



**Black Studies and the
Democratization of American
Higher Education**

Charles P. Henry



A review of *Black Studies and the Democratization of American Higher Education* by Charles P. Henry (New York: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2017. 249 pp., bibliography and index; ISBN: 978-3-319-35088-2) reviewed by Eric R. Jackson (Book Review Editor, *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*; jacksoner@nku.edu) Professor of History Department of History and Geography; Director – Black Studies Program; Northern Kentucky University and Heather Crabbe (crabbeh1@nku.edu) Assistant Dean Chase College of Law Northern Kentucky University.

Africana Studies, African American Studies, Africology, Afro-American Studies, Black Studies, Afro-Caribbean Studies, and Pan African Studies are different names of academic units, departments, and programs that focus on the systemic analysis and investigation of people of African descent and their

interaction with themselves, Europeans, their dispersal and experiences throughout the Diaspora, and the institutionalization of racism and oppression as a means of control as well as the creation of various means of economic, political, and social subjugation. These academic units, departments, and programs are varied in size, structure, focus, and resources. However, they all have a common mission of uncovering the humanity and destiny of thousands of persons of African descent wherever they reside.

Over fifty plus years have passed since the Black Studies movement forced our nation's thousands of colleges and universities, as well as the non-academic world, to become aware that people of African descent were no longer willing to accept their subordinate or second-class status without challenging the system as well as the dominate culture that oppressed and violated them. More importantly, there have been numerous volumes on the origins and development of this powerful and community-based discipline, known as Africana Studies, African American Studies, Africology, Afro-American Studies, Black Studies, Afro-Caribbean Studies, or Pan African Studies since the mid-1980s, such as Abdul Alkalimat's *Introduction to Afro-American Studies* (1986), Robert Harris, Jr, Darlene Clark Hine, Nellie McKay's *Three Essays: Black Studies in the United States* (1990), Maulana Keranga's *Introduction to Black Studies* (1993), Perry Hall's *In the Vineyard: Working in African American Studies* (1999), Delores P. Aldridge and Carlene Young's *Out of the Revolution: The Development of Africana Studies* (2000), Noliwe M. Rooks' *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis in Higher Education* (2006), Nathaniel Norment, Jr,'s *The African American Studies Reader* (2007), Cecil Brown's *Dude, Where's My Black Studies Department?: The Disappearance of Black Americans from Our Universities* (2007), Fabio Rojas' *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (2007),

Talmadge Anderson's *Introduction to African American Studies: Transdisciplinary Approaches and Implications* (2007), *African American Studies* (2010), edited by Jeanette R. Davidson, Alphonso Simpson's *Mother to Son: A Collection of Essays and Readings in African American Studies* (2017), James R. Pope's *An Africana Reader* (2017), Angela Schwendian's *Readings in African American Culture* (2017), Victor Okafor's *Towards an Understanding of Africology* (2017), etc. The book under review is part of this same genre but is rooted, at times, in a more first-person narrative perspective.

In *Black Studies and the Democratization of American Higher Education*, Charles P. Henry, an Emeritus Professor in the Department of African American Studies from the University of California at Berkeley, and one of the founders of this field of inquiry and department at his university, presents a fascinating, sophisticated, and, at times, a personal narrative that discusses the history and evolution of the field of Black Studies, that started during the 1960s and 1970s by various enlighten student groups, as a powerful force for the expansion of the American mind and academy nationwide. More specifically, Henry argues that "Black Studies [was] a crucial part of the struggle for Black power – the power of self-definition and the power to reach one's full potential" (p. 216). Also crucial is the author's claim that "equal educational opportunity must include the right to determine curriculum, to decide what is a problem or issue worth studying, and to legitimate knowledge" (p. 216). Finally, Henry contends that Black Studies must not only play a critical role in America's universities and colleges by challenging traditional fields and disciplines (especially in the creation of core curriculums and also in regards to transcending the academy), but also have to "become more important as the United States moves toward a majority minority population" (p. 220).

Mostly employing a personal narrative and jargon-free writing style, Henry's *Black Studies and the Democratization of American Higher Education* examines the evolution of the field of Black Studies as a powerful force in the American mind and in the academy. Specifically, in chapter one, the author describes his personal journey to the field of Black Studies that began when he was an undergraduate student during the 1960s at Denison University, located in Granville, Ohio. During these years, despite the extremely small number of African American faculty and students, Henry led the campaign to establish a Black Studies program. Within the pages, the author also explains how several programs and departments were established in various colleges and universities across the country at the same time. Henry also explores how some pioneering African American scholars navigated the terrain of their disciplines as these programs and departments emerged. More importantly, the author shows how his career in the field of Black Studies was greatly defined when he "was invited to join the planning committee for the first annual meeting of NCBS [National Council for Black Studies]" and when he was subsequently "asked to join the executive board of the NCBS," as well as the creation of "the Ohio Consortium of Black Studies" during the 1970s (pp. 17 – 18). These experiences gave Henry confidence and tools he needed when he subsequently became one of the first faculty members "in African American Studies at the University of California at Berkeley" (p. 18).

In his next two chapters, Henry explores the history of various Black Studies programs and departments as well as some of the key African American students and faculty who were involved in these efforts, such as Harold Cruse, E. Franklin Frazier, Vincent Harding, Maulana Karenga, Gerald McWorter, and James Turner. Also important in these chapters is the author's detailed discussion of the establishment and influence of various Black Studies departments at a number of University of California campuses, especially at the University of California at Berkeley (UCB). In short, Henry contends that at these campuses a heated debate gradually emerged in regards to the establishment of the various Black Studies Departments and programs, over "the need for legitimacy to the exclusion of place and identity needs" (p. 63).

Next, the author turns to the role that the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS) played in the establishment and the existence of numerous factors that led to the expansion of Black Studies programs and departments in hundreds of colleges and universities during the 1970s and 1980s. These developments occurred, Henry notes, primarily as a result of NCBS holding its annual meetings at various college and university locations throughout the nation, the inclusion of a global perspective by NCBS, and the creation of an organizational Journal (that currently is titled the *International Journal of Africana Studies*). Simultaneously, African American scholars in the more traditional disciplines, as a result of being excluded from numerous publication venues and from holding leadership positions in their respective professional organizations, began to form "their own parallel [African American] organizations and journals" (p. 123). However, with the changing, restrictive political and financial environment during the 1990s and early 2000s, most Black Studies programs and departments had to develop better strategies to face emerging "new challenges for survival" (p. 139).

The final three chapters of Henry's book discuss the continuous importance of Black Studies programs and departments both inside and outside the academy. Specifically, he examines how specific fields within the discipline of Black Studies developed as a result of the exclusion of the experiences of persons of African descent in so-called traditional disciplines. Furthermore, in these chapters the author contends that, in the end, "the goal Black Studies and other emancipatory movements have been working towards is a kind of democratic cultural pluralism," which in some ways "challenge[s] both the mechanisms and values through a narrow focus on Afrocentrism and [creates] a broad focus on the diaspora" (pp. 243 – 244).

There is no doubt that Henry's *Black Studies and the Democratization of American Higher Education* takes a highly critical look at the origins and history of Black Studies as a field of inquiry. Specifically, he uncovers some never before seen views of some of the founding academics of the Black Studies, Africology, and Afrocentric movements, such as John Henrick Clarke, Cheikh Anta Diop, Molefi K. Asante, and Maulana Karenga. His personal narrative and sometimes unapologetic style of placing the light on many internal divisions of the stormy history of the Black Studies movement, especially the impact of the Black Power Movement on this field from the community as well as the emergence of the discipline of Black Feminism. This type of insight is most intriguing, fascinating, and refreshing. For these points alone, the author should be congratulated.

Henry's *Black Studies and the Democratization of American Higher Education* does contain some shortcomings, which includes the lack of a coherent definition of key terms and concepts within the field of Black Studies, and the overly reliance on California universities in his discussion of the origins and development of Black Studies units, departments, and programs during the 1960s. Nevertheless, the volume adds much to our understanding of field of Black Studies.