



**AFRICANA STUDIES AT 40:  
REAFFIRMATION, RECOMMITMENT AND RENEWAL**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 03-22-07, p. A-7*

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*Last week the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS), the preeminent professional organization of the discipline, held its 31<sup>st</sup> annual conference in San Diego. The opening plenary session was titled “The 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Africana Studies Intellectual Tradition: The Origin and Future of the Discipline.” I was extended the honor of giving the opening address. Dr. Dorothy Tsuruta, Chair of the Africana Studies Department at San Francisco State University, where the first Black Studies program was developed by Dr. Nathan Hare, chaired the session. Below are excerpts from my paper.*

The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the discipline of Black or Africana Studies is clearly an occasion to reaffirm and hold fast to our original mission, recommit ourselves to the ongoing struggle to defend and develop our discipline and strive to retain the resiliency and flexibility essential the growth and renewal of our discipline in a constantly changing and challenging world. It is important to recognize the significance of our discipline as a key catalyst of self-questioning and change in the academy. Before us, Europe’s self-congratulatory narrative, masquerading as meaningful curriculum and quality education, went largely unchallenged and unchanged, except for periodic pretensions of acceptance and inclusion.

We had defiantly called for the “death of White sociology” via Dr. Joyce Ladner and later the necessary though “painful demise of Eurocentrism” via Dr. Molefi Asante. And the established order and its allies have consistently countered by claiming our decline and death as a discipline. Thus, we must not be alarmed by the latest effort to reinterpret our history of relentless struggle for a relevant and quality education. There is an intense passion by the larger society for pathological portraits of

peoples and things Black. And thus, there is increased profit for the pathological assertions that pockmark literature posturing and passing as new insight into Black life and history. Our answer to our critics must be continuous achievement and persistent production. And to do this, we must reaffirm our original triple mission of cultural grounding, academic excellence and social engagement.

Africana Studies, of necessity, requires *cultural grounding*, a rootedness in African culture—continental and diasporan, ancient and modern. Indeed, African culture, in its varied expressions, is the indispensable terrain and text for Black Studies and for an African-centered perspective and approach to the world. Black Studies is based on the fundamental assumption that Black life and culture are worthy of the most careful and detailed study and that it offers a rich resource of paradigms of human excellence, achievement and possibility.

Thus, we must continuously dialog with African culture, asking it questions and seeking from it answers to the fundamental issues and concerns of human life. These include enduring issues as well as fundamental challenges of our times, i.e., how to create a just and good society and good and sustainable world; build and sustain strong male/female relations and families; raise our children, honor our elders and ancestors; treat the vulnerable and stranger; establish a right relationship with the environment, design and use technology for the highest human good; determine and build the moral and social basis for global justice; and create and sustain an ever-expanding realm of human freedom and human flourishing in the world.

These questions are usually not asked of African culture, but of European culture. But the intellectual integrity of the discipline requires that the core data and the methodology we use to pursue and teach Africana Studies actually are rooted in and rise out of the actual culture of African peoples, regardless of the supplementary and secondary sources we use.

*Academic excellence*, the second major aspect of the Africana Studies mission, emphasizes the reaffirmation of our commitment to the highest level of intellectual production and teaching as Black Studies scholars, as well as providing the process and practice in which students achieve a similar intellectual grounding in the discipline. Here we move beyond the simple amassing of data to below-the-surface thinking which is African-centered, and the translation of the African initiative and experience in depthful and dignity-affirming ways.

Our task has always been to move beyond routine competence that counts as satisfactory work and clear space in the academy for the emergence of a new, emancipatory, freedom-generating discipline in both a psychological and social sense. Indeed, we sought to do our work in such a way that even those who opposed, even hated us, could not rationally deny the rigor of our research and reasoning and the quality and consequence of what we produce.

Academic excellence also speaks to the issue of our need to defend against disciplinary dilution and fluid and over-extended boundaries. Black Studies is a multi-field discipline which requires one of the widest ranges of competence in the academy. As a pan-Africanist project, it has always sought to encompass and critically engage the diverse peoples and cultures of

the world African community. But it resists the attempt at radical separation of Africana Studies from the source and impetus of its origin and development, the African American community, and from its historic and ongoing liberation struggle to expand the realm of freedom and establish justice in society and the world.

The third aspect of our triple mission is *social engagement*. This calls for a consistent commitment to using our knowledge to repair, improve and transform the world, called *serudj ta* in Maatian ethics. This commitment grows out of our original linking of intellectual emancipation with political emancipation into a single interrelated project. But it is also rooted in the ancient African understanding of the human need and use of knowledge. As Seba Amenomope says of his ethically grounded and grounding instruction, it is “teaching for life and well-being and to make one prosper on earth.” Thus, at the heart of our quest for knowledge, as Mary M. Bethune says, must be our obligation and commitment “to discover the dawn and then share it with our children and the masses who need it most.”

Thus, our central task, in the best of our activist intellectual tradition, is not simply to understand the world and ourselves in it, but also to change the world and ourselves in the interest of human freedom, justice and good in the world. And this requires that we resist the established order’s attempt to shift our attention from justice to genealogy, from life to literature, and from the masses of our people to the music of our teenagers. Indeed, we must struggle to open the way to a new world and a new and more expansive way to bring good and flourish in it.