short, not only is there a need to change what is taught, to whom and by whom, but also to qualitatively overhaul methods of teaching and learning. Thus Black Studies argues for a number of far-reaching reforms. There should be a greater emphasis on student participation in the teaching/learning process, rather than the banking process where the teacher deposits knowledge into students' heads and periodically (at exam time) makes withdrawals. There should be a closer relationship between the academy and "the outside world," in contrast to the traditional model of the academy as an isolated ivory tower. Thus students should be encouraged to engage in field projects and practicums that place them in dynamic interactions with communities. The competitive atmosphere that is so deeply embedded in the American educational process is also challenged. Black Studies proposes that students should be encouraged to engage in more cooperative learning experiences. Finally, the loyalty to disciplines over knowledge, the territoriality of departments, and the sanctity of specialized, indeed professional versus general education, are questioned. The call is for far greater dependence on an interdisciplinary approach. Julius Lester, a professor of Afro-American Studies, exemplifies this approach:

. . . Black Studies cannot concern itself with the University as an apprenticeship system. This does not mean discouraging a student who wants to be a specialist in the field. However, it does not focus its energies on this student, [or] find its *raison d'être* here. The mission of Black Studies is to invite and guide students into human experience as it has affected the lives of Blacks and to examine the variety of ways in which Blacks have responded.

I am not interested, therefore, in creating intellectuals or for that matter in even teaching potential intellectuals. I am interested in that student who will leave the university and go into life, who will, in all likelihood, end up with a job rather than a career. Instead of demanding that this student write a critical analysis of *Native Son*. I ask something harder. I ask the student to learn what he or she feels freedom to be. What is instructive is how often the students have to be convinced that what they think matters.<sup>15</sup>

No discipline has a monopoly on understanding of what freedom is. The best theoretical formulation of freedom is sterile if it is not understood in practice. Finally, freedom, like effective education, is achieved most often when groups of human beings cooperate with each other, not when lone individuals compete against all others.

### Why Teach What Is Taught

It is perhaps on this last point that the perspectives of Black Studies and the tradition of liberal arts education are at greatest odds. The issue is very simply that of purpose—the *raison d'être* of education in our colleges and universities.

The dominant view is that the purpose of liberal arts education is to assist individuals, especially youth, to gain an understanding of the world in which they live. This is a process said to involve an understanding of how the world came to be as it is (history), its physical and natural elements (the sciences), the development and functioning of individuals and societies (the social sciences), and the creative expressions that are unique to the human

species (the arts). As they engage in this process, to whom or to what are members of the academy accountable? The dominant view is that scholars are accountable to an abstract notion called “*TRUTH*,” or more concretely, to an intellectual community. Professor Mike Thelwell further explores the issue:

Scholarly objectivity is a delusion that liberals (of both races) may subscribe to. Black people and perceptive whites know better. The fact is that the intellectual establishment distinguishes itself by its slavish acceptance of the role assigned to it by the power brokers of the society. It has always been the willing servant of wealth and power, and the research done in the physical sciences, the humanities and social sciences has been, with very few honorable exceptions, in services to established power, which has, in this country, always been antithetical to the interests of Black people. The goals of the research undertaken, the questions asked, the controlling assumptions governing it, and consequently, the results obtained have always fitted comfortably into a social consensus which has been, by definition, racist.<sup>16</sup>

Black Studies, the intellectual arm of the Black Power Movement, articulates a very different perspective from that of the “intellectual establishment.” Why study? Not simply to take a place in the world but to understand the world and to actively participate in helping to change it. To whom are scholars and students accountable? Black Studies advocates respond that Black teachers and students should be accountable to Black people as they struggle for a place of dignity, integrity, and equality in American society. By extension, they argue that all scholars and students must be accountable to the best interests of humankind.

A scholarship that is accountable to human interests is fraught with problems. Who defines these interests? How does one resolve conflicting notions of “best interest”? But on the question of racism, Black Studies advocates are absolutely positive that the perpetuation of this destructive system is not in the interest of any but a small elite.

Black Studies advocates argue, like C. Wright Mills, that we should strive to be objective, but we should not seek to be detached. Education, they argue, is one means by which Black youth could be prepared to play a significant role in the improvement of the conditions of Black communities. For these reasons, Black Studies proponents call for a strong activist component in the curriculum, and a close and dynamic relationship between the academy and African-American communities.

## BLACK STUDIES IN LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION: AN ASSESSMENT

Who has heard the critiques first voiced by the founders of Black Studies twenty years ago? Which Black Studies proposals have reached fruition? What is the best course of action for Black Studies advocates in the 1980s? How should we interpret the fact that the number of Black Studies programs and departments has declined over a twenty year period?

Our experiences over the past twenty years and the present realities in our country serve as a sobering context for an assessment of Black Studies. The times have changed. Since the inception of Black Studies programs and departments, governmental support of education and all other social services has markedly decreased. In a parallel and related development, North American society has become far less responsive even with token gestures to the needs of Black people. While the African Americans struggle has not ceased, the definitive link to the state of American politics and the severity of economic conditions are

among the factors that have made our struggle less public, and less national in scope than it was during the late 1960s.

Today, more than in the 1960s, there is a sense of the relationship between the struggle of African Americans in the United States and Third World peoples in other areas of the world. But there is also today the possibility of a shared doom among all peoples. Nuclear bombs are not designed to selectively destroy based on color, gender, or class coding. Clearly, our conditions today are not the same as those that reigned when Black Studies began.

We recall that Black Studies began during a period in which the Black Panther Party was organizing nationally and claiming to be a genuine challenge to the ruling power structure. It was a time of rapid increase in the number of Black students and faculty, largely due to Black students' pressures on administrators. It was also a time of rapid increase in the number of Black faces in industry, social service agencies, and government.

In the excitement of the late sixties and early seventies, many Black Studies participants acted as though these programs and departments would not only endure but also maintain access to resources, autonomy, and decision-making power within white liberal arts institutions. This stance was in some ways functional. By assuming the role of secure, confident administrators with power and financial commitments, many Black administrators and faculty were able to gain a degree of "legitimacy" for their programs. But such a stance clearly involved political myopia.

The euphoria of that period of rapid growth of Black Nationalism, the Black Student Movement, and Black Studies did not last. The systematic and violent repression of political groups such as the Black Panther Party and the assassination of national Black leaders tempered early optimism. Also contributing to the disillusionment were a decline in government programs for poor and minority people and the lessening of guilt-induced efforts by white institutions and individuals.

There has been a definitive decline in the number of Black Studies programs and departments. Today, according to the National Council for Black Studies, there are approximately 375 programs and departments of Black Studies, compared with about 800 in the early 1970s. Among Black Studies faculty, it is generally known that many of the programs and departments continue to exist under considerable strain. Budget cuts, denial of tenure and promotion, lack of academic support counselors, and, in some cases, active counseling against Black Studies all take their toll.

A new emphasis on vocationalism in American education has caused many Black as well as white students to question the "usefulness" of Black Studies, as compared to courses and majors in business, engineering, and computer science.

Twenty years after the first Black Studies department was founded, many academicians are still questioning the necessity and relevance of Black Studies. It is particularly interesting to note that similar doubts are not so frequently raised about area studies: American Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, East European Studies, African and Latin American Studies.

It is clear that Black Studies differs from area studies in several fundamental ways. In Black Studies, the scholars are, for the most part, of the same group as the people studied. They not only claim identity with the people being studied but, indeed, feel accountable to them. Such identity and accountability are less prevalent in area studies programs. Unlike Black Studies, area studies programs have access to sizeable research funds, faculty positions, and government contacts. In addition, the United States government frequently

turns to area studies for information and advice.

Black Studies thus differs from area studies in certain fundamental ways, yet it is often judged by the same standards and expectations used to judge area studies programs. Obviously, Black Studies falls short.

In contrast to area studies, Women's Studies has fared more like Black Studies. Both Black Studies and Women's Studies were "granted" by university administrators in response to demands that were made during the sixties and seventies. Both had to overcome the traditionalists' self-fulfilling prophecy that since there were few readily available resources or qualified personnel, the focus on Black Studies and then on Women's Studies did not warrant expenditure of resources or the stamp of academic legitimacy. These issues, the traditionalist said, could be handled adequately within the regular liberal arts curricula and departments. Yet it was precisely because the traditional departments and curricula failed to deal adequately with issues of racism and sexism, and consistently demonstrated an unwillingness to hire Black or women staff, that a need for Black Studies and Women's Studies arose.

Thus the two programs exist on the fringe or periphery of the "regular" liberal arts curriculum. Many often perceive the departments as existing mainly to provide their clientele with psychic support, while relieving the pressure for more fundamental, university-wide curricula change.

The points made here concerning Black Studies and Women's Studies also hold for Comparative American Ethnic Studies programs and departments, such as Native American Studies, Chicano Studies, Puerto Rican Studies, and Asian American Studies.

Despite changes in American society and in liberal arts institutions that have not been conducive to the growth of viable Black Studies, many Black Studies programs and departments have survived. Survival is not necessarily a sign of the fittest. Nevertheless, there are concrete indices of healthy development in some Black Studies programs and departments. There are also important "by-products" of the ongoing Black Studies movement. Among the concrete accomplishments of Black Studies are a steady rise in the number of dissertations, books, and journal articles in Afro-American Studies and a growing number of scholarly journals and professional organizations in Black Studies.<sup>17</sup> Black Studies has also had some effect on the concepts, theories, and methodology of the traditional areas in the liberal arts curriculum.

The question of Black culture provides a specific example of the influence of Black Studies on social science. Charles Valentine, in a publication, *Black Studies and Anthropology: Political and Scholarly Interests*, defines the importance of Black Studies in correcting the position in anthropology (sociology and psychology, political science, history, and education as well) that Black folks have no culture. Prior to the publication of Melville J. Herskovits's *Myth of the Negro Past*, in 1941, the only position articulated within the ranks of established social science was the notion that Black folks were stripped of their culture before coming to the New World. According to this view, any remnants of African culture that reached these shores were wiped away by the brutality of the slavery experience.<sup>18</sup> Within mainstream scholarship this position was articulated in its modern version by scholars such as Gunnar Myrdal (*An American Dilemma*); E. Franklin Frazier (*The Negro Family in the United States*, *The Negro Church in America*, etc.); and Glazer and Moynihan (*Beyond the Melting Pot*). Glazer and Moynihan declare: "It is not possible for Negroes to view themselves as other ethnic groups viewed themselves because—and this is the key to much in the

Negro world—the Negro is only an American and nothing else. He has no values and culture of his own and no potential position to that articulated by Glazer and Moyni-



han was presented by Herskovits in his carefully documented *Myth of the Negro Past*. Despite detailed evidence of the retention of African cultural traits in the music, dance, folklore, religion, language, and social organization of New World Black folks, mainstream scholars insisted that Afro-Americans are simply imitators of white American ways.<sup>20</sup> Gunnar Myrdal put it bluntly in the summary statement to a series of chapters, “The Negro Community as a Pathological Form of an American Community.” Myrdal said, “American Negro culture is not something independent of general American culture. It is a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture.”<sup>21</sup>

In the new version of Glazer and Moynihan’s book, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, they explicitly state that Black Studies has been a source which corrected the theory of Black folks as “cultureless.” And yet, the way they phrase their “change of heart” is an indication of the tenacity of their original view. Valentine, critically analyzing Glazer and Moynihan, writes:

Students of the changing scholarly scene may be interested to find that in a second edition of their book, Glazer and Moynihan have edited the quoted statement to soften it somewhat without changing its basic message. Elsewhere in the new version of their book, these resourceful authors present a lengthy footnote on the same subject which is a small masterpiece of academic doubletalk. First they say they didn’t really mean what they said in their original statement. Then they admit they made a mistake but blame it on “authoritative scholars, among them E. Franklin Frazier.” Their mistake, as they see it, was to ignore “African survivals,” and they give credit to “Afro-American and Black Studies” for challenging this, although they also condemn this field for “separatism.” Eventually they conclude that “Out of American origins, one can create a distinctive subculture . . . This has certainly happened as a result of 300 years of Black American history, and could [“could,” not “did”] serve as a sufficient basis for strong organization, regardless of the contribution of African origins. All this can surely be seen as a sign of the times, a tribute to effectiveness of the young field of Black Studies. Yet is is also a sharp reminder that the essential message of the traditional view remains intact and continues to be dominant outside Black Studies.”<sup>22</sup>

There are other examples of the influence of Black Studies on mainstream attitudes, assumptions, and even theories. To note only a few, the pioneering work of Herbert Aptheker on slave revolts has received increased attention and has “become more possible as truth” as a result of widespread use of his material in Afro-American Studies and the dissemination of those ideas into communities outside the universities.

The Moynihan thesis on Black families has been severely challenged by Black Studies faculties and students; in fact there are few programs or departments that do not use the Moynihan theory as a teaching device for educating Black students about the convergence of “scholarly” and “ruling class political interests.” The fact that Moynihan has become a known name in many Black communities is in some measure a result of the work of Black scholars associated with Black Studies.

Black Studies brought to the social sciences a different perspective, a perspective of the oppressed, the view of those without power, the view from the cotton patch.<sup>23</sup>

## BLACK STUDIES AND LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Many of the scholars and activists who helped found Black Studies programs and departments, seriously critique what has transpired over the past twenty years. Joined by younger



colleagues, students, and “drylongso” African Americans in communities throughout the United States, these scholars offer direction for the future of Black Studies.<sup>24</sup> These advocates of Black Studies openly criticize the continuing resistance to Black Studies by white administrators and faculty. They deplore the ways in which the financial hard times facing academic institutions and the conservative hostile environment in the United States adversely affect Black Studies. With no less honesty, these proponents of Black Studies turn inward and openly discuss those parts of the problem for which we ourselves may have the solutions.

Some of the points of discussion and debate are relatively new issues, others have been up for discussion since the very inception of Black Studies. For example, the issue of technology and African America is relatively new. How will various sectors of African-American communities be affected by this society’s increasing dependence upon high technology and information as a product as well as a method of communicating? Given the potential for uneven access to high technology and for existing racial as well as gender and class inequalities, what should be the stance of Black Studies? Concretely, should Black Studies curricula take on instruction in computer and information science? Or should the Black Studies curricula continue to focus on the areas more traditionally covered in the liberal arts?

The question of race versus class as the focal point of Black Studies has been openly, indeed heatedly discussed and debated since the inception of Black Studies. What is new, and encouraging, is the growing rejection of the very formulation of a dichotomy such that it is either race *or* class that is *the* key concept for Black Studies: Black Nationalism *or* Marxism that is *the* correct perspective.<sup>25</sup>

To illustrate this dynamic of critical assessment within Black Studies, I choose an example that is particularly appropriate to this volume—the woman question within Black Studies.

### THE WOMAN QUESTION WITHIN BLACK STUDIES

Black women as scholars and teachers, and Black women as an area of scholarship, appear to be caught between a rock and a hard place, that is, between the racial and ethnic bias of much of Women’s Studies and the gender bias in much of Black Studies.

The situation in almost all of the Women’s Studies programs and departments, where Black female professors are indeed rare, is summarized by Arlene Avakian in these terms:

... most of the white women teaching and doing research in Women’s Studies do not see Black and Third World women. Until very recently only the exceptional Women’s Studies course included any women of color in its syllabus. Even rarer was any discussion at all of racism as a force in all of our lives. . . . Women of color are seldom included in our classes, journals or conferences, and when they are it is as if they are another species tacked on to the end of the course. It is rare to find women of color and their concerns fully integrated into a Women’s Studies class or conference. And when Black and Third World women speak to this issue at conferences, the attitude of white women is generally one of annoyance, because their conference has been disrupted.<sup>26</sup>

The figures that confirm Avakian’s point are found in the pages of *Who’s Who and*

*Where in Women’s Studies*

... between 1970 and 1973, courses which concerned minority women or which considered race and class in addition to gender comprised only 4 percent of women's studies courses. Three years later, within the 15 "mature" women's studies programs, only 11 percent of the courses were devoted to considerations of race and class, or to minority women's experiences. Within that number, there were some courses that specifically addressed the experiences of Black women; some of these were, in fact, jointly sponsored by Black studies and women's studies programs. Proportionately, however, they still "wouldn't fill a page."<sup>27</sup>

In 1978, not a single Black Studies program in a western land-grant college offered an independent course on Black women. Until 1982 and 1983, none of the few existing textbooks on Black Studies included specific discussions on Black women. The issues of Black women, when mentioned, are included under the topics of the Black family and traditional African societies. It is important to note that the most recent publication of *People's College* does include a fuller discussion of Black women's issues. This inclusion was clearly in response to criticisms raised by Black Studies scholars, especially women. Also, until recently, the course syllabi for Black Studies courses have drawn almost exclusively on male authors (Black and white) and the material of the syllabi rarely distinguishes Black women's experiences from those of Black men.

The paucity of scholarly attention to Black women within Black Studies is matched by the paucity of Black women as colleagues in these programs and departments. This is particularly important to note because within Black Studies, as in American society as a whole, there is a myth of Black female dominance. The reality is that there are very few Black women in leadership positions in Black Studies. The Black women who are involved in these programs and departments face very clear problems of gender inequality.

Professor Monica Gordon and I did a series of telephone interviews with Black women involved in Black Studies in the New England region. While we clearly did not conduct a rigorous study, nonetheless the women to whom we spoke articulated many of the same problems. The women interviewed believe that the inequities in promotion and salary experienced by Black women are a consequence of the myth that women are a "risk" because they will leave the workforce to have babies. The women deplored the insinuation that Black women who do hold positions in Black Studies gained them because they granted sexual favors (a variant on the myth that Black women have only advanced since slavery because they "give in" sexually to males). Some of the women we interviewed said that they are simply not taken seriously as scholars and as teachers. Finally, some of the women indicated that they are criticized within their Black Studies programs or departments and charged with divided loyalties because of their involvement in women's issues and Women's Studies. The reality is that most if not all Black women have differences with segments of the Women's Movement and with Women's Studies—both of which have been historically bound by middle-class white perspectives and values. But a rejection of those values does not eliminate the genuine concerns that Black women have *as women*.<sup>28</sup>

Until recently, Black Studies scholars and activists did not openly discuss these issues and concerns. In part, they did not raise these issues fearing that to do so would be divisive when cooperation between Black men and women is a prerequisite for the success of Black Studies. In addition, raising "the woman question," it was feared, would give the impression that there is only conflict or dissension between Black men and women in Black Studies when, in fact, there are many areas of cooperation. But ignoring or refusing to talk

about problems rarely if ever makes them simply go away.

The issue of Black women in Black Studies has been brought out into the open. In Atlanta at the Institute of the Black World curriculum development conferences, and at the Howard University Fifteen Year Assessment of Black Studies Conference, the issues of Black women as colleagues and as subject matter in Black Studies were openly addressed. Similarly, at recent Women's Studies conferences these issues are receiving attention. The criticisms raised by Black women, and often by Black men as well as by white colleagues in Women's Studies, may well be heard and acted upon to the point that "more Black is put into Women's Studies, and more women are put into Black Studies."<sup>29</sup>

## WITHOUT CONCLUSION

The "no conclusion" to this review of the beginnings, development, and current state of Black Studies in liberal arts institutions is that the Black Studies challenge remains, and the struggles it embodies continue. What can be said is captured in these words:

Black studies offers a challenge to higher education far beyond the inclusion of black subject matter in the curriculum. Its challenge is how we view human existence itself. The question is, whose lives do we value? Black studies begins with the lives of black people and reaches out to all humanity. How many times I have had white students say to me at the end of a course. "I didn't know I would learn so much about myself by studying black literature."

I knew, because within black literature, history and culture lie truths about America that can be found in no other place. I knew because universal truths lie within the black experience as certainly as these truths reside in the experiences of any people. Unfortunately, white academicians resist growing down into the black experience because to do so means an inevitable confrontation with the underside of America—racism. Yet, what more appropriate place for such a confrontation than the classrooms of universities and colleges.<sup>30</sup>

## NOTES

1. A stipend from Oberlin College made it possible for Elizabeth H. Oakes to serve as my research assistant for this chapter.

2. Mike Thelwell, "Black Studies: A Political Perspective," *The Massachusetts Review*, (1969) Vol. 10(4): 703.

3. Eugene Terry, "Introduction," *Quadrennial Review of the Undergraduate Curriculum*, W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies, University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

4. *Ibid.*, 2.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Julius Lester, "Growing Down," *Change Magazine* (1979): 34.

8. In 1950, about 4.5 percent of the Black youth between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four attended U.S. colleges. By 1970, 15.5 percent of Black youth of this same age group were in colleges and universities. Only five years later, 20 percent of Black males and 21 percent of Black females between

eighteen and twenty-four were in institutions of higher education. A decline began in 1976, reflecting the brutal attacks upon educational opportunities for African Americans. See Manning Marable, "Afro-American History: Post Reconstruction." Review Essay. Black Studies Curriculum Development Course Evaluations, Conference I: History and Political Economy, October 1–3, 1981, Institute of the Black World, Atlanta, Ga., 3.

9. *Ibid.*, 4.

10. *Ibid.*

11. While the focus of this chapter is Black Studies and the African-American experience in higher education, the Eurocentric perspective similarly misrepresents the experience of other people of color and non-Western people.

12. Lester, "Growing Down," 37.

13. Lewis King, "The Future of Mental Health Research of the Black Population: Outline of an Alternative Deep Structure," *Research Bulletin*, Vol. 1(1).