

# **The Emerging Black Studies Africanist: A Case Study of MSU's Triple Heritage African American and African Studies PhD Program**

by

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## **Abstract**

The essay presents a reflective discussion and dialogue about the role of Africa in Black Studies. Using MSU's PhD program in African American and African Studies as a case study, the paper analyzes the program's name, curricular, faculty research and teaching profiles, and the evolution of the program's institutionalization to examine these dimensions in relation to important indices for assessing the legitimacy of Black Studies in 2012. The author proposes the notion of the *Black Studies Africanist* as a way for Black Studies academic programs to unapologetically re-claim the study of Africa as an integral component of Black Studies and a centrally integrated region of advanced study among the Black World. As current director of MSU's Black Studies program, the author argues that along with a Black Studies' Americanist, as well as the African Diaspora scholar, a Black Studies Africanist-trained scholar would contribute to the program's fostering of both a regionally deep, comparatively robust, and globally interconnected distinctive approach to Africa in relation to Black/Africana World Studies. Achieving this objective would formulate a very different genre of Africanist (methodologically, ideologically and scope of content) study that identifies culturally and historically with Africans compared to the solipsist-alienated traditional disciplinary mainstream and dominant African Studies area foci; and that contributes to the actualization of Africana Studies scholar, Paul Zeleza's call to integrate traditional Black Studies and new African-centered African Studies initiatives into a single academic paradigm.

## Introduction

If one were to use the trendier name - *Africana* Studies - to refer to the Black Studies discipline, one would assume that the current article's thesis about Africa-inclusivity were a misnomer! Africa is after-all an integral component of Blackness and, thus, its study one might say is part-and-parcel of its constitution. We know that classical Black Studies scholars ranging from Du Bois (1969), Cruse (1967), Woodson (1969) and Malcolm X (1966) articulated their desire to reconnect the Black experience to African cultural roots.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the current article illustrates important reasons why this proposition that Africa is central to Black Studies cannot merely be assumed. The case must be interrogated, explored and evaluated in relation to important trends regarding the progressive evolution and institutional growth of the Black Studies discipline. The reality is that the study of Africa in Black Studies is much more variable, ambiguous and vague than the popularity of its *Africana* Studies name signifies.

Not only did Black Studies emerge as a core study of the African American experience first – and only later on, include the study of other Diasporic Black experiences in the New World including a more intentional study of Africans in the continent- nonetheless, within both the Euro-Americanist, on the one hand, and the African Americanist disciplinary traditions, on the other, Africa has remained an ambiguous phenomenon. The Continent formed a romantic 'Other' and 'Roots' symbol in even the foundational Afro-centric Black Studies genres. Moreover, for the White American Africanist, Africa would be the terrain of American foreign policy – missionary, security and developmental concerns.

The study of Africa by the mainstream Africanist tradition in America does not concern me in this current discourse. I acknowledge that the study of the continent in that Area Studies field of study is trapped in a geographical and still paternalistic freeze-zone. It has not been able to integrate the more vibrant cultural, ontological, or Diasporic epistemologies that is more of the trend – and certainly ideal- of the Black Studies discipline.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, like and unlike Lisa Aubrey's classic 2002 article, where in her own reflective essay about 'African Americans in African Studies' in which she also criticizes African Studies programs' insensitivity to African American epistemological premises of knowledge on Africa (Aubrey, 2002), the current article perhaps considers the opposite insight and reflects upon similar considerations by 'Africans in Black Studies'.

Using as case study Michigan State University's (MSU) Black Studies program (African American and African Studies- aka AAAS) and shamelessly injecting a perspective of an African-born Black Studies Africanist scholar and current director of a Black Studies program in the US, I use the ensuing Africa query, that I refer to as 'Africa-inclusivity', as an occasion to analyze issues pertaining to nomenclature (Black Studies vs *Africana* Studies), curricular, faculty research, and teaching profiles (inter-disciplinarity, multi-disciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity), and the discipline's institutionalization (Black Studies department vs interdepartmental program), to examine these dimensions in relation to important indices for assessing the state of the discipline in Black Studies in 2012.

In relating these themes to Africa-inclusivity, by which I refer to the inclination for the Black Studies curriculum to foster both a regionally deep, comparatively robust, and globally interconnected distinctive approach to Africa as the discipline evolves; the current article hopes to provoke a dialogue regarding the nature, orientation, and prospects for the role of Africa in Black Studies programs while also navigating the status and range of MSU's AAAS Black Studies program's "African-inclusivity". To further inject dynamic trends to guide the discussion, I use the article to excavate a shifting disciplinary landscape guided by the following questions? What is the role of Africa in the Black Studies discipline? Is MSU's advanced research Black Studies disciplinary focus American-centric, Diasporic, Afro-centric, Africanist or Integrationist? Is the program a *Black Studies* program or an *Africana Studies* program; and do these distinctions matter for the Black Studies discipline? What does a response to these questions mean for the implications for other Black Studies PhD programs and Paul Zeleza's notion of an 'Africana integrationist movement'(Zeleza, 2011)?

Zeleza's *Africana Studies* thesis was catapulted into public debate at a recent lecture delivered at the African American Studies Department at Princeton University; it posed an important theme that helps to unpack the conundrum that I am trying to unravel. Zeleza frames the issue as follows:

By the 1990s the divide between African studies and African American studies and within each field was institutional, intellectual, and ideological. Housed in separate, sometimes antagonistic units that often ignored each other; they examined the U.S. and Africa from distinctly different angles. The Africa of African studies was the sub-Saharan contraption examined through the gaze of modernization and development; the Africa of Afrocentric studies was continental and diasporic, focusing on the ancient past and transnational connections among African peoples. Similarly, African studies ignored African America, while many African American Studies programs ignored Africa. The gulf between development and diaspora, Africa and the diaspora, became deep and unproductive. The institutional divide was also racialized as white scholars dominated African studies programs and African American studies became largely confined to black scholars. African scholars often found themselves straddling between the two solitudes (Zeleza, April 2011)<sup>3</sup>.

As solution to the historic gulf between African American and African Studies, posing the prospects of an emergent Africana Studies movement that would integrate African American Studies, Pan African Studies and a new trans-continental African Studies led by African migrant scholars; by implication, Zeleza is suggesting that an integrated Black Studies approach will embody the future. He bodes a warning nevertheless stating that the value of a reformed Black Studies discipline that includes interdisciplinary, intercultural and international knowledge's, will only succeed if it too overcomes Americanist culturalist uni-centricity and monologism that is characteristic of an approach that excludes new African voices.<sup>4</sup>

While Zeleza's thesis undergirds a core strain addressed in the current inquiry; it is in no way the same argument that this essay makes. This is true because separately from its Black Studies program, MSU houses among the nation's fifth largest and renowned African Studies Center which was established in 1960, forty years before the University's African American and African Studies program.

What remains a curiosity to many at MSU, however, is that in spite of this fact, when establishing our Black Studies program at MSU, the founders chose to include 'Africa' in the program's nomenclature (African American AND African Studies). They included Africa in the program's mission statement, its graduate curriculum (Africa is our first-sequenced, required graduate seminar), and in its faculty selection (thirty percent of our faculty members are Africanists). In this regard, MSU's Black Studies program is already relatively integrated in a way that Zeleza poses.

As such, very differently from that thesis, with the current essay, *The Emerging Black Studies Africanist*, MSU's program presents a case study to examine the challenges that underlie Zeleza's integrationist thesis from the point of view of an African, African-centered, and Black Studies Africanist. Subsequent sections of the essay will examine the scholarly debate surrounding this thesis reflecting on contemporary dialogues on the State of the Discipline Black Studies scholarship. This will follow with a discussion of MSU's Black Studies program challenges in the context of these issues and in a way that presents our program as a heuristic site of analysis and case study for assessing the larger discipline. The 'Africa-inclusivity' factor is examined in relation to the broader prospects of the so-called "Africana/Black World" Black Studies scope of study and its implications for the state of our discipline in general.

Concluding sections, while gently nudging greater Africa-inclusivity and integration in some respects of MSU's program, also justify the program's ideologically agnostic, comparative and global but very loosely integrative African American, African Diaspora and African Studies' profile (the triple heritage phenomenon) that simultaneously fosters the training of a distinctive and unique Black Studies' Africanist who will along with the two other Black World teaching and research specialists that are part of the MSU trilogy- the Black Studies' Americanist and the Black Studies Diasporaist – will make her or his contribution as Black Studies disciplinary teacher-scholars of enormous import.

## **State of the Discipline: Black Studies, Africana Studies, and the Beautiful Struggle**

A Northwestern Black Studies conference in Chicago that sought to showcase the university's African American Studies doctoral students' research while assessing the status of PhD programs in the discipline motivated the current research inquiry. The conference title, 'A Beautiful Struggle', reminisced of the long-haul evolution of Black Studies as an emerging discipline<sup>5</sup> since its *formal* institutionalization in San Francisco State's first program in 1968, as well as, in 1988 at Temple for the first PhD Black Studies program. For PhD Black Studies programs particularly, the Northwestern conference conveners were right, we find ourselves in a curious 'shifting' political landscape in an Obama Era.

Since MSU's own formal first-time program establishment of its Black Studies program as graduate degree doctoral and masters' majors and an undergraduate specialization, given the program's own tenth year anniversary (2002-2012), it has achieved many successes and opportunities.

That is to say that despite the late establishment of the program in 2002- decades after the civil rights era establishment of Black Studies programs in the 1960s and 70s- in 2012, MSU houses the only Black Studies' PhD program in the State of Michigan; and we are one of three PhD programs among thirteen CIC Big Ten Black Studies programs. What's more, with Yale University, of the eleven programs, MSU enrolls the most graduate students (38) and a 2012 job placement rate of 66%. Like the over four hundred Black Studies programs nation-wide (Alkalimat, 2007)<sup>6</sup> and eleven PhD Black Studies programs,<sup>7</sup> MSU's program faces a range of challenges which strike at the heart of a range of critical dimensions of the Black Studies higher educational sector.

As seen by the 2012 Chronicle of Higher Education blog-article's vicious attack on our discipline,<sup>8</sup> despite forty years of disciplinary establishment, we still struggle to legitimize our distinctive historical background in the Black liberation intellectual tradition as we defiantly hold on to our varied but distinctive philosophical premises in academic 'contributionism', 'the Critical School', and the postmodern turn. Respective Black Studies programs across the country still struggle for institutionalization as we demand the establishment and expansion of majors, minors, undergraduate and graduate programs in our discipline. Stable and qualitative academic leadership in Black Studies disciplinary research and teaching remains a challenge for many programs. Finally, Black Studies programs struggle for educational attainment at the varied levels of enrollment, retention and placement of our students.

Africa-inclusivity at MSU's Black Studies PhD program represents but a tiny yet representatively microscopic lens through which to examine these issues as they relate to the contemporary the issues that the discipline faces. Nomenclature, curricular disciplinarity, programmatic geographical research scope, and institutional legitimation represent key themes in Black Studies' 'state of the discipline' scholarly discourses. A 2009 special edition of the *Journal of Black Studies (JBS)*<sup>9</sup> revived a debate over the 'name of the Black Studies discipline' at the annual Black Studies discipline's leading academic professional organization meeting, The National Council of Black Studies (NCBS) in 2006. Dissatisfied with the wide range of name usage by the numerous Black Studies programs around the country, a number of Black Studies scholars deliberated and debated a range of issues on the topic.

Casting the first net was Patricia Reid-Merritt reflecting on earlier assessments of the discipline by writers like W. Shipp.<sup>10</sup> Using Shipp's study, Reid-Merritt revealed the following issues with the discipline: a) not all Blacks teaching Black Studies identify with the discipline b) Black Studies programs are identified by different nomenclatures and housed in different academic programs and departments, and c) not all Black Studies programs meet the standards set by the NCBS.<sup>11</sup>

Classic Black Studies scholarships such as Nathaniel Norment (2007), Talmadge Anderson (2007)<sup>12</sup>, and Maulena Karenga (2010)<sup>13</sup> having spent considerable time trying to understand the Black Studies disciplinary phenomenon have reflected on the first of Shipp's concerns.

Norment asks, does Black Studies warrant the scholarly recognition of a discipline or is it a mere subfield attendant to mainstream traditional disciplines (Norment, 2007)<sup>14</sup>? The question strikes at the heart of the dilemma concerning the evolution of the discipline! Black Studies' programs are progressively evolving disciplinary boundaries or what Talmadge Anderson has referred to as a specific body of teachable knowledge with its own set of interrelated facts, concepts, standardized techniques and skills. Disciplines, says Zeleza, respond to and engage concepts, political philosophies and discourses that intersect with select specialized discourses, theories, epistemic cultures and discursive practices (Zeleza, 2006). While some in the academy have referred to Black Studies as Black peoples scholarship, others have insisted that in order for it to become a discipline, it needs to demonstrate a disciplinary matrix which would comprise of a metaphysical component, shared values, symbolic generalizations, a common language and research methods as well as exemplars.<sup>15</sup>

Regarding Shipp's second concern with respect to nomenclature and the discipline, Shirley Weber considered whether names create the object or whether objects create names.<sup>16</sup> Weber correctly states that in the initial phase of Black Studies' establishment on campuses, our program names did not reflect a distinctive academy of professional training and interests. That is why, Weber claims, departments with different names – African American, Africana, Pan African, Afro-Diasporic- have similar curricula.<sup>17</sup> While most of these programs regardless of their names focus on the African American experience<sup>18</sup>; yet, Weber complains that too many program names regardless of their 'naming' in the discipline, do not represent a distinctive rationale or curriculum emphasis in Black Studies.

Shouldn't the Black Studies discipline be shaped and determined by the words we use to express it, asks Niyi Osundare, the first PhD graduate of a Black Studies program (Osundare, 2002). Essentially two names contend for the standard nomenclature for the Black Studies *discipline* – Black Studies and Africana Studies; while program nomenclature remains pluralistic and agnostic with some derivation of African American and African or vice versa. Speaking to the broad scope of Black Studies (the reality that African and African American histories and cultures have shared historical premises) and to the wide range interdisciplinary dimensions of the Black Studies topics (from social sciences, humanities and health sciences), Reid-Meritt privileges *Africana Studies*. Regardless of their different program names she argues Africana Studies programs are programs with curricular that provide students with an educational experience that explores the history, culture and contributions of African people wherever they are located in the world (Reid-Merritt, 2009).

While Reid-Meritt acknowledges that Black Studies was the term used to describe the new academic endeavor, which during its civil rights fervor in the 60's began with a primary focus on the experiences of African Americans, she acknowledges that the justification for using the name *Africana Studies* reflects that the discipline grew to become inclusive of every aspect of life and culture that was the Black experience everywhere as it is represented by most programs today.<sup>19</sup> However, Maulana Karenga has presented a cautionary caveat in the discipline's moving too quickly away from the Black Studies nomenclature warning that changing the name to *Africana* should not be used as a pretext, nor a prelude for eschewing the discipline's freedom roots.

While supporting what he calls a disciplinary curriculum that distinctively profiles its roots, its range and its relevance, Karenga has argued that the distinctiveness of the Black Studies discipline has been its relevance in the Community emancipatory project with its cultural, intellectual and social dimensions.<sup>20</sup> *Black Studies* nomenclature thereby reflects a core objective of the disciplinary academic mission, he reminds us, which is to contribute to community by translating knowledge into a political practice that transforms. For Molefi Asante, *Africology* is the preferred name for both the discipline and the program (singularly the name of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's program). *Africology*, he says, represents the science of the study of Africa. It is the Afrocentric study of African phenomena trans-generationally and trans-continentially; and it serves to elevate the Black Studies discipline to its core contribution to the academy – an investigation and a critique of White Supremacy.<sup>21</sup>

Achieving curricula disciplinarity is a special challenge for Black Studies programs and is even truer for the discipline's PhD programs where the expectation is that students are attracted to specialized advanced research topics for dissertation study. Munashe Furusa sees this as evidence of why scholars of the Black Studies discipline will need to spell out nomenclatures of the discipline in relation to its nature and scope, curriculum content and structure, and its declared goals and expected outcomes.<sup>22</sup> There are other issues that also concern the disciplinarity debate among Black Studies that relates to faculty research and program institutionalization. Given that Black Studies is a discipline with a methodology that seeks to systematically and consciously adopt a conceptual framework generated from within the experiences of Black peoples, what is the nature of its disciplinarity? Is it interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary or transdisciplinary? And how is either disciplinary structure further influenced by whether the Black Studies program is a department or an interdepartmental academic program.

Most scholars of the discipline agree that Black Studies is inclusive of all three disciplinary statuses interdisciplinary (as an ethnic studies area study), multi-disciplinary (as it borrows from the multiple disciplines of the scholars who have shaped it before it became institutionalized) and trans-disciplinary (its engagement with community and social justice praxis). Moreover, Black Studies scholars would agree that the discipline is interdisciplinary while also acknowledging that among four main definitions of interdisciplinarity (Shumay and Messer-Davidow, 1991), the Black Studies discipline is a new field that is emerging from overlapping areas of discrete disciplines (Mazama, 2009) – such as history, political science, sociology, English, anthropology, education.

Nevertheless, Mazama warns against Black Studies becoming a ‘Blackenization’ of these traditional mainstream disciplines, which he sees as Eurocentric. The Temple scholar concludes that the trend to see Black Studies as merely - ‘Black Sociology’ , ‘Black Literature’ ‘Black History’, or ‘Black Politics’, ignores the epistemic transformation for new, self-defined knowledge constructs that require Black Studies to be seen as a formative disciplinary study (Mazama, 2009).

A final related issue concerning Black Studies’ attempts to achieve disciplinary stability and vibrancy is addressed by Munashe Furusa who believes that Black Studies programs should be structured as departments rather than interdepartmental academic programs. Furusa argues that traditional departments are centered and this is why Black Studies programs should not be housed within departments even in a dual degree shared structure. Doing so, he argues, mitigates efforts to build Black Studies on the basis of perspectives, epistemologies and research techniques derived from the agency and centering of Black peoples (Furusa, JBS, 2009). Furusa continues that interdepartmental structures undermine Black Studies main objective which is the critiquing and rescuing of Africana knowledge systems from the stultifying grip of Western theories and approaches (Furusa, 2009).

In 2006, the late Dr. William Little, a former NCBS president and then the chair of the organization’s Curriculum Committee recommend that the normative, standard name for the Black Studies discipline should be Africana Studies. Quoting the late John Henrick Clarke, Little argued that *Africana* Studies reflected the last stage of Black Studies which would represent a global view of African people and an understanding of how they relate to each other and to other people.<sup>23</sup>

### **Naming, Missions, and Identity: The African American (AND) African Studies Program at MSU**

Responding to Little’s 2006 question, “Is the name of your department a true reflection of what you are?” (Weber, 2009) serves as a valuable guide to consider similar issues raised by the NCBS debate with respect to MSU’s African American and African Studies Black Studies program. How are Black Studies programs classified universally in terms of objective research standards and criteria? According to a 2007 study on the state of Black Studies programs in the US, Abdul Alkalimat classifies the identity of three hundred and fifty Black Studies programs and departments by their names: African American or Afro-American 100 32%, Africana 63 20%, African and African American 45 14%, Black 37 12%, Pan African 7 2%, African 5 2%, Africology 1 0% (source: Alkalimat, 2007). Thirty-two percent or one hundred programs are named African American or Afro-American. Twenty percent or sixty three are Africana. Fourteen percent or forty-five are African and African American. Twelve percent or thirty seven are simply named Black Studies, two percent or seven are Pan African, five or two percent are named African Studies, and one program is named Africology (Alkalimat, 2007).

While Alkalimat classifies all of these programs as *Diasporic/Africana*, and not as *Black*, using the “Africa-inclusive” measurement, for the sake of the current study, it is helpful to classify the programs into “American-centered” versus “Africa-inclusive” Black Studies programs. Programs named African-American, Black or Afro-American Studies (44% in total) tend to be American-centered, while the nomenclatures of the rest, trigger a deliberate curricular connection and relationship to Africa.

Africa-inclusive named programs vary in the emphasis that they place on the continent. MSU chose to name its program ‘African-American and African’; while Harvard names its program ‘African and African-American’. The University of Michigan’s department is ‘Afro-American and African Studies’. It is noteworthy to consider whether MSU’s placement of ‘African American’ Studies before ‘African Studies’ signifies an asymmetrical value consigned to the role of African Studies in the program. Yet, judging by comparison with Harvard’s African and African American Studies, where Africa is placed first in the name, there is no evidence that greater value for one regional cluster over the other explains the reason with naming sequence. What’s more, Harvard’s program offers separate but equal PhD degrees in both African American and African Studies.

Black Studies programs have also been classified by teaching and research mission scope. For example, Yusuf Nuriddin (Asante and Karenga, 2007), there are five major models or configurations, although others do exist: 1) national (i.e., blacks in the United States); 2) hemispheric (the African Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean); 3) continental and hemispheric (Continental Africans as well as the African Diaspora in the Western Hemisphere); 4) global (Continental Africans and the worldwide African Diaspora including blacks in Europe and Asia); and (5) African Diasporan Studies (the global Diaspora minus the continent). With its emphasis on the African diaspora in the Western Hemisphere, especially in the US, followed by African continental and non-US diaspora teaching and research, MSU’s African American and African Studies program adheres to configuration (3).<sup>24</sup>

Of course, department/program names and teaching/research structural models are derivative of the politics of the university and the historical evolution of the Black Studies program in that context. MSU’s Black Studies’ doctoral program was borne in 2002 in response to the same quests for educational rights and self-determination struggles that other Black Studies programs experienced. Notably, however, MSU’s program has emerged forty years after the university’s nationally acclaimed African Studies Center was established. Despite the success and largess of MSU’s African Studies Center; nonetheless, the faculty-founders of MSU’s program who started out with a plan to establish an African American Studies program, ended up with a name and a mission that included Africa.

It isn't clear why MSU chose to become an "Africa-inclusive" Black Studies program at its founding and styled itself around Nuruddin's model three (North American Diaspora and continental Africa). Perhaps this happened because its founders included faculty with the research luster of the likes of the late Ruth Hamilton, who began her doctoral study in Africa, but ended it cultivating a framework for the notion of the 'African Diaspora'. Hamilton demonstrates the ideological thrusts that embed a long history of intricate relations between African American and African Studies (Zezeza, 2011). In the 1960s, the African Heritage Studies Association (AHSA) - a Pan Africanist break-away movement from what the scholars involved in this movement complained was a Eurocentric African Studies Association (ASA) - was formed.<sup>25</sup>

For the alternative AHSA, the African-American Pan Africanist scholarly faction of African Studies has re-appropriated the study of Africa to establish a Black Studies Africanist paradigm that differs distinctively from the relatively Euro-America dominated, area studies ASA Africanist model that constitutes most African Studies programs on American and European campuses today. MSU's African Studies Center and African American and African Studies programs are no doubt aware of this history, both having embodied the ideals, ideologies and research agendas of the respective faculty members of each institution. Faculty founders of MSU's program had this history in mind when they established MSU's 'Africa-inclusive' Black Studies program.

Neither does MSU's Black Studies program necessarily marginalize the study of Africa in its programming. For example, MSU's mission statement states that though anchored by the Black experience in the United States, the program is also deeply comparative, cross-national and cross-cultural in its commitment to teaching and researching the Black experience elsewhere in the African Diaspora as well as in the Continent of Africa. In this regard, like other "Africa-inclusive" Black Studies programs, MSU's narrative underscores a global or what Alkalimat refers to as a 'Diasporic' orientation in his report on Africana Studies programs in the US (2007). MSU's program states,

Our program is devoted to advanced exploration and analysis of the social, cultural, economic, and political experiences of Blacks in the United States, in Africa, in the Caribbean and elsewhere in the African Diaspora. The mission of AAAS is the production and creation of knowledge and the cultivation of scholars committed to academic excellence and social responsibility in the Black World and in the immediate community (MSU AAAS Website accessed July 11, 2011).

Comparatively, MSU's narrative differs little from the National Council of Black Studies (NCBS) mission statement which similarly commits to the research and scholarship of an "African World Experience" [http://www.ncbsonline.org/about\\_ncbs](http://www.ncbsonline.org/about_ncbs).

Closer introspection of Black Studies programs, nevertheless, and their narratives reveals much more ambiguity with respect to their substantive nature regarding “Africa-inclusivity”. For instance, as it is reflected in the larger disciplinary dialogue, MSU’s program equivocates on the nomenclature definition- in terms of distinguishing the scope- between “Black” and “African”. Deliberating its mission narrative at MSU, some of the African faculty raised their discomfort with our reference to the study of “Blacks in Africa”. Africans were not ‘Black’ but ‘African’. As well, the program’s narrative distinguished between “Blacks in the United States” and “Blacks in the African Diaspora”. This irritated some faculty scholars of the African Diaspora who asked where the US was positioned in relation to the Diaspora. Was the US no longer part of the African Diaspora? Was the program centering its global study of Blacks in the US, privileging what Paul Zeleza has referred to as an “American (Western) Atlantic” model of African Diaspora?

Lastly, while MSU’s narrative made easy reference to our disciplinary study of “Blacks” “globally”, it lacked a heuristic and hermeneutical frame-work for presenting the study of “Black globality”. These deliberations compelled us to consider deeper and more complex analyses of our identity narrative. Is the program an American-centered Black Studies program, an Africa-inclusive one? Or is it merely truly Diasporic? Since President Obama’s preeminent emergence in American politics, who is Black, African American, African Diasporic, or simply African has become an interesting and prevalent discourse point Americans as well as Africans.

### **The Black Studies Graduate Study Core Curriculum at MSU’s AAAS: Norment, Asante and Hamilton and their Discontents**

Nomenclature, mission narratives and program identity are mirrors of deeper structural disciplinary emphases that are influencing Black Studies programs. Yet, probing deeper than the mere naming of a program will illustrate and perhaps justify the vast differences in Black Studies program as they are informed by the diverse experiences drawn from historical paradigm and identity shaping on their respective campuses. A program’s educational model is structured depending upon whether it is part of a teaching or research institution, a factor that further influences the teaching and research models that it privileges in its curriculum design. The curriculum design of a program represents an additional way to assess the extent and nature of “Africa-inclusivity” at MSU’s Black Studies program.

The program’s core curriculum involves the teaching and training of advanced research and knowledge production in African descendent communities in the US, in other countries and regions of the African Diaspora, and of peoples and nations in the diverse and deeply complex continent of Africa. Nevertheless, despite this expansive scope of ‘Black land’ (Reid-Merritt, JBS, 2009), the curricular strengths of our program, unlike the PhD programs at UC-Berkley (African Diaspora Studies), UW-Milwaukee (Africology), and Northwestern (African American Studies), MSU’s program nomenclature doesn’t signal a distinctive Black Studies’ research profile indicating whether its core focus is in an African American, African, or an African Diaspora area of study.

As such, some faculty have argued that to its detriment the program is bereft of a distinctive research profile similar to our sister programs aforementioned, or perhaps, a profile-narrative and academic mission that integrates the study of African Americans, African descendent peoples around the world, and continental Africans, into a single composite discipline of *Africana Studies* disciplinary study. While restructuring the curriculum at MSU, the faculty have been engaging in dialogues about the ‘centeredness’ and ‘positionality’ of Africa, US-Black America and the African Diaspora in relation to the program’s own research and teaching approach to the Black Studies discipline.

The first dialogue contends with African versus American centeredness. The American Studies *Black Studies* paradigmatic orientation focuses on the disciplinary study of Black people in the United States. While acknowledging African heritage; the disciplinary foci of this school would see the deep-rooted, varied-scope and historically-suppressed experience of African Americans in the US as the core focus of the Black Studies discipline. MSU’s program has reflected this position in its program narrative and two of four core curriculum graduate seminars. The program’s narrative proclaims that it is anchored by the experience in the United States while being simultaneously deeply comparative, cross-national and cross-cultural in researching a broad geographical spatial context that includes the Black experience elsewhere in the Diaspora and in the diverse nations of Africa. Offering three graduate seminars titled, *Introduction to African American and African Studies I, II and III*, each course’s content represent discrete regional emphases of the “Black World” respectively – African America, Africa and the African Diaspora.

MSU’s core graduate studies seminar course (An Introduction to African American Studies), privileges Black Studies’ texts and scholars like Nathaniel Norment whose *The African American Studies Reader* focuses primarily on the American experience. Norment does nevertheless view Africa and the broader Black World as one component of the larger vision that is the reunification of African thought globally (Norment, 2007). In *Introduction to African American Studies*, Talmadge Anderson further advances the ideological platform a little differently in this regard, explaining that while the Black Studies scope, breadth and depth goes beyond the exclusive experience in the US, the study should be seen as a component and integral part of American and mainstream world history (Anderson, 2009). Reinforcing this view, Cornel West has stated that the African heritage is very rich, but one still has to acknowledge what “black folk” in the New World have themselves come up with to inform the struggle at the cultural levels, spiritual levels, the Church, music, political levels, different movements, inventions and constructions (West, 1994). The legitimate point made by Norment, Anderson and others is that the US-lived experience of African Americans has indeed been the pioneering spearheading force for Black Studies programs and Black Studies disciplines.

Deliberations and debates by the core Black Studies faculty at MSU in deciding the sequencing, as well as, in rationalizing the courses' objectives, select readings and learning goals, fostered some interesting outcomes for the program's core curriculum. For example, until recently, premising our program on Norment's African American Studies model, we sequenced the required graduate seminar course offerings in the following way: a) African American Studies, b) African Diaspora Studies and c) a course on Africa. Our African American Studies course was to act as the primary intellectual pedestal and foil for the two other courses on the African Diaspora and on Africa.

An interesting discussion about sequencing of the courses and the centering of the region in our curricula pursued. Some of the Africanist Black Studies faculty suggested that the course in African Studies should precede the African American and African Diaspora Studies courses. Africa, they claimed, ought to have been historically centered since its existence occurred before African America, which was in the Diaspora. These faculty members argued that introducing the content of African studies was required for graduate students to understand course content about African descendants in the US and other parts of what they referred to as the African Diaspora. While MSU's program rather prematurely reversed its course sequencing of its graduate seminars to reflect this argument, in my view, the "Africa-inclusivity" dilemma was in no way resolved in this decision. At the core of our curricular debate at MSU was a plea to understand the heuristic place of Africa in the Black Studies discipline. Nonetheless, the counter argument regarding the role that the US Civil Rights Era intellectual liberation tradition had in establishing the Black Studies discipline was not made forcefully enough in justifying our original decision to sequence the African American Studies course first.

Rather than course sequencing, other ways of ensuring "Africa-inclusivity" in Black Studies programs might be to offer additional perspectives, models and texts in the core curriculum. The Afro-centric model of Black Studies privileges the "African World View" and African centeredness as a disciplinary idea in which the Black world is seen as an organic whole constitutive of African ideals, values and experiences. Africans and African descendants are examined as the *subjects* and not the *objects* of history. Much as Carter G. Woodson has done in an earlier evolution of Black Thought for Black Studies, more contemporary African-centered Black Studies scholars such as Molefi Asante and Clement T Keto point to the various ways in which the correct representations of African civilizations remain camouflaged by hegemonic Europe-centered perspectives disguised as universalisms.

To reverse this, Keto advocated a world history that acknowledged pluri-versalism (1989) – a concept that he later changed to multi-centricism in 1993 that would operate as the heuristic device to de-center Europe and elevate the multiple global centers of culture and civilization in ways that allows the plural cultures of the world to be examined as parallel planes of disciplinary foci and research (Keto, 1989)<sup>26</sup>. In viewing Africa as a parallel world center, we are able to avoid the Area Studies approach that still examines the Continent as an inferior cultural difference from the West.

African-centered Black Studies disciplinary foci counter-attack the Euro-Africanist model. However, this ideological message needs to be carried forth into our Black Studies curricular discussions as well. Like Mazama's Americanist correlate 'Blackening', the "study of Blacks in Africa" approach, created by mainstream Africanists, and increasingly adopted by Africa-inclusive Black Studies programs, must see how they too transport Eurocentric themes toward Africa into their curricula and scholarship.

In this respect, we in Black Studies, have also become too inclined to use Eurocentric tropes that further the stigma of extreme African "otherness", such as modernity, corruption, crises, dictatorships and linear development, to profile the study of Africa. When Black Studies follows the area study model this way to 'de-center' Africa, its study of the continent and its peoples is also inclined to be tainted with pathological, negative and simplistic, misrepresentations of Africa. Scholars that advocate an African-centered Black Studies model posit Africa as a core geographical component of an epistemologically unified and central disciplinary site of Black Studies discovery. The approach serves to utilize Africa as an extended scholarly arena for the applications of codes, paradigms, symbols, motif, myths and circles of discussion that will seek to strengthen the global scope of research of all Black peoples as a legitimate frame of reference for disciplinary research (Robert Perry, 1993). In teaching the now-first sequenced core graduate seminar (829 Introduction to Africa) – notably now alongside in the same semester of Introduction to African American Studies – I incorporate an African-centered approach to the teaching of Africa based on my own self-determined African agency and subject voice as an African transnational citizen.

An additional strain of geographical centeredness that MSU's program is deliberating concerns the positionality of the African Diaspora in relation to African descendants. Does the Diaspora refer to the unity of the Black World, including Africa, with no centering of any of its regions, or is does it refer to the 'place domain' of African descendants in the US or other North American locales and Africans who live outside of the Continent? The placement of MSU's African Diaspora course, currently the third sequenced-course in the graduate seminar trilogy, has also come under scrutiny and criticism by some of the faculty who had noted their own discomfort with some aspects of our curricular narrative that were described as "the study of Blacks in the US, in Africa, and in the *non-US* African Diaspora". These faculty members argued that referring to African-descendent peoples outside of the US in the negative (non-US) this way, 'otherized' African descendent peoples in the Caribbean and Central/South America in relation to those same descendants in the US. Constructed this way, they criticized the program's narrative for having contributed to a misrepresentation of the notion of the African Diaspora.

The discussion led some faculty members to advocate for a Black or *African Diasporic* Black Studies program identity structured similarly to trends elsewhere. Doing so, they argued, would serve to formulate a pan Africanist integration of our study of the Black World. It would extend the American-centered Black Studies model of Black Studies to the Caribbean, the Americas, Europe, and to Africa while emphasizing Black people's global mobility, "geocircularity, global cultural pluralism, and pan Africanist unity" (Hamilton, St Claire Drake).

Despite the fact that there exists a range of paradigms for representing the study of the Diaspora in Black Studies teaching and research, MSU's third-tier sequenced graduate seminar, *An Introduction to the African Diaspora*, tends to adapt the philosophy of one of its program's founders, Ruth Hamilton. Unlike late Black Studies sociologist St. Claire Drake as well as the late Black Studies political scientist, Ron Walters, who both viewed the Diaspora in Pan Africanist terms related to transactional political, sociological and economic relations among Diasporas and continental Africans (Walters, 1993)<sup>27</sup>; Hamilton's Diaspora model was not so limiting. Hamilton sees the Black Diaspora as an arena that consists of the geographically and socio-culturally diverse peoples of Africa and its Diaspora who are linked through complex networks of social and cultural experiences, relationships, and processes. The African Diaspora consists of these dispersed peoples whose contemporary experiences are multi-layered, interactively varied, as well as mediated within an even wider and deeper global social ordering (Hamilton, 2009).<sup>28</sup>

There is criticism of the Diaspora model – especially that advanced by Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*<sup>29</sup>, which is in turn critical of African-centered Black Studies models that have been formulated on Asante's Afrocentric underpinnings. Criticizing Pan African identity as pejoratively essentialist and describing programs that adhere to this approach as an unrealistic way to understand African descendant communities in the Diaspora, Gilroy's Diaspora he argues captures the more universal, Western-inclusive, global experiences of Black peoples in the Americas and Europe. Gilroy's Diaspora genre calls for Black Studies to emphasize the mixed, syncretic and hybrid cultural attributes and formations that have shaped Black identities in the West.

In turn, African-centered and Afro-centric Black Studies scholars counter-argue that Gilroy's 'Atlanticist' model of Diasporaization strips African descendent peoples of the factual historicity of African heritage leading to a constraining effect on Black peoples agency in a global era where culture and trans-nationality are important dimensions for individual and national identities. The problem of centering for the Diaspora model is still seen as problematic for modeling a Black Studies program because it weakens the historicity of Africa as a cultural and heritage reference point for Black Studies. Diaspora centering leads to the proliferation effect of Black culture and heritage, acting as if it has no home.

Rejecting Gilroy's model but resuscitating the general parameters of Hamilton's Diaspora and reinventing it as the essence of the new *Africana* model, Paul Zeleza advocates a re-fusion of African-American studies and traditional African Studies programs into a *diasporic Africana* Studies Black Studies discipline in an age of Obama. The President's unique Diasporic personal narrative reinforces the rising appeal of the Diaspora paradigm in both African American and African studies, which he claims, "accelerates the diasporization of African Studies, the transnationalization of African American Studies, and thereby, the ascendancy of *Africana Studies*" (Zeleza, 2011).

### **Challenges of an Interdepartmental Academic Program: MSU's Multi-disciplinary Black Studies "Affiliated" Core Faculty**

Measured by its core faculty research profiles and doctoral students' pre-dissertation and dissertation interests, MSU's Black Studies program represents African American Studies by about 60%, African Studies by 30% and African Diaspora Studies by 10%. Of forty current faculty members in our program, twenty four conduct their research in African American studies; nine conduct research in Africa; and only four conduct research in the African Diaspora. With this curriculum structural underpinning, MSU Black Studies' incoming graduate students have a choice to select their advanced research study from a region (US, African, Afro-Caribbean/Afro-Latin communities and countries). Within an ideal five year PhD study, a first year of course work would entail both a comparative and integrated core curriculum Black Studies disciplinary grounding in graduate seminars representing these regionally-focused 'studies' courses, a Black Studies teaching philosophy/methodology and professional development course, and two internship courses in the domestic and international Black World. Of thirty seven students, based on their proposed or current dissertation study, about 50% of our students are Black Studies' Americanists, 20% are African Diaspora-focused, and 30% are Black Studies Africanists.

Nonetheless, it is not clear to me how our current or alumni PhD cohorts represent their 'teacher-scholar' profiles in relation to the Black Studies disciplinary phenomenon. The Americanists believe that they are the penultimate Black Studies scholars and that Black Studies resides its core study in the US; the Africanists see themselves as exactly that – Africanists and not Black Studies scholars at all; while the Diasporas see themselves as conducting research on the study of 'Black people' in non-US regions of the African Diaspora. This ambiguous identity status among our students at MSU has emerged not just as a reflection of our program's slow evolution of a core Black Studies disciplinary identity that is integrated and composite of a Black World curricular focus; the ambiguity is complicated by our institutional 'academic program' structure related to the pluralistic nature of the program's faculty leadership in relation to the disciplinarity phenomenon of Black Studies.

Of the eleven Black Studies doctoral programs, MSU's program is the only program that is not institutionally offered through the academic structure of a department. As a result, none of MSU's Black Studies' core faculty members holds a tenure-system appointment with the program. Instead, each faculty member holds a 100% tenure stream appointment with traditional disciplinary departments ranging from history, English, political science, anthropology, sociology, education, human medicine, philosophy, religion, psychology, and Writing Rhetoric and American Culture (WRAC), to name a few. While the program assigns these faculty members as "core faculty" of our program; they are in reality "affiliated" faculty whose primary obligation is to conduct research in an aspect of Black Studies and to train our graduate students through thesis and dissertation committee service and leadership.

The interdepartmental structure and the diverse disciplinary foci of our Black Studies faculty cohort foster both challenges and opportunities for our program in its attempt to develop a coherent and geographically cohesive Black Studies vision and identity. A beneficial feature of this multi-disciplinary structure is that ideally our graduate students would earn an advanced degree in the Black Studies discipline (their degree major is exclusively African American and African Studies) while applying their Black Studies research to a choice among a range of traditional disciplines (aforementioned) that our program treats as 'sub-disciplines' or 'areas of concentration' subsumed to our Black Studies disciplinary-core curriculum.

Given this structural milieu, MSU's Black Studies PhD program is valuably both interdisciplinary as well as multi-disciplinary. Nonetheless, multi-disciplinarity may also be a weakening factor for our attempts to strengthen the Black Studies discipline at MSU's institution, and along with our interdepartmental faculty structure, the so-called 'matrix' structure can further tend to mitigate the institutionalization of the Black Studies discipline at MSU. Exterior discipline Black Studies teacher-scholars (I am guilty of this phenomenon as a trained political scientist whose tenure home is in international relations and politics) are neither trained in the Black Studies discipline and more significantly at MSU are not appointed into Black Studies Departmental tenure homes.

As such, there is a tendency for such faculty to treat their "Black Studies" research and teaching as part of a supplemental 'field of study'. Non-Black Studies tenure-stream or tenured faculty are less inclined to seeing Black Studies as a discipline- a normative and empirical body of knowledge and field of inquiry that consists of a set of formally interrelated facts, concepts and generalizations that are defined by efficiency, predictability and specialization (Karenga). As well, non-Black Studies' trained- or cultured- faculty may tend to import their disciplinary foci – sometimes in contradistinction to the core themes of Black Studies, including our focus on Race, Cultural Nationalism, Black Liberation, Community, Post-Colonialism and other key genres of legitimate 'contributionism' and 'revisionism' that make up core philosophies for the Black Studies discipline.

This presents a peculiar challenge for the Black Studies Africanist who desires to represent Africa with self-determined agency as well as epistemologically embodied in Black Studies themes. Possessing a longer ‘free’ history of struggle for autonomous and ‘sovereign’ Black Studies programs since San Francisco State’s 1968 foundation, African American scholars document an earlier and thus more extensive tradition of indicting the traditional disciplines for using social science to culturally reproduce of societal racial inequalities of African Americans.<sup>30</sup> Because they are trained and teach as well as conduct research in traditional African Studies academic models, African Africanists are not always so privileged. Such faculty members tend to import disciplinary foci that have been formulated by area studies’ ‘colonialist’ approaches imported from history, anthropology and political science disciplines. Mainstream African history departments focus on the colonial period as if African history were nothing other than that. Africanist anthropologists tend to adhere to an obsolete parochial study of ‘tribes’ whose modern manifestations have become “rural communities” or ‘local cultures’; while political scientists focus on negative, pathological representations of African politics – corruption, violence, poverty, charity and deprivations.

The notion that the multi-disciplinary interdepartmental model of Black Studies fosters an academic balkanization that limits Black Studies disciplinary emergence, coherence and agency may be an exaggerated indictment of its limitations. Be that as it may, the disciplinary diverse, ‘regional Black Studies emphasis’ and the ideologically plural perspectives regarding the meaning of Black Studies that make up the MSU program certainly complicate its fostering of what some are demanding for as a singular vision and disciplinary institutionalization of Black Studies advanced study at our institution.

### **Conclusion: Leveraging MSU’s Triple Heritage Black Studies Discipline in a Transcultural Global Community Public University**

Profiles of the current eleven US Black Studies PhD programs will vary according to their own unique educational structures, as well as, curricula and course offerings that are developed by the faculty research agendas that make up their respective programs. MSU’s program is no different. In spite of my own African-centered research and teaching heritage among a much larger cohort of multi-disciplinary traditional Africanists, Americanists, and Diaspora ‘affiliated’ faculty and as current director, I have come to realize that there are important academic benefits to our pluralistic and ideologically agnostic nomenclature (AA&A/double A and A), our interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary curriculum, and our interdepartmental academic program and affiliated core faculty structure that also support ‘Africa-inclusivity’ and thereby the development of a Black Studies Africanist.

Perhaps the program's 'triple heritage' inscribed by its faculty cohort's diverse regional and disciplinary research and teaching orientations has fostered MSU's own distinctive evolution of the Black Studies genre. Founded by some of MSU's most accomplished scholars- Darlene Clarke-Hines, Geneva Smitherman, Curtis Stokes, Bill Lawson, and the late Ruth Hamilton-MSU's establishment clause articulated the program's objective to advance knowledge of Black Studies from a range of intellectual and geographical platforms, including American, African and the African Diaspora. In promoting the program to prospective students, incoming faculty and to the community, our program presents these geographical arenas as sites of knowledge production about Black peoples, communities, regions and diverse nations. This deep and broad scope examines African descendants and Africans as both comparative as well as globally interconnected sites of advanced Black Studies research, scholarship production and teaching.

With this graduate educational model, MSU's Black Studies mission uniquely offers its graduate students, domestic local and national Americanist, comparativist, and globalist geographic contexts and methodologies from which to select to conduct their advanced research of the Black World. Students may utilize a comparative method that centers each region on its own terms while also infusing the interdisciplinary Black Studies disciplinary lenses for approaching each regional study. Otherwise, while not necessarily privileging the Diaspora as a center, students may use a global perspective that posits each region as a pluriverse or multi-center (Keto). In doing so, using Hamiltonian and St Drake genre Black World/Pan African Diasporic paradigms, their research agendas and Black Studies objects of study may examine historical, cultural, and political intersections among these regions.

MSU's Black Studies disciplinary focus is appropriately Africa-inclusive without necessarily being exclusively Afro-centric. Our distinctive plural and multi-disciplinary structure allows the program's diverse affiliated faculty to teach courses, train graduate students and conduct research from a range of geographical, disciplinary and ideological platforms. This diversity brings together faculty and graduate students conducting advanced knowledge production of various topics in diverse areas of the Black World. It does so in ways that allow us to draw commonalities, differences, interconnections and reconciliations about African descendants and African people's lived-experiences thereby advancing the Black Studies discipline in strategic and distinctive directions.

It is from this platform of consciousness and a public, state research one university committed to both land grant (local outreach) and world grant (global outreach) academic missions that MSU's program can make its foremost contribution to an increasingly evolving and strengthened Black Studies disciplinary academic institution. I am especially piqued by the fact that as I write the conclusion of the current essay, a cohort among my second year MSU-African American and African Studies graduate students have organized an MSU-African Studies Center workshop series for the purpose of what they describe as the need to develop a conversation between Africanists and Black Studies' African-Americanists.

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