

Reflections of a Woman who Works Quietly and Loudly for the Race: A Conversation with Dr. Shirley Nash Weber

an interview conducted

by

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This year, the Africana Studies Department of SDSU (San Diego State University) in California celebrates its 40th Anniversary. Dr. Shirley Weber, full professor and department chair, has been with the department the entire time of its existence. She has served as chair a number of times, and during her administration the department grew in its national reputation as one of the strongest undergraduate Africana Studies department in the country. In this wide-ranging interview, she gives insight into the life experiences, activism and philosophy that makes her one of the outstanding leaders in the discipline of Africana Studies.

Weber is not only an Africana Studies scholar and leader. She is also a strong community activist with a long history of community work. She is the former President of the San Diego Unified School Board, where she served two consecutive four-year terms until she retired in 1996. Shirley Weber was selected Outstanding Young Woman in America twice, 1976 and 1981. Three times she received the SDSU Outstanding Faculty Award, 1981, 1988, and in 1990. For her service, Dr. Weber has received numerous awards from a host of organizations including the NAACP, Urban League, Negro Business and Professional Women, California Women in Government, National Council for Black Studies, National Women's Political Caucus and many more too numerous to note.

In 1980, Weber proposed the Black Baccalaureate to speak to the unique experiences of Black students graduating from SDSU. Established in response to the complaints of students and parents about the quality and relevance of the University commencement, the event is eagerly anticipated and well attended by the community. This year marks the 33rd annual celebration of this event, and Weber has led every one of them. The purpose of the Baccalaureate was not to replace commencement but to provide an additional service, to allow the community to more actively celebrate the accomplishments of its undergraduate and graduate students.

Based in the community, and held in the sanctuaries of large churches, this gave to the graduating experience a missing spiritual component, while re-connecting it to the Church—the community’s most historically important social institution (after the family). This writer was privileged to be one of the two graduating student speakers at the 1983 Baccalaureate. The event has grown over the years and now must be held in the larger auditorium of a local high school.

Now a professor emeritus, Weber recently ran for 79th District state assembly in California and finished first in the June 2012 open primary election. She will be facing the Republican opponent in the November run-off. The following interview took place June 28, 2012 at her home, where she graciously took time from her busy schedule to share her past experiences, present activities and vision for the future.

Merritt: You are distinguished for heading for a long time, one of the longest, continuous running African-American, now Africana Studies Department in the nation. This year is our 40th anniversary for the department being in continuing existence. So in talking with Dr. Weber, we’d like to have her take on a number of things, but I’d like to just start out with giving readers a little bit of her background, and her progression to her present status. Dr. Weber, could you talk a little bit about your childhood and your family upbringing?

Weber: Well my family is from Hope, Arkansas and I’m the sixth of eight children. I didn’t know a lot about Arkansas as a small child, because we came to California when I was three years old. But we visited Arkansas regularly because my family is strong in the concept of family and that we needed to know where we came from and who all of our relatives were. So we visited Arkansas quite often in terms of my early childhood, but I was raised in Los Angeles. Dad worked in the steel mills of Los Angeles. My parents had very limited education, but held very strong beliefs in education.

Merritt: Your parents were part of the Black migration--that major, post-World War II migration of Africa Americans from the South?

Weber: Yes. Post World War II.

Merritt: To the West and the Pacific Northwest.

Weber: Yes, My father came here in 1951 and at the time, I was actually the baby of the family. My grandmother, however, was very--I'd say I'm somewhat like her--was a unique spirit because she came to California in the 30s and probably in the 20s when I think about it. She came by herself, a divorced woman. She left her two children in Arkansas with her mother because she wanted a different life. It was her being in California that eventually brought my uncle here, my mother's brother, and eventually our family to California. So she was kind of like the pioneer in moving out and my dad left Arkansas to come here. Everybody thought that that was crazy because they knew nothing about California. They all stayed in Arkansas and here he was moving to California with his in-laws, but, nonetheless, he wanted a better opportunity for his children. He hated segregation and discrimination, refused to say "yes, sir", "no, sir." So it was clear that he was on the path to religion fields in terms of his whole attitude and so he knew that he had to leave Arkansas.

So we left Arkansas, came to California. I was raised in Pueblo, which was initially a Los Angeles Projects. They built a new Projects on 51st and Long Beach, and so we moved to the Pueblos in Los Angeles and lived there for about seven or eight years, and then finally moved to 45th and Broadway where I spent most of my life going to the public schools.

I attended John Adams Junior High, and graduated from Manual Arts High School with honors. I went to UCLA as a freshman, which was quite a unique experience being one out of 300 African-Americans out of some 30 thousand students. It was a rare experience to see a Black person on campus. I got there and was admitted before EOP, but once I got there, EOP had just begun so I was able to take advantage of financial aid and those kinds of things that came with the attendance, but it was a unique experience being at UCLA. I ended up getting my Bachelors, Masters and Doctor degrees at UCLA by the time I was 26, but I had come to San Diego State when I was 23. This was because I was teaching part-time at Cal State LA, and there was a posted notice that there was a job in San Diego that the Chair of the Department of Speech thought I might be interested in. I had gotten positive group evaluations in teaching and he said you might find this of interest, and so I thought, well, okay, let me check it out as I had focused my research on African-Americans already. I was in the field of speech and had been inspired by Dr. Molefi Kete Asante. He was one of my advisors and my faculty member, who had recommended me for various awards and those kinds of things, and so since I was doing work on Marcus Garvey I made up my mind to more fully develop my work on Garvey and the UNIA.

Merritt: That was the subject of your dissertation?

Weber: That was the subject of my dissertation and though I was interested in African-American rhetoric, as such, I had no intentions though of going into Black Studies. It was a new field. It was opening up in various places. They had just had a couple classes at UCLA.

Dr. Asante had founded the Afro-American Studies Department and *The Journal of Black Studies* and so forth, but I had not necessarily made my mind up that that would be the field I would enter. I knew I would go into something having to do with communications and dealing with Black people, but was I going into the discipline [of Black Studies], I wasn't sure. However it was an opportunity to come and to develop and to teach three classes in communications in the Black Studies Department. So I thought, this is a unique opportunity. Not only would I get a chance to teach the basic communication theory class that they wanted, but also to teach Black rhetoric, Black language, those kinds of things and my minor in my doctorate was African-American history. So it became a natural fit. I came to San Diego for an interview in 1972 and decided to stay for one year to see what was going to happen. 40 years later, here I am still! It was an exciting experience in its infancy. Those of us who were working on it at the time didn't realize just how historic an event it would be. Sometimes when you're involved in something just beginning, you don't have any historical perspective. You're just taking care of the moment, and it became real interesting that this cadre of faculty members would be the ones who would spend a tremendous amount of time, and nights and weekends and retreats, and you name it, trying to fashion a something called Afro-American Studies. We didn't really have a model for it. There were some things in San Francisco and Cornell and what have you, but this enterprise being new, most of us didn't even know each other. We were just working kind of separate from each other, with some of the people in the field trying to figure out what was going on and it was interesting. Dr. Asante at that time was still in communications and speech and had gone to Buffalo to run the speech department, so he wasn't really in Black Studies at the time. So we as new faculty met a lot and we talked about trying to "build the plane while you're flying it." The department was rolling and we were trying to build and create classes and attract students and respond to their needs, and you make a lot of mistakes. You also make a lot of correct decisions, but it was one of these very dynamic times where you really are, as a faculty, working morning, noon and night to try to develop something that's solid, to develop some standards, to realize that you're under attack daily about is this discipline valid, is it even a discipline, does it have the kinds of things that are essential. You didn't have your traditional, developed faculty involved in the endeavor, you didn't have those who had been in traditional departments with developed curriculum who understood "the university"; we didn't really have the people involved in the development of Black Studies. It was those of those who were masters students and new Ph.D.s at San Diego State whose whole teaching career had probably... if we put us all in a room together of maybe 10 people, you'd probably didn't have 20 years of teaching among all of us together. So it was truly a new venture in that sense and which, when I look back on it was kind of frightening in some sense.

Merritt: But at the time you didn't have time to be frightened!

Weber: No, I didn't have time to be frightened. It was just something you had to do so you do it and you don't realize the seriousness of it as such. And you engage in these wars and battles, I mean, constant wars and battles with faculty on campus, academic senate traditionalists. I mean, you name it, we were engaged in constant attacks, writing letters, responding to people, those kinds of things especially as a unit. But we didn't die off and we continued to grow. That became a major concern for so many.

Merritt: You've been past President of National Council for Black Studies. Can you talk about its strengths as an organization as well as some of its past, present and future challenges?

Weber: Well, the good thing is that I came into the National Council of Black Studies early in its inception. It started at one point and I may have gone to one or two meetings early on. Like anything, it starts and then it kind of peters and sputters and you have to deal with some people who get involved in it because they want to make a name for themselves. So when I came into the National Council for Black Studies, I was brought into it in the second round by a good friend, Bill Little who is now deceased, but Bill was actively involved in the National Council for Black Studies. I think he was chair at the time and he brought me on to be acting secretary because Dr. Kato who was our secretary had gone back to South Africa to head up the educational efforts there. Being an organization person, I guess I became an asset to the organization because my whole training in parliamentary procedure and organization development and communications was really about organization. So what I lacked compared to some of them who had all these scholarly efforts and what have you, I had real strengths in organization and organization building.

Merritt: And that's what it really needed.

Weber: And that's what it needed at that point. So when I got involved, I began to realize some of the flaws in its structure, the organization of it, the things I didn't see in it that were present in other organizations, and I tried to get beyond the rhetoric and the "this and the that" to get to building a strong organization. So when I became involved, we would struggle to get maybe 80, 90 people at our conferences. I said this is ridiculous, and so my whole task from when I became President I think in 2002 until 2006, was to really build the organization, to build the base of it. So I set out, about in 2001 or so, to make sure we had the largest conference we had ever had. Bill Little and I organized the first conference in San Diego and it was interesting because that was the first time we had over 400 people in our conference. We did a great job of not only attracting our own scholars in the field, but we also blended ourselves with K-12 and made that some of the issues, so that some of the San Diego people took advantage of it and we had our largest conference.

So we set a standard at that point and from that point forward in 2002's conference, we saw continuing growth in the Council. Continuing on to the board meetings, there were people on the board who took the boardmanship lightly. I put people off the board who didn't come to meetings. I made sure they understood the bylaws and standards of my expectations and after my first year or so, a significant number of people were asked to leave the board. I put some fees on the board and stipulated that we had to pay a certain amount every year as board members to stay on the board, and you had to attend the meetings. It had come to the point where I would come to board meetings before I was President and it might be like three, four or five maybe seven of us in a room. When I became President, I think there were 35 or 40 people on the board, and there were five people coming, six people actually coming to meetings, but the rest--they just didn't feel the need to come to be there. When I got on the board, it was like, okay, you don't come to meetings, you're not on the board. You're not going to appear on the member roster, you're not going to have the status of being a board member. I can remember, I think it was in Houston when we met, everybody showed up in Houston, everybody. People came in from Africa to come to the board meeting because they knew that I expected 35 people to be in that room and. In fact, they had booked a room for about 20 and we had to get another one because I said everybody's got to be at this board meeting. I mean, there are tragedies and things that happen when you can't make it and you need to let us know, but you just can't be active for two or three years and call yourself a board member and that's what we had. We had people I had never seen who were on the board and each board member had to complete something and chair a committee, so I got involved in helping rewriting the organization's structure and doing those kinds of things that were significant.

Merritt: Well that's good. The NCBS is the premiere organization, and the *International Journal of Africana Studies* is the well-respected journal that you have helped grow in stature. You were talking about not only the challenges with the organization, but also the challenges you have had in the halls of academia.

Weber: Yes, yes.

Merritt: Well, and certainly your tenure as department chair over the years has seen many highs and many lows. You've been able to meet a number of your goals and even surpassed some of your goals, but you've also experienced some lows, administrative stonewalling and other instances of lack of support. What are some of the highs and some of the lows? I think that would be a whole interview in itself, but...

Weber: Well, if we talk about the highs and lows, I think that what I quickly came to realize as Chair of Africana Studies is that Africana Studies was not only an academic unit, but also a political unit, and that if we only develop the academic side without understanding the political reality with which we exist on and off campus, we'd be in a state of disaster.

We had to have a community base that recognized us, that valued us in it, and that we had to be active in that community outside of campus. Otherwise, when things got difficult, budget crisis, low budget, you name it, when those things happen, we would be the first ones to be eliminated. So it would be important for us at that point to always maintain a connection to the community such that when we were faced with our highs, to me, it was really based on our strong connections with community. The fact that we were able to develop in the midst of limited resources, very limited resources, and maintain a high profile in our community, our high is that we have some very dedicated faculty members, full and part-time, who give not only their time on campus, but who are so dedicated to the discipline that they go beyond what is necessary in terms of not making demands. We have faculty who teach lots of students because we know our students need to be taught and it strengthens the department. They often go beyond what is required in teaching, and we are hampered in that we are not able to compensate them in other areas. So I have an extremely dedicated staff and faculty part and full-time who are willing to do that, who don't drain the department, who see themselves giving to the department and strengthening the department.

Our highs come in our communities that show up for our baccalaureate every year and the newspapers that recognize us, or when we're having a challenge I can call on the community and they will meet with the President about Black Studies. They don't ask who are these people and what are they about, and so we have a very strong connection to community and that, to me, is one of the very highs of the department.

The fact that we've been able to produce some excellent students who graduated from San Diego State who not only are part of our academic setting, but also who go beyond that and who are now excellent in the discipline. To be a small unit like we are and have students graduating from Berkeley and Temple and U Mass Amherst, and getting our students into those doctoral programs. Those are the highs to me in terms of where we are and watching our students grow and develop and become young men and young women who give back to the community. Even in the face of a lot of challenges, most of our African-American students will minor in Africana Studies. We have strong majors in it despite all the negative people coming at us, we still have students who major in the discipline, who want to be in Africana Studies and so we've experienced some very satisfying highs.

Our lows continue to be the constant challenge to the discipline itself. Is it valid? Do we meet the efforts to try and force us to mesh it into something else that we don't want? To sometimes disrespect the faculty in its expressions of its own wishes so that it almost becomes, once again, a plantation mentality that they know better for us than we know for ourselves, and often the double standards that are applied to Africana Studies versus other disciplines. I look at things in the personnel department that would never happen sometimes in other departments that people impose on us where they don't hear us, they

don't listen to what our needs are, where they think the discipline ought to be going (as if they know better than we know, even though they have no contact at all with the discipline). We are challenged with where the resources ought to be and how we are to develop discipline. So we continue to fight these battles. Sometimes, they're a little less overt than they were early on, where people aren't saying oh, you're not a valid discipline or you have no place in the academy, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. We don't have that, but we do have it in other ways where people say, well, maybe if you just blended this over here or maybe you're too rigorous in your standards, so we end up with this conversation as if those outside know better what Africana Studies ought to be about than those in the middle of it. And yet I don't think anyone in the English department would attempt to tell somebody in Anthropology the direction that the Anthropology department should go, but yet people have a tendency to believe they know best what Africana Studies ought to be like, where we ought to be going.

So it's a constant challenge, I think, at that level to develop a discipline that you own, that you have some respect for, that you have responsibility for in terms of responsibilities to be accountable to the large community that gave it life and so, for me, that is the real challenge and sometimes the low, if we allow ourselves to be caught up into those kinds of things that exist. So as I look at where we've been for 40 years, the battle continues--the constant battle to have ownership, to have input and to have that ownership and input respected. Even after 40 years of being in the discipline, even after 10 years of service on NCBS's board, chairing the national organization, in a place and with all the scholars in the discipline locally and internationally, you still have people asking you these questions that they can't answer themselves, but they're asking out of ignorance and disrespect for those who run the discipline.

Merritt: The department really feels honored to have you attain the rank and title of Professor Emeritus. A lot of people don't even know what that means, but it implies many things—greater intellectual freedom, more personal time (maybe), a teacher of teachers, advisor, mentor, greater creative control of your time, again, maybe. How would you describe your role as Emeritus?

Weber: You know, the sad thing is I haven't had a chance to enjoy it yet! It would be wonderful to be in some position where you could sit up on a loft somewhere above and look down and share your wisdom and that's what most people think of an emeritus faculty member; someone who can provide advice. I think, more than anything, I'm honored that the University has such a title, but also the fact that we have faculty emeritus in the department. We have a couple of them and many of them are gone and provide very little guidance and direction. I'm optimistic because of my longstanding commitment to the discipline and my involvement continually with those in the discipline to be able to, I hope, to mentor the leadership of the discipline, to provide them with some insight of my 40 years of struggle, because the battles continue.

They change faces. They may even change clothes occasionally, but the heart is still the same in terms of battles we engage in at the University. So I'm optimistic that I can share that wisdom and that experience of how to fight these battles and win some of them. Also, I want to continue to be a liaison between the community and the department.

Merritt: That's what we really hope to see you continue doing.

Weber: Yes, I want to do that. I also want to be a fundraiser for the department. I would love to be able to endow a chair in Africana Studies that we own and control. In fact, that's one of the many things I want to do in terms of endowing a chair. I want to strengthen our relationship with Africa as we have done with our programs. So I see myself, hopefully, being in a unique position to be able to expand those opportunities that we have already experienced and to take it to another level of involvement and participation, so that we can strengthen the department in ways that we've not had in the past. We've had those who've retired who've kind of moved on and I understand and I respect that. They just want to go and do their thing and be retired. I plan to continue to be engaged in the department and in its activities, maybe not like on campus every day, but I do plan to still be engaged on campus, engaged in that even as an elected official. I want to continue to be engaged in the discipline locally and statewide. I do firmly believe in what we have attempted to accomplish in the last 40 years. As California becomes more diverse, as we see the ugly head of racial intimidation and various kinds of things begin to rear its head in different spaces in different times we need to still have a strong focus in education and educating the California kids and kids around the nation differently than we have in the past, and that would be important.

Merritt: Well that really touches on my last question. You've answered pretty much a lot of it, but you might want to add maybe a couple points in regards to where you do see and really would like to see Africana Studies go in the next 40 years?

Weber: I think one of the real challenges that we face goes all the way back to Carter G. Woodson in terms of understanding the importance of knowing oneself and changing the essence of education. I think at some point, Black Studies set out to transform the post-secondary experience. It set out to be a catalyst for change in every aspect of the institutions, not just to become a part of it, but to change that institution and its thinking. I think we see some of it when we produce different kinds of students who go out into the professional world and really make a difference, but we have to do it at a grander scale and we have to believe that that's going to happen everywhere. I sit on a whole bunch of committees and one of the things that constantly comes up is that how are we going to change K-12 so that it's more relevant to students, and it really is the biggest challenge in Black Studies to not only transform the post-secondary experience, but to transform K-12.

One of the many ways we can do that, of course, is to make sure that teachers who come out of K-12 are actively prepared and knowledgeable about Black Studies, Chicano Studies, Women's Studies and all those other study areas. That is fundamental. That is fundamental and I think at that you have to figure out, well, do we go into the K-12 and develop classes and those kinds of things with Black students. We can do some of that, but we're limited in our ability to do that. We may be greater or more influential in influencing what happens if the teachers who come out and go into the schools with a different curriculum, different attitude and different perspective because the students are hungry for something different. When I go into the high schools, such as Crawford High, and teach Black history every other week, those students are hungry for the information. They want to know it. They show up on their own free time to be a part of it. They want to participate in the gains of the factual information about Black people and so on. They want to go to the Allensworth Historical Site. They want to go to the cultural events. They want to know their history and it's not only them. There's some Latino kids in there, some Asian kids who come to that class as well. So it's really quite interesting, and yet we haven't done a whole lot statewide or otherwise to basically change that whole education system. Black Studies set out to be a transforming agent; to make sure that the ivory tower was intricately involved in communities and not some separated institution. That what we do up there in the tower ought to matter on the streets of our cities, and that we need to basically begin to change the dynamics of the life of African people by the information they have, and the motivation and the self-esteem that they develop as a result of this information.

So if we're going to transform our communities, which is why our community center is there, then we really have to do a better job in taking the Black Studies, Women's Studies, Chicano Studies, all those kinds of things into the communities so that they do transform people and communities, and begin to give them a different perspective on themselves. And give them motivation and cause them to begin to transform their own lives into different kind of ways.

So I think that in my mind, that's where Black Studies has to go for the next 40 years. We have to go beyond the ivory tower. Now I know that that's hard because (1) the ivory tower is not interested in the community unless there's a grant attached to it. The ivory tower is going to make it difficult to go into the community because it doesn't value community. So everything you do in a community is harder because it doesn't count for tenure, promotions, and all that blah, blah unless it's a grant. So those kinds of things means that the work is going to be difficult, but, at the same time, after 40 years, we have to see some level of transformation. We've established the institution here. Now we must make sure that the institution of Black Studies goes beyond the ivory tower into the street and one of the ways, hopefully, we will do it and we try to do it here, we continue to try to do it, is make sure that the National Council for Black Studies has a component, that is K-12.

Merritt: That is an excellent point.

Weber: When we bring it to San Diego, we bring in the teachers, the K-12 African American educators becomes a partner in our conference and they love it when they can come and hear our scholars lecture. Then we can be on panels with them and engage in that dialogue that comes. It's very, very important and so we have to make sure that not only there, but also here, but everywhere we go that Black Studies is a K-12 post-secondary experience. It has to be.

Merritt: Well, these are the things I wanted to ask you, but I just have to say personally, we, as faculty, and certainly many people in the organization such as the National Council for Black Studies really respect and love you for the work you do and the way you do it because you're a down-to-earth person. You're a person who is involved in the community, working constantly to bridge that gap between the community and the academy to promote Black intellectual growth. We look forward to you continuing this for as many years as the Almighty gives you to do this.

Weber: Well, I'm honored. I've always been honored that my community has given me the opportunity to do that, and that's important.