



**BLACK/AFRICANA STUDIES AT 40:
ITS ROOTS, RANGE AND RELEVANCE**

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Black/Africana Studies celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, with an appropriate self-reflection on its roots, range and relevance as an intellectual-activist discipline with the interrelated overarching goals: *cultural grounding*, i.e., critical, and deep-reaching dialogue with African culture; *academic excellence*, i.e., exemplary research and intellectual production, teaching and learning; and *social responsibility*, i.e., acquiring and using knowledge in the interest of African and human good. Since the beginning of the Black Studies initiative in 1966 and its taking departmental form under the intellectual development and administrative leadership of Dr. Nathan Hare at San Francisco State University in 1969, Black Studies has continuously questioned itself and been questioned by others about its meaning, mission and future. This questioning has emerged from conversations anchored in and reflective of differing concepts of its roots, range and relevance (see a larger discussion of these issues in my article “Names and Notions of Black Studies: Issues of Roots, Range and Relevance”, *Journal of Black Studies* 2009; 40:41).

The issue of *roots* has to do essentially with accepting, denying or deemphasizing: the primary foundation of the discipline in the African American initiative and experience, the central role of the Black Freedom Movement, especially its Black Power phase, in the creation of the discipline, and its resultant emancipatory or liberational character. The issue of *range* involves varied positions on the reach and inclusiveness of the discipline in terms of African peoples and their varied kinds and concerns, and its original self-conception as a pan-African and world-encompassing project.

The *relevance* of Black Studies revolves around its critical contribution to humanity’s

and society’s expanded self-understanding; aiding the university in its claim to teach the whole human truth rather than a Eurocentric one; the rescue and reconstruction of Black history and humanity; the development of a more honest, accurate and useful social science and humanities; the cultivation of a new body of socially-conscious intellectuals and professionals; and the critique, resistance and reversal of the progressive Europeanization of human consciousness and culture.

Black Studies is grounded in the African American experience and initiative, and emerges in the liberation struggles and communal concerns of the 60’s. Hare contended that “Most crucial to Black Studies, aside from its ideology of liberation, would be the community component of its methodology”. This required, he said, that we bring the community to the campus and take the campus to the community in mutually beneficial relationship and exchange. This interpretation included a national and international thrust toward the liberation and development of the world African community in its most extensive form. Accepting this meant also that Black Studies would teach Black life and culture in the most expansive and inclusive sense, as W.E.B. DuBois said, as a truth worthy of being known and of the most careful consideration as a critical contribution to understanding ourselves and humanity as a whole. And as Molefi Asante argued, it would and must be centered in African culture, reflecting Africans as subjects of their own history and culture.

Thus, in terms of its concern with the range of the discipline, from its inception Black Studies stressed inclusion of African peoples everywhere, i.e., Continental and Diasporan Africans. To stress the foundational role of Africa in our history and culture and

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other vital links to other African peoples, early scholars in the discipline used various forms of the category “African” in naming the discipline, without denying the inclusive range of “Black Studies” as a similarly useful category and conception of the discipline. These categories included Pan-African Studies, Afro-American Studies, African and Afro-American Studies, African American Studies, and Africana Studies, and more recently, other names such as Africology or Africaology.

None of these names preclude or prevent the parallel and continuing use of the term Black Studies which carries an equally inclusive meaning and is seen as an informal designation as distinct from a more formal and cultural designation of terms derived from the words “Africa” and “African”. The term Africana Studies has moved to a prominent position and the preferable category in many quarters for varied reasons, although some scholars, including this author, use Africana Studies and Black Studies interchangeably. In any case, the defining discipline practice must be a methodology in which Africans are the subject of their own history and agents of their own life, learning and liberation. Thus, if we retain Black Studies’ rootedness in the life and struggle of Africans in the U.S. and of necessity link them to other African peoples in real and meaningful ways, we not only maintain the integrity of the discipline with its African American *roots*, but also are better able to demonstrate and develop its pan-African *range* and preserve its original and expansive *relevance* as an emancipatory cultural, intellectual and social project.

In its insertion in the academic world as a cultural nationalist project, Black Studies represented a hard-won concession not to color, but to culture and a freedom-focused that linked intellectual and political liberation

and privileged contestation and struggle as indispensable to learning and life, i.e., to the acquisition of knowledge and the achievement of social conditions supportive of a free and flourishing life. Indeed, as Mary McCloud Bethune taught, it continually insisted on a relevant education, i.e., an emancipatory, even liberational learning and teaching that aided in the struggle for self-determination and dignity-affirming development of African peoples.

Our task, then, is not to add to the self-congratulatory narrative and archives of the established order, posing as curriculum and quality education, or to strive for routine competence rewarded by tenure and financial taps on the head for Eurocentric work well-done. And it is clearly not our task to produce a language and literature of self-mutilation, self-concealment and pathological portraits of Black people, so characteristic of the new “non-Black”, “race-neutral”, “post-racial”, “Crusian crisis-ridden negro intellectuals”.

On the contrary, our task, as Anna Julia Cooper urged us, Black women and men, is to embrace the liberational thrust of our age and to establish the human conditions, i.e., the intellectual and social conditions, for developing a deeper and more useful understanding of ourselves and the world and for the conception and creation of ever-new, refreshing and relevant products of research, reflection and social practice. This means establishing bold intellectual and institutional initiatives to expose, challenge and provide alternatives to the dominant definitions and construction of social reality, to generate new concepts, develop a new language and logic of liberation and human life, and to cultivate an expansive social practice rooted in a profound respect for human dignity and possibility and a deep-rooted concern for the health and wholeness of the world.