

# Posterity and the Disciplinary Implications of Interdisciplinarity, Post-Raciality and Affirmative Action

by

Shaun Ossei-Owusu, M.L.A.  
Doctoral Candidate, Department of African American Studies  
University of California, Berkeley

*Shaun Ossei-Owusu* ([sowusu@berkeley.edu](mailto:sowusu@berkeley.edu)) is a first year doctoral candidate in the Department of African American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his M.L.A. from the University of Pennsylvania and a B.S. from Northwestern University. His teaching and research interests include racial stratification, law and society, gender, urbanity and culture.

## Abstract

This essay engages the future of Black Studies (and adjacent disciplines) by probing three critical issues: interdisciplinarity; the notion of post-raciality and the slow repeal of affirmative action. The piece argues that these issues are of critical importance and will substantively impact the future the discipline.

*“The future of African American Studies will ultimately reside in its ability to address a number of theoretical, structural and political questions which confront this next generation of scholars and teachers.”* (Marable 1992, 30)

As we enter the fourth decade of institutionalized Black and Ethnic Studies programs and departments, we face a new set of challenges, coupled with classic hindrances.<sup>1</sup> This brief essay explores three specific phenomena that pose problems to Black Studies programs and departments (as well as other institutionalized units committed to critically exploring race and its intersections with gender, class, sexuality, and other markers of difference). With Marable’s suggestion in mind, these three issues include: the move toward interdisciplinarity (professional/structural); the arrival of an imagined “post-racial” epoch (theoretical and political); and the slow repeal of affirmative action (political/structural).<sup>2</sup>

All three of these issues are broad topics that can engender trenchant discussions exclusively. I will not rehearse the explicative discussions of these topics; instead, I offer terse descriptions of these issues along with conceptual contributions rooted from a graduate student's perspective. I assert that for Black Studies and similar programs to thrive these issues must be discussed, addressed, and mitigated against.

## **Interdisciplinary Interdisciplinarity**

Interdisciplinarity is a concept and practice that continues to gain purchase in academia. Rooted in a synthetic and integrative approach toward the dialectic and knowledge production, interdisciplinarity seeks to answer broad and complicated questions that exist outside the realm of one discipline or field of study. There are rich theoretical discussions on the topic of interdisciplinarity, and I will not engage this voluminous literature; instead, I will illuminate the benefits and challenges posed by interdisciplinarity vis-à-vis the current and future state of Black Studies.

Since the inception of Black Studies, the discipline has postured and packaged itself as an innately interdisciplinary project. The prefix “inter-” has several meanings; as it relates to disciplinarity, inter- can be defined as “between” (i.e. international) or “mutual/reciprocal” (i.e. interrelate). With the first definition, interdisciplinarity can be used to define a project, method or research that falls in between one or more disciplines, whereas the second definition can be used to represent the building of relationships across disciplines (Moran 2002). The former interpretation is inherently established, as traditional disciplines are constitutive in Africana Studies; the latter points to the proliferation of joint and courtesy appointments, which signals the steady institutionalization of interdisciplinarity.

Accordingly, one major challenge to Black Studies programs is what I would call “supply-side interdisciplinarity.” This trope is not related to Jude Wanniski's coined concept of supply-side economics (Wanniski 1978), which suggests that economic growth should be facilitated by incentives to produce; instead I allude to the ways in which the supply of interdisciplinary scholars trained in traditional disciplines impacts students trained in newer interdisciplinary programs such as Black Studies, American Studies, Ethnic Studies, etc. Reappropriating this term from its economic context, my main assertion here is that interdisciplinarity is not only in demand but also in supply in the contexts of Black Studies faculty hiring (as well as other interdisciplinary programs). Accordingly, interdisciplinarity is not a practice possessed only by students of interdisciplinary programs; as it has gained more purchase in the past few decades, students in traditional disciplines enter the job market with interdisciplinary training, research, and writings in their portfolios. Does traditional department incorporation of analytical considerations of various markers of difference undermine the Black Studies project? How does this manifest itself on the job market when the historian or the sociologist is posited against the Africana Studies historian or social scientist?

There are many speculative paths in which one can consider this inquiry. A cursory glance at profiles of Black Studies Ph.D. granting departments shows that a large majority of faculty are trained in traditional disciplines, while only a small percentage come from interdisciplinary programs.<sup>3</sup> Fabio Rojas' (2007) broader research on Black Studies professors corroborates, showing that roughly a third of Black Studies professors received their degrees in the humanities, while approximately 40 percent receive their degrees in the social sciences and the remainder from relevant disciplines, with Black Studies compromising just under 7 percent.

One easy explanation could be the relative newness of Black Studies as a graduate endeavor, with oldest programs being at Temple University (established in 1988), the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (established in 1996) and the University of California, Berkeley (established in 1997); however, this rejoinder does not completely address this issue, as several cohorts of scholars have completed their programs. In fact, research has shown that there are more than 150 doctoral graduates in the past 20 years, between the three aforementioned schools (Rojas, 2007). Are graduates of these doctoral programs gravitating toward traditional disciplines (particularly the humanities)? Precise tracking of graduates becomes difficult as some graduate programs (as well as schools' graduates subsequently teach at) may not be transparent or have this information readily accessible to the public.

This is where empirical research on the discipline becomes integral to understanding the job prospects for Black Studies graduate students. Rojas points out that "if black studies programs depend mostly on graduates of existing doctoral programs in other disciplines, university administrators will be less likely to approve the creation of graduate programs dedicated solely to black studies" (Rojas, 2007, 189). Despite the emergence of new doctoral programs at the University of Pennsylvania, Brown University, and Indiana University, Rojas' assertion resonates not only in the context of creating programs but also sustaining them. A privileging of graduates from traditional departments over graduates from interdisciplinary programs valorizes the same disciplines that Black Studies seeks to challenge and transform and insinuates a certain kind of inferiority of the discipline. Certainly, different academic units have distinct goals, disciplinary and methodological approaches, and contextual circumstances that need to be accounted for. This observation may just be a byproduct of Black Studies relatively nascent institutionalization into the academy. Thus, I am not arguing for an essentialist approach to this issue, where Black Studies departments only hire their own; traditional disciplines benefit from the scholarship and presence of interdisciplinary-trained scholars, as they help challenge theoretical inclinations and presumptions. Moreover, the richness of African Diaspora Studies comes from its diverse and interdisciplinary character. Instead I implore us as a community of scholars to look reflexively and objectively at the interdisciplinary nature of the discipline and how it impacts hiring decisions and the structures of academic units within the discipline.

## Post-Racism for Whom?

The tropes of “post-race,” “post-racism” or a “post-racial” state have gained significant traction in popular and intellectual discourse. While these neologisms have been employed in the academic community, along with other “post” classifications (postmarxism, post-modernism, post-industrial societies, postchristianity, etc.), television media has been at the forefront of promoting the potentiality or arrival of a “post-racial” moment. Equally important to note is that individual members of the print media have also been resistant to these suggestions (Dyson 2008; Lyons 2009; Norman 2009; Pitts 2009). This envisioned state of postraciality corresponds with the concept of colorblindness, anti-affirmative action rhetoric and the revanchist retreat from civil rights sensibilities. Understood as a temporal designation, the post implies being “after” or “beyond” race. The recent election of President Obama (coupled with the clichéd mentions of media paragon Oprah Winfrey) has invigorated this discourse exponentially, providing opportune possibilities for either serious discussions around race or swift dismissals of racial realities.

Part of the conundrum of post-raciality stems largely from its sometimes nebulous and dissimilar meanings. For instance, Bolaria, Hier and Lett’s (2009) forthcoming edited volume *Racism and Justice: Critical Dialogue on the Politics of Identity, Inequality and Change* offers a more nuanced approach to the concept and attempts to conceptualize the possibilities of post-raciality “in terms of a set of interrelated institutional and cultural changes that can neither be separated from historical relations nor which are reducible to the past;” this designation is “neither oblivious to the importance of racial classification nor the persistence of racism and injustice” (Bolaria et al., 9). While certainly an ambitious project, post-raciality still presents opportunities for elisions that may be counterproductive to racial progress. It begs the questions, post-raciality for whom? Is post-race discourse a sincere and progressive attempt to improve race-relations and our understandings of how race operates in society? Can post-racial sensibilities be in accordance with color consciousness or are they diametrically opposed?

Journalist Jeff Chang rhetorically inquires, “Do post-racial politics merely mean a new way of marginalizing a racial justice agenda” (2008, 21)? Similarly, political scientist, Michael Fauntroy contends that, “Celebrating a “post-racial” America is premature and those doing so may well be unwittingly leading a dangerous new attempt to overlook and ignore America’s racial history and avoid public policy approaches to the systematic racial prejudice that still pervades our society” (Fauntroy 2008, 1). A sophism guised under sophistication and progress, post-racial discourse eviscerates institutional, structural, systemic racism as well as the microlevel and quotidian manifestations of race. One can postulate that such suggestions may stem from individuals’ (of all races) inability, reluctance and/or discomfort with discussing race in the context of either genuine or opportunistic conversations.

In its sincere manifestations, post-racial discourse attempts to move away from an axis of difference that has been the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (DuBois, 1901) and has the prospect of lingering for longer. It hinges on the reasonable assumption that discussions around race reify it and prevent it from discontinuing to be a dominant social force. Paul Gilroy's *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2002) argues a similar point albeit without the trope of post-racism, suggesting that race-thinking is dangerous to humanity and calls for an eschewal of "race." In an opportunistic sense, the idea of post-racism is quite homologous with laissez-faire racism, which refers to the disappearance of overt prejudice and the endurance of racial disparities produced by Jim Crow and sustained by modern free market ideologies (Bobo, Kluegel et al. 1997). Colorblindness operates in a similar fashion to laissez faire racism and post-racism as an abstract extension of liberalism to racial discourse that preserves white supremacy by conveniently and speciously striking down uses of race that attempt to remediate historical injustices while condoning racial profiling and discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2002; Haney Lopez 2005).

Juxtaposing post-racism with racial paternalism is especially useful; paternalism is the dominant groups' curtailment of freedom, right, discourses and possibilities of a subordinate group under the guise of marginal (and often the dominant) groups' best interest. Post-raciality operates in this paternalist framework via appeals of moving beyond race to yield productive, pluralistic benefits. Racial paternalism problematizes post-raciality as members of several racial and ethnic groups have espoused racially paternalistic discourse, with Ward Connerly being one of the main driving forces. Keeping in mind Derrick Bell's (1992) assertion that blacks who protect white hegemony receive enhanced "racial standing" and limelight, what would a coherent confrontation of post-racial confabulation look like—especially in the context of racially plural proponents of this ideology? More broadly, if race, as DuBois asserts is the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is it also the problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> or will it be post-race?

This is perhaps one of the most salient issues facing Black Studies programs as well as individual, departmental and institutional efforts towards addressing race and racism: the idea that we have arrived at a "post-racial moment" and its endorsement by members of various racial and ethnic groups. The fervent eagerness of proponents of post-raciality may pose serious problems for racial progress. Coincidentally, these post-racial suggestions are concomitant with discussions that question the viability and utility of Black Studies programs. Traditional departments have mimetically included courses that seriously consider race, class, gender and sexuality in their curricula; while this is intellectually rewarding for students and faculty, these axes of difference were first considered critically in Black Studies and Ethnic Studies departments (with gender and sexuality being later inclusions) and add to the questioned viability of such programs. Scholars have certainly begun to discuss and resist "post-racial" designations but more interlocutors are needed in this discussion. Speculatively, the next cohort of scholars will also have to deal with this issue more explicitly, situating Black Studies scholars (students and faculty) in a space where it becomes important to preemptively mitigate against the potential cascade of post-racial discourse.

## **An Affirmatively Transforming Academy**

The push for Black Studies was one of the vital movements that led to the inclusion of racial minorities in the academic professoriate and student body. As the discipline was institutionalized, faculty in Africana Studies and adjacent disciplines played integral roles in sustaining a modicum of racial diversity in American universities. The three recent Supreme Court affirmative action cases offer a telling revelation on the future of racial inclusion in the higher education. In *Gratz v. Bollinger*, the University of Michigan's undergraduate point scheme, which allocated 20 points to racial minorities, was struck down as unconstitutional. Most recently *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* dismissed racial balancing as a compelling state interest for high schools. *Grutter v. Bollinger*, upheld the University of Michigan Law School's narrow use of race, but paradoxically offers a snapshot of the conservative shift in affirmative action jurisprudence. A 5-4 opinion delivered by Justice O'Connor offers a sunset provision, stating, "It has been 25 years since Justice Powell first approved the use of race to further an interest in student body diversity in the context of public higher education. Since that time, the number of minority applicants with high grades and test scores has indeed increased. We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today" (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 [2003]). In this quixotic vision, O'Connor suggests that in 2028 affirmative action programs should not be necessary, with *Parents Involved* underlining that sentiment in 2007. This post-racial presumption coincides well with the new consciousness that has been produced post-Obama election and will undoubtedly impact admissions of racial minorities and latently Black Studies departments (especially at public schools), forcing current and future faculty to consider either crafting new strategies for undergraduate/graduate inclusion or challenge the slow repeal of affirmative action.

Justice Thomas offers provocative insight on affirmative action that deserves serious consideration for Black Studies faculty and students. Thomas argues,

*"The Law School wants to have a certain appearance...I believe it [this aesthetic] underlines the ineffectiveness of racially discriminatory admissions in actually helping those who are truly underprivileged. It must be remembered that the Law School's racial discrimination does nothing for those too poor or uneducated to participate in elite higher education and therefore presents only an illusory solution to the challenges facing our Nation... There is no recognition by the Law School in this case that even with their racial discrimination in place, black men are "underrepresented" at the Law School. See ABA-LSAC Guide 426 (reporting that the Law School has 46 black women and 28 black men). Why does the Law School not also discriminate in favor of black men over black women, given this underrepresentation? The answer is, again, that all the Law School cares about is its own image among know-it-all elites, not solving real problems like the crisis of black male underperformance."* Thomas dissenting in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).

While Thomas' view of completely eliminating affirmative action is problematic and controversial, he does offer a useful critique. Randall Kennedy summarily acknowledges that this criticism emanates from Thomas' belief that affirmative action serves two self-interested parties: white elites who seek the "appearance of racial equality by preferring the window dressing of affirmative action and 'diversity' to more radical measures" and black elites who benefit from "bounty generated by white guilt that is largely inaccessible to ghettoized urban blacks and impoverished rural blacks" (Kennedy 2008, 99). Thomas is also commenting on affirmative action's shift of emphasis from remediating racism to promoting diversity. This new accentuation privileges a utilitarian diversity logic and deemphasizes a civil rights logic (Lipson, 2008). Derrick Bell (2003) argues along somewhat similar lines and suggests that the shift toward diversity is a distraction from racial progress that prevents policymakers and courts from directly addressing race and class, obscures the larger inaccessibility of educational systems to poor people and does nothing to address the actual structure of privilege and its reproduction. Recent research shows that African immigrant students are overrepresented at elite institutions and are more educated than black Americans as well as their Asian and Latino immigrant counterparts; however, researchers are careful suggesting that immigrant students, "are not favored in the admissions process but... have come to exhibit the set of traits and characteristics valued by admissions committee" (Massey, Mooney et al. 2006, 268). Anti-affirmative action interlocutors who argue that immigrant groups and their American born children are beneficiaries of policy/initiative not intended for them often misappropriate such significant research and observations to argue for the elimination of the initiative/policy.<sup>4</sup>

As avatars of inclusion the affirmative-action/diversity discussion creates a new conundrum for faculty and students of Black Studies and adjacent disciplines. Outside of the technical legal discussions, do faculty concede to the language of diversity, which has the potential to obfuscate race and class and renders racial diversity as tantamount to an amorphous category such as "diversity of experience?" Or do professors and administrators directly challenge the shift from an affirmative action to the nebular notion of diversity? Both sides to this quandary offer serious advantages and disadvantages. The response from Black Studies units is contingent on contextual circumstances (e.g. the institution, academic unit status, the state of the institution), but the broader assertion is that this reality needs to be accounted for and mitigated against. Affirmative action "as we know it" is under the threat of extermination. If affirmative action remains, then becomes important to address Thomas' concern of "opportunity hoarding" (Tilly, 1999, 10) administered by elites of all races who intentionally and unintentionally foreclose poor minorities' access to the valuable resource of higher education.

Irrespective of the approach to this issue, it becomes important to resist essentializing a certain form of blackness and valorizing one racial group over another. Black Studies was "born of the desire to see a more equitable world" (Asante and Mazama 2005, xxvi) and although the socio-political and institutional context of Black Studies is distinct contemporarily, this proclivity to social justice is imperative.

While people espouse different conceptualizations of politics and activism, African American historian Martha Jones perceptively suggests that a “consideration of collective memory, that which we share and that which we help to create, may be the common ground on which we overcome the academic-activist divide in Black Studies” (Jones 2004, 71). In his classic critique on intellectuals in the academy, Russell Jacoby (1987) argues that careerism has generated an academe that is disconnected from broader audiences. While his focus is more on the production of exoteric scholarship, his underlining theme is the disengagement of scholars from larger publics and it would be myopic to think that Black Studies is impervious to this careerist sentiment. Responding to the atrophy of affirmative action presents an opportunity to reexamine our collective social justice pulses while constructing new ways to think about inclusion.

## **Conclusion**

Interdisciplinarity, post-raciality and the uncertain trajectory of affirmative action pose substantive challenges to Black Studies departments. Interdisciplinarity is an appealing and effective approach to scholarship, but it is important for Black Studies academic units to play close attention to their disciplinary composition while achieving a healthy and appropriate balance of scholars trained in traditional and interdisciplinary areas. As established disciplines continue to simply add race, class, gender and sexuality to their agenda (sometimes benignly, sometimes through institutional attempts to jettison Black Studies and Ethnic Studies programs) it becomes an imperative for Black Studies to critically consider interdisciplinarity and continue to posture itself idiosyncratically. Interdisciplinarity impacts the posterity of the discipline and can act as a methodological and institutional savior for graduate students trained in Black Studies, whereas students are able to market themselves more flexibly, or it can act as the subterfuge in which institutions use to consolidate faculty and demand more from scholars.

Similarly, the concept of post-raciality and colorblind ideology has challenged the necessity of affirmative action as well Black Studies and Ethnic Studies programs.<sup>5</sup> Such programs are typically underfunded relative to other departments on campus. Moreover, a poorly performing economy that is compelling university administrators to propose changes that circumvent faculty governance (Wilson, 2009) does not help the posterity of Black Studies departments. Black Studies must address post-raciality rhetorically, theoretically and empirically; the prospect of this allusion will force the discipline to articulate its importance and uniqueness as the market contracts and academic resources become scarcer.



Affirmative action as a tool of inclusion coincides with these concerns. The slow repeal of affirmative action as well as its current class-based inadequacies will arguably impact faculties and student bodies across higher education. This is especially true in states like California and Michigan where schools are prevented from using race in their admissions processes, which benefits applicants who suppress their racial identity (in a post-racial manner) and detrimentally impacts applicants whose racial identity is important in their lives but are reticent about mentioning race in their background because of the prospect of rejection (Carbado and Harris 2008). These new ramifications of anti-affirmative policy, along with the concomitant controversy behind affirmative action requires a collective response from the Black Studies community as well as scholars invested in inclusion. Although daunting obstacles, interdisciplinarity, post-raciality and the trajectory of affirmative action are only some of the critical and perplexing issues the discipline is faced with as we enter the second decade of the century and attempt to carry on tradition as well as challenge, revisit, refine, and improve our larger edifice of knowledge. If the current cohort of scholars is able to aggressively pursue social justice at a similar level to the vanguards of the discipline then it is reasonable to believe that these hindrances may be daunting but not insurmountable.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While I am primarily concerned with Black Studies many of my arguments are applicable to and have reverberations for similar programs such as Ethnic Studies, Chicano Studies, Asian American Studies and Native American Studies. To avoid redundancy I use Black Studies, Africana Studies, African American Studies and African Diaspora Studies with the clear caveat that there are distinctions between these naming conventions.

<sup>2</sup> For clarity and brevity, I focus on these three as particular topics of interest. There are in fact a host of other issues Black Studies and similar programs, such as prominent Africana scholars not publishing in Africana journals (Rojas, 2008) the issue of cross-fertilization and networking between programs and departments, the regional disparity and lack of Ph.D. programs in the south (Evans, 2006), the theory/praxis binary in the discipline, the negotiation of various theoretical prongs (i.e. African-American Studies, Diaspora Studies, Afrocentricity), as well as the transforming conceptualizations and manifestations of social justice.

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<sup>3</sup> While Ph.D. granting departments are certainly not representative of the larger mosaic of Black Studies departments, centers, institutes and programs, they are arguably at the forefront of the discipline in regards to producing scholars trained in the discipline. By interdisciplinary programs I am pointing to programs of Black Studies as well as American Studies and Ethnic Studies, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Ironically, this has even manifested itself in the discipline of Black Studies vis-à-vis the various debates around the increasingly Diasporic presence in the discipline as well as naming conventions and disciplinary approaches. For a controversial polemic see Cecil Brown (2007) *Dude, Where's My Black Studies Department?: The Disappearance of Black Americans from U.S. Universities* North Atlantic Press.

<sup>5</sup> One controversial article that has received several rejoinders is Wilson, R. (2005). "Past their prime? After 35 years on campuses, black-studies programs struggle to survive." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 51: 33. For an interesting forum discussion on "Whither Black Studies" see: <http://chronicle.com/forums/colloquy/archives/2005/04blackstudies/>