

# Thomas Weissinger Interviewed: African American Studies Librarian, Philosophy Bibliographer and Professor Emeritus

by

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Thomas Weissinger has a solid record in African American Studies and librarianship as Librarian, African American Research Center (a unit within the History, Philosophy, and Newspapers Library), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (2002-2016); Head Librarian, John Henrik Clarke Africana Library, Cornell University (1985-2001); Coordinator, Library Instruction, Kilmer Area Library, Rutgers University (1982-1985); and City Hall Librarian, Newark Public Library, Newark, NJ (1980-1982). He holds a M.L.S. from the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Pittsburgh (1980), a M.A. from the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh (1978), and a B.A. from the School of Arts and Sciences at the State University of New York at Buffalo (1973). He has a special interest in Black heritage book collectors and Black Studies scholarly communication; and he has taught 'Researching the African American Experience' in the Department of African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. And notwithstanding, he is a former editorial board member of *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, author of *The Book Collecting Practices of Black Magazine Editors* (Litwin Books, 2014), co-author with Joseph Wilson of *Black Labor in America, 1865-1983: A Selected Annotated Bibliography* (Greenwood Press, 1986), and author of articles on the African American experience ("Black Studies Journal Assessment: Two Possibilities." *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 8(4) (2015): 97-116; "The Core Journal Concept in Black Studies." *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 36(2) (2010): 119-124; "Black Power Movement Book Publishing: Trends and Issues." *Collection Management*, 31(4) (2007): 5-18; "Black Studies Scholarly Communication: A Citation Analysis of Periodical Literature." *Collection Management*, 27 (2002): 45-56; and "Defining Black Studies on the World Wide Web." *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 25(4) (1999): 288-293.

## **Abstract**

This interview of Thomas Weissinger provides a discussion of his career in African American Studies and librarianship at the African American Research Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the John Henrik Clarke Africana Library of the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University, etc. with answers to questions concerning the book he has written, and the articles he has authored. Also discussed is the need for future librarians to pursue a career in African American Studies, the rewards and dangers of such a profession, the flaws in the process of Black magazine collecting, and digital and multimedia publishing.

**Zulu:** Thank you for this interview and congratulations on your career in African American Studies and librarianship since 1980.

**Weissinger:**

Thank you. I am honored. Perhaps these thoughts will inspire future librarians to take on this valuable work.

**Zulu:** In your book *The Book Collecting Practices of Black Magazine Editors* you focused on the collecting habits and personal libraries of three Black magazine editors (Ben Burns, Era Bell Thompson, Tom Dent) to understand why they sought to assemble personal libraries that was often based on their ideological perspectives. For those who have not read the book, what were the collecting habits of the editors, and how does their experience echo the overall African American experience in the U.S? And last, how may their collecting habits help in structuring or configuring functional African American (or generally, African centered) personal libraries?

**Weissinger:**

In writing about the personal libraries of the three editors I wanted to emphasize the connection between collection building and their ideas about identity and race. I think this emphasis is important because their goal was not to simply amass a lot of books about African Americans, but to build a collection that reflects a certain perspective? One of Tom Dent's letters makes the point about perspective. Commenting about William Styron's portrayal of Nat Turner, Dent says "It's the wildest thing. Such a violent polarity between what the black cats are saying and what the white literary establishment is saying. ...I mean there's just no meeting ground anywhere between what these people are saying."

Burns, Thompson, and Dent had different ideas about identity and race. These ideas were reflected in their book collections as well as the serials they edited (*Chicago Defender*, *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Negro Digest*, *Umbra*). Ben Burns' book collection emphasizes themes of race mixture, interracial dating, intermarriage, and miscegenation.

Those themes also dominated the early pages of *Ebony* and other Johnson Publishing Company serials. Era Bell Thompson's ideas on multiculturalism and racial tolerance stem from her religious and multiethnic North Dakota upbringing. They also are reflected in her book collection and Johnson Publishing content. Similarly, Tom Dent's book collection and publishing reflect his interests in black consciousness and identity formation as a Black Arts Movement poet.

The book collections were assembled in diverse ways. Many of the books retained in these personal collections were the subject of book reviews written by the editors. These were largely unsolicited gifts from publishers eager to publicize their products. Many of Tom Dent's reviews appeared in John Henrik Clarke's *Freedomways*. The Johnson Publishing Company sold a number of books through its Negro Digest Book Shop and Ebony Book Shop. Many of the books sold through the Book Shops are included in the Ben Burns and Era Bell Thompson libraries. Thompson and Dent often purchased titles at book talks and conferences. Burns and Dent frequented new and used book stores. Dent also ordered books directly, catalogs such as those from the African Books Collective (Oxford, England). Additionally, many of Dent's books were preowned by others. These included those formerly owned by his parents and several writers' groups he founded (BlackArtsSouth Writers' Workshop, Congo Square Writers' Union).

**Zulu:** Next, I would like to ask a few questions about some of the articles you have written, is that acceptable?

**Weissinger:**

Certainly. There are certain themes that run through my writings on librarianship, chief of which is availability and access to relevant information in the field of Black Studies.

**Zulu:** Thank you.

**Zulu:** You have written on the 'core journal concept' used by Black Studies scholars in 2010 in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* (vol.36, no.2, pp. 119-124); can you explain this 'core journal concept' and perhaps discuss how relevant it is to an academic examination of the cultures, societies and political economies of people of African origin and descent around the world? Second, in the same article you also argued that 'traditional disciplinary journals' should be included in the 'core journal concept' used by Black Studies scholars, is this still a concern you have, and do you think it is a general concern of academe?

**Weissinger:**

Generally current debate and scholarship in a field takes place within selected journals, a field's "core journals." In newer and interdisciplinary fields a particular journal may have importance in more than one field. My article highlights that the core journals in African American Studies have shifted of over time.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the core journals with content about African Americans were a mix of traditional discipline and African American oriented journals. The latter included *Crisis: A Record of The Darker Races*, *Fire!!*, *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, and *Phylon*, to name a few. In the mid-1940s Albert P. Marshall started a quarterly index called *Guide to Negro Periodical Literature*. This was a bibliography of articles from exclusively African American serials. The serials mostly were from historically black colleges and universities and were not covered by mainstream indexing services such as the Faxon Company. In the 1970s publication of African American journals proliferated in all areas and resulted in more extensive lists.

Essentially, my 2010 article makes the following point. Because mainstream journals once served as core African American content, it is not outlandish to think that some of them might do so again. Since African American Studies scholars both cite the content of traditional disciplinary journals as well as publish in these journals, it makes sense to count some of the more productive mainstream journals among the “African American core.”

**Zulu:** In 2007 (*Collection Management*, vol.31, no.4, pp. 5-18) you wrote about the Black Power Movement's legacy in sparking the rise in independent presses owned and operated by Black folks that produced culturally relevant books for Black audiences and created a space for Black authors to publish, a goal that surpassed its original objective. Today, independent presses owned and operated by Black folks seem to be few, with the exception of Third World Press, Black Classic Press, Africa World Press, and a few others. What has happened to the independent Black publishing houses since the Black Power era?

**Weissinger:**

Authors now have more options in terms of where they publish. One trend my article documents is that both university and larger commercial presses have found that publishing books about the African American experience is lucrative. There has been an upsurge in university press publishing in the subject area, but commercial presses remain dominant. A second trend is that, far from a competitive environment between independent black presses and large commercial ones, there is a synergetic relationship. Smaller independent publishers sometimes reprint works originally issued by larger publishers, and larger publishers sometimes create African American imprints of their own.

**Zulu:** Do you think the “rift among Black Studies thinkers” in reference to your “Black Studies Scholarly Communication: A Citation Analysis of Periodical Literature” article in 2002, concerning whether the field should embrace scholarship and activism has closed, and that the information transfer between the different intellectual camps are now more reciprocal patterns of communication, than in the past, especially in light of a new generation of scholars entering the researching and teaching aspects of the academy?

**Weissinger:**

No, the problem persists. My articles on core journals and journal assessment (2002, 2010, 2015) are consistent on this. For whatever reasons, Black Studies scholars publish in different journals, traditional disciplinary journals and Black Studies journals. Moreover, the 2015 article indicates that only about 15% of Black Studies scholars publish in both types of journal. There is more fertile ground for reciprocal communication between the two camps of Black Studies scholar. It is that Black Studies scholars cite discipline-specific journals 1.15 more often than they cite Black Studies journals. This was established in the 2002 article. I found the result so intriguing that I continued to explore it in subsequent articles. Theoretically, citation analysis and impact factor studies can bridge the gulf between the two Black Studies intellectual camps.

**Zulu:** I read the abstract to "Defining Black Studies on the World Wide Web" (*Journal of Academic Librarianship*, vol.25, no.4, 1999, pp.288-293) which said that "academic Web sites have little connection to contemporary Black experience and activism" and of course, there can be considerable debate about that statement today as yesterday, but in the world of electronic communication and social media (academic and non-academic) today, would that statement be an over simplification of reality?

**Weissinger:**

When this was written Black Studies on the Internet was in its infancy. The article was a useful way to describe the kinds of information published at the time. However, things have changed radically since then. The older websites were largely compilations of useful Africana sites, or bibliographies with links. Now, academic, commercial and personal websites are more complex. Many still feature links to other sites, but overall the content is more robust. For example, personal sites such as Abdul Alkalimat's *eBlackStudies* include essays, a lecture series, digital books, and other material. Commercial sites such as ProQuest's *Black Studies Center* are full libraries all to themselves. They include primary source material, access to journal and newspaper literature, essays, bibliographies, and more. Government and academic sites such as those produced by the Library of Congress, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, or Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, are rich collections of digital texts.

**Zulu:** You have had the opportunity to be the Head Librarian (1985-2001) at the John Henrik Clarke Africana Library of the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University, a library and campus I've had a pleasure to visit. How was it working there in light of it being the birthplace of the field of Africana Studies rising in protest in 1969 as the field of Africana Studies today has been increasingly embraced and universalized as a discipline in academic programs and departments at colleges and universities around the nation, as they have adopted the name "Africana" to signal their investments in interdisciplinary methodologies and approaches to examine African life and culture comparatively in a global dynamic?

**Weissinger:**

During my time there the Africana Studies and Research Center had a unique and privileged status. It was an autonomous academic unit that reported directly to the University Provost. Its 10+ faculty were 100% hires with subject expertise covering the whole African diaspora. It featured the first master's degree program of its kind in Africana Studies. In addition to a half dozen graduate students, its faculty served on thesis committees of other departments. The Center had its own building and an extensive departmental library. The library itself had more than 25,000 titles and included thousands of primary source documents in its microfilm collections. Altogether this was a vibrant and stimulating environment bustling with activity.

**Zulu:** In a 2015 article written for us at *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* (vol.8, no.4, pp. 97-116) titled "Black Studies Journal Assessment: Two Possibilities" you argue that a problem in Black Studies research is that important journals in the field are not evaluated by standard journal ranking systems, opportunity is limited for being published in the field of Black Studies, thus Black people have founded their own journals, and the ideas of credibility and trustworthiness are inextricably linked to particular Black Studies journals that focus on an evaluative system that engages "academic excellence and social responsibility" in reference to the tenets of the 1970s Black Studies movement or an approach that measures Black Studies journals impact in a manner comparable to the assessments used to rank mainstream disciplinary journals. Many appreciated the article, so much so that it was linked in a roundtable discussion at the National Council for Black Studies 41st annual conference in Houston, Texas on March 11, 2017 titled "When the Dust Settles: Journal of Pan African Studies (JPAS) in the Mix" in contrast to a previous panel held March 10 titled "Impact Factor in Journal Publishing in Africana Studies: Journal Editors and the Discussion of Citation Indexing, Journal Rating, and Publishing in Africana Studies" at the same conference. What has been the response (if any) to the article?

**Weissinger:**

There have been a few responses within my institution here at the University of Illinois, otherwise I have heard nothing. The recent NCBS discussion is the first external feedback I have had. I look forward to seeing the results their task force. Hopefully this leads to an annual review of Africana journal impact factors.

**Zulu:** I ask because in response to the two above mentioned panels at the National Council for Black Studies 41st annual conference in Houston, Texas, the email memorandum distributed to the editorial board of the *Journal of Pan African Studies* entitled "JPAS: Cited Half-Life, Impact Factor, Article Influence, Eigenfactor Score I wrote about a Afrofactor/Afrifactor" which you referred to as the Zulu memorandum has inspired Amanishakete Ani (Department of Africana Studies at University at Albany, State University of New York), an attendee at the conference in Houston to issue a call for journals in *Africology* to consider an Afrofactor/Afrifactor evaluation system for journals in *Africology*.

Based in your knowledge of journals in Africology (Black Studies, African American Studies, Africana Studies, etc.) and the nature of their operations and ideological orientations, what response can one expect from the twenty-five or more core journals in Africology?

**Weissinger:**

It is unclear to me how this will work. I had thought that a single organization would take on the work, similar to what Thompson Reuters does with its annual journal impact studies in the *Web of Science*. An Africana organization such as NCBS should take the lead if only to provide continued and consistent support. This is different than expecting the “core journals” to assess their own impact.

**Zulu:** Has the changes in the naming of the discipline of African American Studies, i.e. from Black Studies to African American Studies or Africana Studies to Africology hindered or complicated the practice of librarianship in your opinion?

**Weissinger:**

For practical purposes as a librarian, I take the terms to be synonymous. The programs and departments I have worked with had various names, methodological approaches, and subject emphases. Each consultation on a research matter has to be treated situationally. At Rutgers University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, my constituents mostly had joint appointments with other departments. At Cornell University faculty had 100% appointments within the Africana Studies and Research Center. While at Rutgers and the University of Illinois I served mostly in African American Studies, at Cornell my service areas included providing access to material about Africa, African Americans, and the African diaspora.

**Zulu:** In a recent e-mail (4-3-17) to me you mention that you would like to encourage future librarians to pursue a career in African American Studies? How do you suggest one go about such as task?

**Weissinger:**

There are a range of institutions where one can practice African American Studies librarianship. Apart from work at universities and colleges, and public libraries, positions are available at independent research libraries such as the Library Company of Philadelphia. My first position was at the Newark City Hall working for the Newark Public Library. I was the Municipal Reference Librarian there. I was attracted to Newark because the city had an African American mayor, Kenneth Gibson, and large African American population. Much of my collection building and reference service was geared towards providing information about urban development and the African American community. Before taking the Newark position I considered, and was actually offered, a position at a historically black college in Texas.

There are several library organizations one might join for encouragement and networking. These include the Africana Librarians Council, the Association of College & Research Libraries' African-American Studies Librarians Interest Group, and the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. There are also regional groups such as California's African American Librarians Interest Group.

**Zulu:** Although there are usually rewards and dangers in any profession, what are the particular rewards and dangers in African American Studies librarianship?

**Weissinger:**

In any given year the number of vacancies in African American Studies librarianship will be relatively few. I am aware of only four or five vacancies this past year. Three were at academic libraries and one at a private research institution. The fifth was at a large county library in Maryland. So, a measure of patience may be required while waiting for a good opportunity to open up. A second drawback is that the hours are long (12 month terms and 39-hour weeks). Academic positions which have faculty status entail librarianship and teaching, research and publication, and professional service.

Of the many redeeming aspects of being an African American Studies librarian is the positive impact one can have on student and faculty research. I am especially proud of the many acknowledgements received in their theses and book introductions. I am also proud of having served as a consultant to TransAfrica Forum, the advocacy organization in Washington, D.C. founded by Randall Robinson, and the African Centre for Development and Strategic Studies (ACDESS), a think tank founded by Adebayo Adedeji in Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State, Nigeria.

I especially enjoyed building library collections. At Rutgers University I was on the team that developed the Afro-American Labor Archive and actually processed several collections (the Ernest Thompson Papers and the Hosea Hudson Papers). At Cornell the Africana Studies and Research Center secured external grants (Ford Foundation, U.S. Department of Education, etc.) enabling it to host visiting professors from various countries. One such visitor was Professor Joseph E. Holloway who had written several books on African cultural survivals in the Americas. I believe Professor Holloway visited the campus for a year as a senior scholar. At the end of that year he donated a collection of manuscripts, video and audio tapes. Several years later Dr. Holloway arranged for a donation of the papers of Boniface I. Obichere, a UCLA professor of African history and editor of the *Journal of African Studies*. At the University of Illinois, I acquired the papers of Albert P. Marshall, a pioneering African American Studies librarian, and those of Pulitzer Prize winning *Washington Post* journalist Leon Dash, the author of *Rosa Lee: A Mother and Her Family in Urban America: When Children Want Children* (1996).



**Zulu:** You recently (4-3-17) mentioned to me about flaws in the process of Black magazine collecting when libraries rely on digital searches for information that rip through important cultural contexts as though key words can replace ideas and concepts in the guise of being neutral. How do you think this trend can be brought to light so readers and researchers will know that key word selections by the author or the publisher is selective (not objective), and may often be selected based upon how database search engine companies configure their marketing strategies, rather on content ideas and concepts?

**Weissinger:**

Admittedly, some journal aggregators (*JSTOR*, *Academic Search Complete*, etc.) include both journals from traditional disciplines and Black Studies journals, but this is far from ideal. While the journals of traditional disciplines are well represented, coverage of African American Studies journals is incomplete. For instance, these journal aggregators are not as comprehensive in their coverage of African American Studies journals as Chadwyck-Healey's *International Index to Black Periodicals*.

Likewise, some of the traditional discipline journals covered by journal aggregators cannot possibly be considered "core journals" in African American Studies. Either African American Studies scholars rarely cite the content of these journals or few African American Studies scholars choose to publish in these journals. This is a question about relevancy. Should inconsequential disciplinary journals have the same status as "more trusted" material when it turns up in one's search results?

**Zulu:** Thank you for this insightful interview, I am sure our readers and listeners (there is an audio data base that allows people to hear our content), will enjoy our conversation. And should there be anything we didn't discuss that you would like to mention or briefly discuss, now is the time to place it 'in the record'.

**Weissinger:**

Thank you for providing a forum where issues in librarianship and African American Studies can be discussed. It is important that students and scholars never lose sight of the strong relationship between the two fields. This relationship has always existed. For confirmation one has to look no further than the pioneering efforts of Daniel Murray, Arthur Schomburg, Monroe Nathan Work, Albert P. Marshall, Jean Blackwell Huston, Dorothy Porter Wesley, or Jesse Carney Smith, to name just a few.

**Zulu:** Thank you.