

# Africana Studies: Post Black Studies Vagrancy in Academe

by

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Maulana Karenga (2010: 425-429) in the *Introduction to Black Studies* informs us that critique and the corrective (problem solving) are indispensable to the mission and meaning of Black Studies. In this context, this essay is a dignity-affirming African centered critique and corrective designed to examine the present, the possibly distorted, the vacant and the silent issues in our disciplinary vicinity.

In this context of critique and corrective, I don't think the now popular '*Africana Studies*' is the correct name for the discipline that was once called 'Black Studies' for at least three reasons.

First, it is a word created to describe a list of books or other materials related to Southern Africa (e.g., Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa, etc.) as early as 1908 according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (the self-styled premier dictionary of the English language) and perhaps as early as 1882 when the blood thirsty and cruel Reverend Duff Macdonald [he ruled with 'despotic cruelty, flogging and killing' in Malawi according to Philip Briggs] of the Church of Scotland Mission wrote '*Africana: Or the Heart of Heathen Africa*', which was published in 1923.

Second, the term has its roots in a racist past, particularly apartheid South Africa, although most definitions of the word are linked to books, documents or the like relating to objects from or connected with Africa, there is always a particular reference to colonial/occupied Southern Africa with a note about items of value or interest to collectors (paraphrased via the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

And third, if *Africana* is such a proper name, why are there no departments of '*Africana Studies*' at Temple University, Harvard University, Ohio State University, Northwestern University, the University of California at Berkeley or at other institutions of higher education in the U.S.? I think they realized that the now vogue *Africana* is a vociferous without prominence. Harvard University has a Department of African and African American Studies with a PhD program in African American Studies, although the head, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (and Kwame Anthony

Appiah, formerly at Harvard University, now at Princeton University) popularized the term as *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* was published in 1999 (ninety years after W.E.B. Du Bois first articulated a need for an encyclopedia on the African experience). Northwestern University is the home of the first African Studies program in the U.S. and the Melville J. Herskovits Library of Africana Studies (established in 1954), now considered the largest separate *Africana* collection in the world. However, the university has a Department of African American Studies with a PhD program in African American Studies, not an *Africana Studies* department as one would expect, since the term ‘*Africana*’ seem to have its academic root at Northwestern upon the founding of the Program in African Studies in 1948. And furthermore, of the eleven doctoral programs on the African world experience via their diverse names, only Brown University (organized around history, politics, and theory; literary, expressive and performance cultures; and feminism, gender, and sexuality) and the University of Pennsylvania (Spanish speaking Latin America, East Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific focused) offer a PhD in ‘*Africana Studies*’. Perhaps one can reason that the others have not made a decision to join the ‘*Africana Studies*’ formation, considering how difficult it is to construct such a program. Therefore, I think it is very unlikely that any would be changing to ‘*Africana Studies*’ in the near future.

James E. Turner (2007) argues that ‘*Africana Studies*’ is a “more formal and proper terminology” for the discipline than Black Studies, and thus, it is “essentially about renaming self in the world of knowledge and human relations” (ibid., p.75). I disagree with these assumptions, first because it was not an African project that created the term, but rather a Euro-centric enterprise that was seemingly introduced to Melville J. Herskovits at Northwestern University (more research needs to be done on this question). Thus there was no African involvement in the “renaming self in the world of knowledge and human relations”, unless we can give an ‘African pass’ to Herskovits for his efforts to bring the study of Africa into the academy in the U.S. Yet, in a true fashion of honoring the elder statesman, Turner says his assessment is in line with John Henrik Clarke (2007), stating that Clarke said he “prefer to use the phrase ‘*Africana Studies*’ to ‘*Black Studies*’”, and thus “Black” has its limitations whereas ‘*Africana*’ relates to land, history and culture. But if we use the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of *Africana*, there is no mention of history or culture, only objects/things in Southern Africa, thus limiting the land question to one region of the continent, and therefore discounting the question of history and culture of the other regions of the continent.

Recognizing the complexity of finding a proper name for our discipline, the September 2009 edition of the *Journal of Black Studies* issued a special volume on the topic to mark its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of publishing. In sum, in the issue, there was no general agreement on a name. Hence, Munashe Furusa (2009) of California State University at Dominguez Hills argues that “the name or names of the discipline should reflect the nature and scope, curriculum content and structure, declared goals and expected outcomes of *Africana Studies*”, Ama Mazama (2009) of Temple University posit that “as long as Black Studies is primarily defined by subject matter, as it is the dominant practice, rather than by perspective, the naming of the discipline will remain a

contentious and tricky affair”, Shirley N. Weber (2009) of San Diego State University in agreement with Furusa notes that department names should be constructed based upon their curriculum, Maulana Karenga (2009) and Patricia Reid-Merritt (2009) are generally neutral, yet alone in his assessment is Molefi Kete Asante (2009) of Temple University as he suggests that the name *Africology* be used as the referent for Afrocentric analyses and critiques in the academy.

I find the above general avalanche of non-agreement interesting, because the promotional literature and program descriptions (via their web-sites, etc.) of most of the departments, programs or institutes are very similar in mission and scope, yet generally, there is no consensus on a name for the discipline. For some, this lack of agreement is a sign of strength (nonconformity, flexibility, innovation, vitality, etc.). Yet, for others, it represents an overall ideological lax in the intent and expected outcomes that engage the study of African people, history and culture around the globe.

Like others, I am of the understanding that new knowledge and experiences often require a shift in emphasis or theme and thus it is expected, and in particular situations encouraged. However the seemingly 1990s and beyond bandwagon approach to the adoption of ‘*Africana Studies*’ as a name for a discipline is dangerous. And in some respects, the rationales I’ve received for the use ‘*Africana Studies*’ in the academy is almost the same as the rationale for the use of the ‘N’-word. Hence, in the same way, I can imagine that one can suggest that the phrase: provides (1) a cleansing effect or mellowing effect to the discipline (as opposed to its aggressive and ‘militant’ past), (2) functions as a term of endearment and affection for the African experience, and (3) that it explains or describes part of the African ethos.

I honestly think some have tried to sanitize ‘Black Studies’ by offering ‘*Africana Studies*’ to suggest that their scope is more international, and thus beyond a domestic orientation to Black life in the U.S., a notion which prompted Cecil Brown (2007) to ask “*Dude, Where is my Black Studies Department*” as he reports on the disappearance of African American students and the internalization of Black Studies as a way to diminish the African American origins of the discipline, and thus replace key post (department/program head or chair) with people of African descent from the Caribbean, Africa or elsewhere in a fancy attempt to thwart the Black experience in north America. Few have been willing to discuss this issue (except in a ‘divide and conquer’ posture), but it is a growing concern that functions to keep African people everywhere in check in the academy, and therefore the mostly white power elite (and their puppets of different stripes) remain in place to dictate and define ‘*Africana Studies*’ as a safe zone for mass inclusiveness in hope that the diversity (home-geography, race, gender, class, ideology, ethos, etc.) would hinder their quest for a liberation psychology.

In short, it is now time to dismantle the temporary illusion of progress in the popular naming of our discipline. Thus, we must capture a self-defining and protracted African centered capacity to define and name our discipline.

Such self-determining and dismantling may be traumatic for some, but those out of the veil can assist others in the process of engaging reason and logic into forming a post-traumatic 'Africana Studies' epistemology via an Africological perspective, specifically designed to heal the effects of the 'African Studies' phenomena within Africology.

## Conclusion

The careless use of 'Africana' in relation to 'Africana Studies', formerly 'Black Studies' ignores the true history of the word, hence the oppression behind it which rest in a demeaning historical period, and therefore, any attempt to 'sugar-coated' it should not make it acceptable. Thus, instead of trying to find a rationale for its vagrancy in our disciplinary lexicon/vocabulary, perhaps it is best that the word be left in history, as we begin to rethink and rework how we want to define our discipline in a self-determining way, absent of external pressures to conform to the dictates of white supremacy, and intellectual imperialism.

In my opinion, and in agreement with Molefi Kete Asante, the faculty and administration at the University of Wisconsin, and others, the appropriate name for a discipline that examines the story of people of African origin around the world is *Africology*. The term was articulated based on internal protracted knowledge and practice in the discipline. Second it immediately suggests by its suffix that it is about study, hence the study of the African phenomena. Third, it suggests a seriousness of intent in the academy, in relationship to knowledge production, and conservation.

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