

The Black Studies Movement: Afrocentric-Traditionalist-Femi- nist Paradigms for the Next Stage (1992)

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In 1987 the Ford Foundation asked me to visit a select number of Black Studies programs, departments, centers, and institutes and 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, and summaries of similar investigations conducted by Robert L. Harris of Cornell University, and by Nellie McKay of the University of Wisconsin. The document was appropriately edited to protect the identities of those interviewed. Although the report became a basis for the subsequent distribution of over three million dollars in grant money not all Black Studies scholars and administrators were pleased.

Most critical of my specific involvement in the Ford Foundation examination of Black Studies was Selse W. Williams, chair of National Council for Black Studies (NCBS). Williams maintained in the fall 1990 NCBS *Newsletter*, "While Hine is a reputable historian, her minimal contact with the Black Studies Movement and lack of understanding of the real issues in this developing discipline become readily apparent to the initiated reader." He elaborated, "After reading Hine's essay, it appears that Hine does not view the mission of Black Studies as fundamentally different from that of traditional academic disciplines." It was this latter comment that started me on a course of systematic review of just about everything that I could find concerning the evolution of Black Studies over the past two decades.

Williams was correct on one score, I had assumed that as an academic endeavor the purpose or mission of Black Studies was to create and disseminate new knowledge about the social, political, cultural, and historical experiences of Black people of African descent throughout the Diaspora. Yet, his criticism struck more than a defensive chord. I wondered indeed if I had missed something, and therefore determined to discover what it was that made Black Studies, as Williams asserts "fundamentally different from that of traditional academic disciplines."

Inasmuch as sufficient time has passed since the modern incarnation of Black Studies as an intellectual movement, what are we to make of its accomplishments, contributions, and shortcomings?¹ This essay, is at heart an exercise in Black intellectual history of both the movement of Black Studies and the idea of Black Studies.

In their text, *Introduction to Afro-American Studies* 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 a 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."² It must be pointed out that many black scholars working within mainstream disciplines have offered brilliant critiques and have successfully transformed the work being done in key disciplines.

In 1969, the chair of the Black Studies Department at the University of Pittsburgh, Jack L. Daniel, maintained in another definition:

Black Studies constitutes an attempt to understand the human experience using Black experience as both a focal point and a platform from which to view ... 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." Similarly, Black Studies is concerned with the integration of the objective and the subjective, the material and the spiritual, or the visible and the invisible.... Black Studies is for all Human beings.³

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."⁴ 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 student consciousness emerged a two-decade long critique of institutional racism in higher education.

It is well to underscore 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 with Black Studies, Ethnic Studies and Women Studies appeared on college and university campuses.

Most Black Studies scholars agree that the field is distinguished from other academic endeavors because of the tension between theory and practice and that they must always respond 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. Their "outsider within" posture arose, in part, out of the radical protests and demands of the first generation of Black college students on predominantly white college and university campuses during the late 1960s. 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."⁵ Recently, Molefi Asante, the author and architect of "Afrocentricity,"⁶ has argued that there were problems with the initial formulation of Black Studies. He declared that,

The field of Black Studies or African-American Studies was not born from a clear ideological position in the 1960s. Our analyses as students were correct, but our solutions were often fragmentary, ideologically immature, and philosophically ill-defined. The absence of a comprehensive philosophical position, with attendant possibilities for a new logic, science, and rhetoric condemned us to experimentation with an Islamic base, a Marxist base, a civil service base, a reactionary nationalist base, a social service base, a systematic nationalist base, or a historical-cultural base.⁷

Asante further maintains that systematic nationalists tended to be grouped with the historical-cultural school because they, at least, understood that Black Studies implied a different perspective although they could never thoroughly articulate that perspective. Asante, however, names the Afrocentric perspective, and highlights the crucial distinction that just because a professor is Black, it does not mean that the professor is Afrocentric. Afrocentricity as that perspective becomes indispensable to our understanding of Black Studies; otherwise, we have a series of intellectual adventures in Eurocentric perspectives about Africans and African Americans. That is why the students of the sixties, in their moment of intellectual purity which remained uncaptured until now, railed against white instructors of Black Studies. As we now know the mistake was not in their intention: to have a black perspective (they did not refer to it as Afrocentricity) but it was in their misunderstanding that Afrocentricity meant black professors."⁸

The tortured birth of Black Studies has long affected how this newest of the academic disciplines has been perceived and evaluated. But this is not the only difficulty impeding a judicious assessment of its institutional and intellectual evolution. Race remains a substantial barrier that blocks and distorts our view. In one regard, Asante is on target. All African American academicians who work on subject matter pertaining to peoples of African descent regardless of individual perspective and orientation are, as a rule, lumped together and categorized as Black Studies scholars. It would appear that their racial identity outweighs other differences. The past few months I have experimented with ways of ordering and distinguishing difference between Black Studies scholars, and analyzing the Afrocentric impulse. Risking oversimplification, and the ire of those mentioned and unnamed, I have devised a model of ideal types within the Black Studies community of scholars, writers, and thinkers. It is important to emphasize that these are ideal types and that there is considerable movement between them.

The three groups of scholarly practitioners fueling the Black Studies mission of creating and disseminating new knowledge that illuminates the past and present social, economic, political and educational conditions of African Americans and of all peoples of African descent throughout the diaspora can be separated into "Traditionalists," "Authentists" and/or "Afrocentrists," and Black Feminists.

When I prepared the Ford Foundation report I essentially focused on the scholarship produced by the "Traditionalists," consisting of both Black and White academicians in

sociology, history, and in literary theory. Based upon an assessment of their work, I concluded that Black Studies was alive and well and indeed flourishing at institutions fortunate enough to boast a critical representation of academically respected, highly visible scholars. It was easy for me to "roll call" the names and titles of the books authored by James D. Anderson, John Blassingame, Clayborne Carson, Barbara Fields, Thomas Holt, Earl Lewis, Nell Irvin Painter, Leslie Owens, Albert Raboteau, Joe Trotter, and the late Nathan I. Huggins, to name only a few historians. Among the scholars of African American Literature the stellar roster included Michael Awkward, Houston Baker, Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Deborah McDowell, Nellie McKay, Arnold Rampersad, Valerie Smith, and Mary Helen Washington. Similarly, among the acknowledged Black sociologists are Walter Allen, Elijah Anderson, Bart Landry, Aldon D. Morris, and William Julius Wilson. Neither time nor space permit the listing of all the traditional 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. Virtually every established social science and humanities discipline, including art history, music, psychology, political science, and economics has had to contend with the fresh interpretations and perspectives, innovative methodologies, new sources, and probing questions that characterize the best of traditional Black Studies scholarship.

The scholarly monographs collectively gave notice to and unveiled the myriad accomplishments and experiences of Black men and women from every strata, segment, and territory in the African World. The previously muted voices and actions of slaves, agricultural workers, urban migrants, industrial laborers, writers, artists, musicians, reformers, accommodationists, and nationalists demonstrate a relentless critical reflection on the fundamental principles, and the as yet largely unrealized ideals, that undergird our total society.

Let's take the history of slavery as a case in point. The pioneering generation of Black Studies scholars who entered the academy in the post civil rights movement era amassed clearly impressive records. We now know a great deal more about slavery as an institution and about the inner lives of slaves. The innovative and imaginative scholarship on slave communities, slave religion, slave resistance, 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 and fashioned a remarkably resilient and progressive culture reflected in song, folktales, dance, and in quilts. Their essential humanistic values and belief in the sanctity of life and black world views grounded largely upon a theology of hope ensured the survival of African Americans in slavery and in freedom.

In spite of the dazzling achievements of slavery historians, a sober assessment revealed a special lacuna. The voice and experiences of Black women remained mute, unexamined. In most of the studies both the slaves and the masters were male. Beginning in the late 1970s an emergent group of Black Feminist scholars raised disturbing and challenging questions about the androcentric bias in Black history. Were not Black women captured and enslaved on the coasts of Africa? Did not Black women suffer the middle passage and participate in the often future rebellions on board the slave ships? Did not Black women bear the responsibility of reproducing the entire slave labor force after the 1808 close of the African slave trade? To be sure, Angela Davis, writing from

prison in the early 1970s suggested that Black women had a unique slavery experience worth exploring on its own merits, but few heeded her call.⁹

The appearance of Deborah Gray Whites study of slave women in the plantation South significantly altered our understanding of the "peculiar institution" and its gender relations."¹⁰ Her critique of the stereotypes of Black women as Jezebels, mammies, and Sapphires revealed the myriad ways in which our society attempted to devalue and to dehumanize Black women. Raped with impunity both in and out of slavery, exploited as producers and reproducers, Black women developed a culture of dissemblance and self-reliance in order to survive.¹¹ They had no choice but to become creative agents for change and to embark upon the heroic task of re-imaging themselves and their sex. Moreover, the study of women's experiences under slavery revealed the layered depth of white women's complicity in the exploitation and oppression of Black women and the extent to which white women were privileged on the backs of Black bondwoman in slavery and on Black domestic servants in freedom. When Black women occupy the center of the intersection, then slavery studies and all labor studies of the late 19th and 20th centuries will examine new, more complex questions of gender as well as of racial power relations.

I am much encouraged by the number of scholarly works that have appeared in the past decade chronicling the historical and literary experiences and contributions of Black women. The monographs by historians Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, Jacqueline Rouse, Adrienne Lash Jones and Marilyn Richardson to name only a few have legitimized the study of Black women's history. The textbook history written by Paula Giddings, the collected essays of Angela Davis, the important anthologies edited by Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley, and Filomina Chioma Steady attest to the vibrancy of this field. Of course, the numerous works in progress including Gwendolyn Keita Robinson's study of the Black cosmetic industry, and Elsa Barkley Brown's examination of Maggie Lena Walker and the Order of the St. Lukes, plus Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's research on Black women and the Black Baptist church, along with Wilma King's, Brenda Stevenson's and Stephanie Shaw's work on Black women and children in slavery bode well for a provocative future in Black women's history.

Armed with impressive scholarship in Black women studies, we are able to speak with greater confidence and accuracy about the external and inner lives of Black women in the United States. We now know that Black women played essential roles in ensuring survival and progress of families, institutions, and communities. We know that even oppressed Black women were able to develop, as in the case of Maria Stewart, a political agenda for Black liberation that pivoted on the emancipation of Black women. We now know that Black women's angle of vision enabled them collectively and individually to fashion an autonomous world view and opposition consciousness.

Black feminist scholars have been especially critical in the development of theories of intersectional analyses of race, class, and gender. In describing the existence of sexism among Black men, and by documenting "the ways in which racism empowers white women to act as exploiters and oppressors" Black Feminists have opened a Pandora's box. In short, as bell hooks declares, "By calling attention to interlocking systems of domination—sex, race, and class—Black women and many other groups of women acknowledge the diversity and complexity of female experience, or our relationship to power and domination."¹² Patricia Hill Collins writing along the same line in her book, *Black Feminist Thought*, argues that race, class, and gender may not be the most fundamental or important systems of oppression, but they have most profoundly affected African American women. She adds that one significant dimension of Black feminist

thought is its potential to reveal insights about the social relations of domination organized along other axes such as religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and age. Collins and hooks agree that "investigating Black women's particular experiences thus promises to reveal much about the more universal process of domination."¹³ Clearly "Black Feminists" are working within the prescribed definition of Black Studies scholarship while at the same time challenging androcentric biases. Arguably, it may well be the case that the "Traditionalists" and "Black Feminists" make up one camp in the Black Studies debate. Both groups critically interrogate reigning intellectual systems, but with the positive intention of somehow reforming the academic, or making it live up to its potential.

The "Authentic" Black studies scholars and writers have likewise engaged in and produced important intellectual work. Most prominent among this group are Wade Nobles, Maulana Karenga, James Turner, Molefi Asante, Nathan and Julia Hare, Robert Staples, Ronald Bailey, Cedric Robinson, Haki Madhubuti, James Stewart, Asa Hilliard, Ak'im Akbar, and a host of others too numerous to mention. Among Black women "authenticists," I would include the following: Vivian Gordon, Kariana Welsh-Asante, Carol Barnes, Roszlind Jeffries, and Frances Cress Welsing.

Although I list these names together I am not unmindful or unaware of the critical perspectival and ideological differences among these scholars and thinkers. Some "Authenticists" are cultural nationalists, pan-Africanists, Afrocentrists, and Marxists. Their works are either descriptive, prescriptive, or proscriptive. At the outset, I must underscore that I do not wish to suggest that the scientific merit of the work of the "Traditionalists" is more important than that of the "Authenticists." Nevertheless, the acceptance accorded the work of the "Traditionalists" if the larger academy suggests what white and some Black academic gatekeepers deem meritorious. Suffice it to say that there are many leading edges and many streams in multidimensional academic intellectual space.

The theme unifying the work of "Authenticists" is an intellectual and often overt political commitment to Black liberation from European, or more crassly white, categories of thought and analysis. "Authenticists" are determined to create a new African methodology that allows Africans to control knowledge about themselves. Their rejection of European categories often means a rejection of "Traditionalist" and even "Black Feminists" approaches which remain rooted in "European" tenets of research, evidence and argument, even as they transform those tenets in use.

Of the earlier generation of Black Studies scholars and liberation activists who most inform the work of contemporary "Authenticists" are Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. DuBois, E. Franklin Frazier, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Langston Hughes, C.L.R. James, Franz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Eric Williams.

Until quite recently neither the writings nor the identities of the "Authentic" Black studies academicians penetrated mainstream awareness. Recent magazine and newspaper articles have effectively captured the excitement, controversy, and tension surrounding the concept of Afrocentricity and the growing prominence of a contingent of speakers, writers, adjunct or retired professors variously referred to as Nile Valley scholars, Egyptologists, or African World scholars. I refer to this important subset of "Authenticists" as "Originists." The most prominent "Originists" are Yosef ben-Jochannan, John Henrik Clarke, John Jackson, Drusilla Dunjee Houston, St. Clair Drake, Ivan Van Sertima, and Cheikh Anta Diop. Originists, as the titles of their many books attests, argue that Africa is the cradle, or origin, of civilization (High Culture) and that most significantly Egyptians were African. In sum, the "Originists" provide African Americans with

their own origin stories that lay claim to the credit for much of the knowledge that allegedly has been erroneously attributed to Greeks and Romans. Asante defines Afrocentricity as "the belief in the centrality of Africans in post modern history. It is our history, our mythology, our creative motif, and our ethos exemplifying our collective will."¹⁴

Although "Originists" have been teaching, writing, and privately publishing their own books and pamphlets for decades, they went into eclipse for a period of years, but they are experiencing a resurgence. The degree to which this resurgence is related to the problems growing out of modern manifestations of racism is unclear. A brief survey of the arguments and titles of some of "Originists" books is suggestive. Martin Bernal, author of the controversial *Black Athena*, declared that "the political purpose ... is, of course, to lessen European cultural arrogance."¹⁵

John G. Jackson in his *Introduction to African Civilizations* declares on the dedication page, "This book is dedicated to everybody with an African ancestry—the whole human race!" Jackson's main point is that "Civilization did not start in European countries, and the rest of the world did not wait in darkness for the Europeans to bring the light. "Then there is the trilogy of Yosef ben-Jochannan, *African Origins of the Major Western Religions* (1970), *Black Man of the Nile and His Family* (1978), and *Africa: Mother of Western Civilization* (1978)."¹⁶ ben-Jochannan declares that the purpose of his *Black Man of the Nile*, is to help African peoples' "Re-identification with their great ancestral heritage. For the Black Peoples have maintained that: If the European Jews can fight for an arid piece of desert; the Irish for a small emerald island; the British for a barren island of misery; protestant Anglo-Saxon American for their stolen "Indian" empire; why should the Black man (the African, African-Caribbean, and African-American) not fight for the richest piece of real estate on the planet earth—His original homeland—Mother Africa."¹⁷ Linking the African past to the discovery of the New World Ivan Van Sertima declared in 1976 in *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* that by design and by accident, "in several historical periods long before the coming of Columbus, Africans traveled to America."¹⁸ Van Sertima writes, "We now know, without a shadow of a doubt, through the most modern methods of dating, that some of the Negroid stone heads found among the Olmecs and in other parts of Mexico and Central America are from as early as 800 to 700 B.C."¹⁹

The father of the scholarly project to reclaim and reconstruct the African basis of Western civilization, beginning with a reidentification of Egypt as African was Cheikh Anta Diop, author of *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*. Diop espoused the theory of the cultural unity between Egypt and Africa in order that a revision of the curriculum of African history would teach the young their own history "rather than that of the colonizer."²⁰ The most recent additions to this literature are the two volumes of St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There* (1987).

Traditional Black Studies scholars have generally remained aloof from the passion engulfing Nile Valley Civilization scholarship, and Afrocentricity. But as these topics capture the imagination of students, it becomes important to take a closer look, not to dismiss but to explain what is happening. All groups and societies need origin stories. Taken collectively the works of Diop, Jackson, ben-Jochannan provide a sense of beginning and belonging. The late Nathan Huggins observed that, "Tradition is a legitimizing phenomenon. All peoples and all nations want to tie themselves to an ancient past (ideally, preliterate and mythic)." He continued, "The Founding Fathers were conscious that the actual history could not be the rationale on which their new nation could rest. They

wanted to found their roots in a classical and honored past, while they were deliberately severing themselves from the one tradition that gave them place and reason." But then Huggins departs sharply from "Originist" claims of how African Americans came to be. He declared, "Afro-Americans, too, are new, a new people brought into being as a consequence of American history, a new people for whom after several generations in America, it was impossible to trace back to any tradition beyond the American experience itself. This newness of people and nation has caused in both a problematic relationship with tradition."²¹

As may be imagined, assertions or descriptions of African Americans as new people is guaranteed to raise the ire of any "Originist." The important question remains unresolved. Is there a problem or intrinsic threat to the intellectual integrity of Black Studies, and the larger field of historical studies, from the thought-control implicit in the writings of "Originists" and "Authentist?"

In other words, the development and dissemination of origin stories must not comprise the final objective of Black Studies. The battlefield remains the minds of students and the goal is control or liberation, depending on one's perspective, through the development of an oppositional consciousness. A recent issue of *Black Issues in Higher Education* featured the current debate over Egypt's and Africa's place in the ancient world. As the article pointed out, the real challenge was how to move school systems towards Afrocentric education.²² John Henry Clark in an article excerpted from his book, *The Afrikan World at the Crossroads: Notes for an Afrikan World Revolution* (1991) summed it up boldly. He announced:

"What I've been pointing to is that if there's going to be a world revolution among African people we have to locate African people and connect with African people. No matter what we call ourselves and what island we came front or what part of Georgia or Alabama, we can still identify, with these regions. But the overall identification is with Africa and with Afrikan people wherever they are on the face of this Earth."²³

Black Studies is heterogeneous and complex. No single category of analysis should be allowed immunity from criticism. In order that the intellectual domain remain healthy each group of Black Studies scholars must engage in continuous critique, not in a quest for academic dominance, but to keep the ongoing movement free from dogma or absolutes. We must continually ask questions in order to keep the discipline vital. For example, is the Nile Valley view a fundamental acceptance of the old-racist-imperialist European view that nothing of note was accomplished in sub-Saharan Africa, and certainly not after, say 1000 B.C.? Or, is it that true "civilizations" are literate (versus oral), political, economically and socially centralized (versus decentralized), and architecturally monumental; and that all less complex cultures are "backward" and unimportant?

Black Studies is now poised at the most propitious moment in its evolution. I suspect that the long-range consequences of the contemporary phase of the struggle pivots on the theoretical coherence of the field, the extent to which Afrocentrism wins converts and gains currency, and how the entire Black Studies movement responds to the Black Feminist call for gendering. In conclusion, we must remember that there is much Black Studies work that remains to be done. There is room for innumerable contributions. Above all, dignity across categories must be maintained.

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Endnotes

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