

Africana Studies: An Anchor in a Liberal Arts Education

by

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“The idea of a liberal education as a basis for general education in American schools is alive-but barely.”
----- Herbert M. Kliebard

Abstract

This article posits that there is a symbiotic relationship between the aforementioned questions concerning liberal arts and the exhausting and un-yielding retort about Black Studies. This work will examine the role, mission and function of Africana Studies as an intellectual enterprise and explore how it is an explanatory anchor for a 21st century liberal arts education. This work will not re-visit the curriculum wars of the 1990s, nor will it singularly explore the place of Africana Studies in the academy. The paper looks at the discipline of Africana Studies in this contemporary moment and illuminate its relevance to egalitarian civic education and people of African descent in the larger human story situated in a complex world.

Introduction

In the 21st century the subject of relevance in education is located on highly contested ground. The political and economic editorial pages of mainstream newspapers, as well as the agendas of state legislatures and many cost conscious families are in conversation about the meaning of “purposeful” subjects in higher education. Predicated on the ideas of using tax dollars efficiently and giving young Americans (in their view) the best shot at a job, the favored subjects in the debate are STEM i.e. science, technology, engineering and math. Consequently, as humanity moves forward in the second decade of the new millennium it is difficult to argue against the proposition that these are necessary and important subject fields in a technological world. In the public sphere one can witness firsthand the highly charged partisan political climate that America is locked into at this moment and while the political actors can’t agree on much, it is clear to a large degree that this body merged into consensus on this burgeoning dilemma.

Because of this widening 21st century reality, the liberal arts are under a critical microscope in terms of their meaning and purpose in education. This topic produced a series of special reports in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* which highlighted this reality on Feb 28, 2010:

- University Honors Colleges Pitch the 'Liberal-Arts College Experience'-by Peter Schmidt
- Think Selling the Liberal Arts Is Hard? You Should Try It in Texas- by Beckie Supiano
- Are the Humanities on the Ropes? Maybe Not- by Jeffrey Brainard
- For the Liberal Arts, Rhetoric Is Not Enough- by John Strassburger
- 7 Major Misperceptions About the Liberal Arts by-Sanford J. Ungar

Three years later more developments on this issue enter the horizon. On June 19th 2013 both the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *New York Times* ran stories on a of 61-page report titled: “The Heart of the Matter.” The headline in the *New York Times* story by Jennifer Schuessler titled: “Humanities Committee Sounds Alarm” speaks to a common thread running through both of these articles. The understanding that policy makers, families with children in college, as well as states with tight budgets, are wondering is: What is the value of the liberal arts in the technologically centered 21st Century?

It is important to note here that African-centered Africana Studies is more than just about the life of the mind as is understood about the general nature of the Liberal Arts. The discipline holds a larger place in the human world as it also addresses quality of life issues when done in an empirical fashion as a member of the social sciences. A glance at the quality of life and social indicators paint a rather bleak picture for many Black Americans as the second decade of the 21st Century treks forward hurriedly. This has been broadly looked at by social scientists for quite some time as Winant (2001) maintains:

Pick any relevant sociological indicator—life expectancy, infant mortality, literacy, access to health care, income level—and apply it in virtually any setting, global, regional, or local, and the results will be the same: the worldwide correlation of wealth and well-being with white skin and European descent, and of poverty and immiseration with dark and “otherness.” (p. 305)

Taking Winant’s observations into account, the goal of this article is not to illuminate the causes of this reality; although that is a very worthwhile pursuit, but to discuss the intellectual role that Black Studies has in speaking to these issues to some measureable degree in the new millennium.

Public Scrutiny a Recurring Theme

From its inception few disciplines have come under the level of scrutiny that Africana Studies has both in the educational and political spheres. That type of interest has not abated in the new millennium. In the spring of 2012 a very animated and at times acrimonious debate emerged as a result of a story in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about the nature of the scholarship that Ph.D. students and candidates in African American Studies are engaged in during past few decades. The usual ideological suspects emerged and offered their viewpoints on a range of ideas about the scope, purpose and value of the field. Africana Studies has grown accustomed to this type of hyper contextualized critique and in the main has done an adequate job of setting the record straight in the public sphere (Asante, 2006). However, as the comments sections and blogosphere responses demonstrated, there still remains writ large a plethora of myths, scholarly prejudice and misinformation concerning the Africana Studies intellectual enterprise.

In order to understand fully the nature of the debate that ensued over the “Naomi Schaffer Affair” in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* it is necessary to offer insights into how this type of rebuke became a common position concerning Black Studies. Black Studies, as it has and still is called by some departments (and will be used henceforth in this essay), has been contested ground for quite some time. After its politicized start in 1968, it has respectively institutionalized itself firmly in the intellectual life and scholarly landscape of most colleges and universities in America. However, it is still held in contempt by a tiny minority of both suspicious academics and political ideologues that tend to maintain two fundamental positions:

- 1.) Black Studies courses should/could be absorbed by “traditional” academic departments
- 2.) The courses in Black Studies do not prepare students for mainstream jobs and therefore are not the most efficient use of student tuition and/or tax dollars

These two positions keep Black Studies on the table for redress and this is particularly meaningful in the current political climate in the United States. In acknowledgement of the aforementioned second point, the National Council of Black Studies has acknowledged this critique and posted on its website a link titled “What can I do with a degree in Black Studies”? The link contains a wide range of categories of jobs that Black Studies majors are employed. In addition, the scholarly record, intellectual heft, and institutional contributions of Black Studies is expansive, documented and growing in a wide trajectory albeit to a large degree un-noticed by disinterested academics and political ideologues. It remains to be seen if this is an accidental or a purposeful neglect of available information in the digital age.

Nonetheless, this lack of knowledge is alive and well in small circles both academic and political. The information in question, which appears to be in constant swirl about Black Studies, is located in public discourse and defined discursive communities. The foundation of the argument is usually constructed on the premise that Black Studies is both a tool of leftist indoctrination and divisive progressive rhetoric that makes its way into the college classroom. In this regard, it is important to highlight the political nature of anti-egalitarian public discourse, for example, Fiske (1996) maintains: "Discourse, then is always a terrain of struggle, but the struggle is never conducted on a level field. The dominant discourses, those that occupy the mainstream, serve dominant interests, for they are products of the history that has secured their domination" (p. 5). The argument that Fiske makes above illuminates the context of current politicized discourse surrounding academia. As author David Horowitz makes clear in his book: *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*, any academic that seeks to promote critical thinking which goes against the grain of his positions standards are seen as dangerous.

In the main, this argument is at best thin and falls flat, but there is a community of scholars, politicians and groups, particularly the National Association of Scholars and their perennial spokesman Peter Wood, who consistently offer this line of reasoning. The political expediency of these claims has not gone un-noticed and often the expositors of these extreme positions rest their argument on parochial interpretations of the academy in the modern age. Of all the Liberal Arts and Social Sciences those with the word "studies" in their titles have experienced the most critique, but there has always been a strident hyper-critique of Black Studies going back over forty years.

Measure of Value

The question about what types of knowledge have public worth is not a new area of inquiry. Historically, there have been conversations on this issue going back to the Victorian intellectual tradition, which included the voice of naturalist Charles Darwin. Another person not widely known for his educational reform proclivities was philosopher/sociologist Herbert Spencer. Spencer is commonly known for his ideas about the nature of humankind and his development of Social Darwinism and its corollary the notion of survival of the fittest. Spencer is not as well known for his strident political bends toward anti-egalitarianism, which was demonstrated with the publishing of his work in 1842 titled: "The Proper Sphere of Government." In this series of essays he argued essentially that the federal government should only be responsible for the protection of people and property and not involved in education, the building of roads, or any form of charity. Alternatively, Herbert Spencer's foray into ideas concerning Liberal Arts education set the social and political climate in the late 1800s for many of the contemporary discussions that are in evidence today.

According to Kliebard (1988) Spencer's work "...offered an even more formidable challenge to the traditional conception of a liberal arts education" (p.33). Spencer's views on liberal arts education were clearly evident in his book titled *Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical*, written in 1860. In this volume, he states, "Before there can be a rational curriculum, we must settle which things it most concerns us to know and to this end, a measure of the value is the first requisite." Determining a measure of value is the subjective platform from which Spencer's movement was launched. This is instructive in the case of Black Studies when looking at Spencer's notion of a measure of value. The measure of value that the progenitors of Black Studies maintained was situated in the idea that the wellbeing of African descended people in the United States could best be served by an organized and structured exploration of Africana phenomena. It was to this end that Black Studies was created and formed under the mantra of "Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility." This could be seen as contrary to Spencer's Victorian ideas of self-preservation through the study of the sciences as man's most important intellectual purpose.

In addition to its monumental unfolding as a mainstream scholarly endeavor Black Studies has had wide influence and impact on ideas and movements outside of the Black experience. As Rojas (2007) writes, "If black studies programs had never been established, it is hard to imagine that the modern academy would have engaged with multiculturalism and related issues with the same intensity" (p.219). In the 1990's, Black Studies exacted a similar tone concerning the development of the multicultural movement. In his book *The Dis-Uniting of America*, the late historian Arthur Schlesinger (1992) writes, "If the republic now turns away from Washington's old goal of "one people," what is its future?-disintegration of the national community, apartheid, Balkanization, tribalization?"(p.118). Adding to the conversation Columbia College educator Diane Ravitch and a host of other lesser known individuals entered the fray and located the movement for African-centered thought as divisive to the American nation, although her position has shifted in her rhetoric of today. In the aftermath of the efforts of those who espouse this position, it is still not clear how offering a more inclusive curriculum to reflect the contributions of all Americans is divisive.

Knowledge Production and Use

The history of the United States culminating in the 1960s and its structural, systemic, and institutional barriers to full equality for Black Americans prompted Black Studies to locate its work in the engagement of practical reality. The luxury of abstraction and dis-engagement from real life challenges facing Black people were not permissible practices afforded to authentic Black Studies practitioners both then and now. The notion of "a view from nowhere" or dispassionate reflective observation so often discussed in social science and scientific discussions was/is alien to the applied Black Studies enterprise.

This way of looking at and using knowledge contradicts the Kemetic understanding of knowledge as Karenga (2002) maintains that "... the commitment to learning is based on the conception of knowledge not simply for knowledge sake, but rather knowledge for human sake"(p.7). It is generally understood in Black Studies circles that passion towards a subject does *not* automatically connote lack of rigor or depth of analysis when examining important questions of humanity.

In his text, *Introduction to Political Sociology*, Anthony M. Orum (2001) writes, "For Marx, as all scholars, there is an inherent tension between the role of a practical human being and the role of a student of society and ideas" (p.10). The luxurious notion of pondering the tension between ideas and society is a question that authentic African-centered Black Studies does not entertain enthusiastically, because it seeks to examine phenomena related to African descended people and illuminate the disparate social conditions placed at the door of Black America. Orum (2001) argues further that, "The former calls for practical action, involves one in the immediacies of everyday life, and above all requires moral commitments. The latter calls for a theoretical and dispassionate stance—for an unbiased observation of things as they are, have been, and will be" (p.10) Maulana Karenga's definition of Black Studies would locate its mission on the former or "practical" side of Orum's observations. Karenga (2002) defines Black Studies thusly, "Black Studies is the critical and systematic study of the thought and practice of African people in their current and historical unfolding" (p.3). Orum's understanding of Marx's view on the nature and use of knowledge is not present or of great importance in the authentic Black Studies approach to the world of ideas. To be distant from the realities of African descended people intellectually for the applied Black Studies scholar was/is in essence to be disconnected from the project because the discipline was founded on two primary ideas:

- Academic Excellence
- Social Responsibility

These two ideas permeate the disciplinary thrust of Black Studies and when authentically done should direct the work in the field no matter the nature of the question. This is the mission compass that is used by authentic practitioners. There should not be a greater weight given to either position but balance in both spheres is sought, valued and necessary.

The Organic Tradition

In historically analyzing the intellectual spirit of Black Studies before its inception in 1968 and understanding how its scholarly formation took hold, there are many individuals that can be looked to for the inspiration of the mantra of Black Studies. However, there are two individuals specifically who set the stage, influenced the reality and opened the idea to the founders of the Black Studies enterprise. W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson stand out and must be explored respectively for their way of looking at the world of ideas and social transformation.

These two men represent the idea of the “Organic Thinker.” The organic thinker is deeply concerned with social conditions and how their scholarly work can change the nature of society and transform the day to day reality of people who do not have a heard voice. The organic thinker is not concerned with ideas that are designed to remain solely in the halls of the academy. The focus of the organic thinker is with how her/his research and ideas can be used to change the nature of anti-egalitarian societal influences and transform the everyday lives of the common man or woman. This position fits quite naturally within the boundaries of applied research as it is understood by Tillotson & McDougal (2013) to mean that “...research that is designed and intended to have a real world impact and improve the wellbeing of a particular segment of society and/or society as a whole (p.104). The nature of this understanding is housed in the Black Studies idea of social responsibility which is a critical part of the disciplinary mission of the field.

The practical minded scholarly activities of authentic Black Studies works would be against the grain of earlier thinkers. Julien Benda in his work titled: *La trahison des clercs*, argued against the idea that the intellectual should be engaged in the life of the mind beyond the insulated realm of abstract thought. Benda (2007) writes,

I mean that class of men whom I shall designate “the clerks,” by which term I mean all those whose activity essentially is not the pursuit of practical aims, all those who seek their joy in the practice of an art or a science or metaphysical speculation, in short in the possession of non-material advantages, and hence in a certain manner say: “My kingdom is not of this world.” (p.43)

Benda’s position on the “clerks” is the antithesis of the Black Studies enterprise. His mention of Leonardo da Vinci, Malebranche, Goethe and others as people given to, “Purely disinterested activity of the mind” (p.44) is in direct opposition to the idea of Black Studies from its inception in 1968, which is the organic idea of addressing societal ills as they affect the Black world. Taking Benda’s ideas further does not require a descriptive analysis of a much earlier historical time period, but an understanding of the nature of the scholarship that is expected of Black Studies intellectuals who engage in applied work. Locating the mission of Black Studies as seeking equal parts solutions and equal parts intellectual productions is also a simplistic definition of the field. There exists no exact formula in terms of proportion for how the discipline should engage the world, but one consistent reality should be the constant critique and challenge to anti-egalitarian ideas no matter where or how they surface with regards to the well-being of African descended people and the larger human landscape.

In practice Black Studies assumes the *anti-clerk* position in that it seeks to produce knowledge and ideas that come out of the clouds of abstraction and aggressively engages the world as it presents itself. One reason among many that this is necessary is identified by Asante (1999) who posits,

If we have lost anything, it is our cultural centeredness; that is, we have been moved off our own platforms. This means that we cannot truly be ourselves or know our potential since we exist in a borrowed space. But all space is a matter of point of view or interpretation. Our existential relationship to the culture that we have borrowed defines what and who we are at any given moment. By regaining our own platforms, standing in our own cultural spaces, believing that our way of viewing the universe is just as valid as any, we will achieve the kind of transformation that we need to participate fully in a multicultural society. However, without this kind of centeredness, we bring almost nothing to the multicultural table but a darker version of whiteness. (p. 8)

Asante's position articulates the results of the historical epochs of oppression and contemporary anti-egalitarian movements that have impacted African descended peoples lived realities in a so-called multicultural, multiracial contemporary society. The unique nature of the aforementioned human challenges warrants an evolutionary need for the continued creation of ideational frameworks that address the aftershocks of structural, institutional, systemic and cultural biases that continue to challenge the promise of America and all of its citizens. This reality is what locates Black Studies as an anchor of a liberal arts education.

21st Century Effectiveness

The effectiveness of Black Studies as a vehicle for social responsibility and human agency in the 21st Century is predicated on four key issues:

- Its ability to draw connections between the formation period (pre-colonial) and current issues and concerns
- The willingness of its applied practitioners to produce relevant/meaningful ideational frameworks that offer an informed perspective so this population can make enlightened decisions about the nature of the society in which they live
- Its courage and conviction in unabashedly addressing the unique challenges facing people of African descent
- Its ability to put forth intellectual initiatives that are recovery driven, solution centered and translatable to the lives of everyday people

In the main Black Studies has done an admirable job of teaching and illuminating the periods of formation and oppression in Black life and rightly so. However, there is a question of proportion that must be addressed. As the common undergirding feature of the Black experience oppression is an undeniable feature of African feet on American soil. Clearly, Black Studies instructional applications examining (Colonialism, Enslavement, Apartheid, Jim Crow and De Facto–De Jure Segregation) along with other anti-egalitarian realities have been emphasized to a much greater degree than recovery and transformation. The overrepresentation of oppressive paradigms is problematic for institutional pedagogy as well as forward thinking community engagement in terms of praxis intentions. A pedagogy of victorious consciousness i.e. (Resistance, Agency, Recovery and Transformation) must find itself welcome and be given equal proportion in teaching and research. This will give students and community an actionable framework to consider in their efforts to understand the unique place that Black Studies occupies in the current epoch.

In this contemporary moment if the discipline is to be of service outside of the academy, it must continue its collective scholarly efforts in areas of agency (taking into account the African-centered initiative) and employ a robust push for intellectual ideas located in recovery and transformation. This is key because unlike other disciplines, Black Studies does not authenticate itself on a sterile dispassionate stance from the unique issues of people of African descent. Subsequently, the disciplines high standards of academic rigor and purpose must continue to be clear on its concurrent institutional and scholarly responsibilities. Therefore, intellectual projects that address the conditions of people of African descent can be the engine that advances the work, but agency driven ideas must influence the ways in which carefully crafted research is conducted.

Re-Capturing the Imagination

In many cases the common misunderstanding of Black Studies in contemporary America is that of the African American talk or radio show host. Many assume that these individuals have some type of academic training in Black Studies because they speak almost exclusively about Black people. The un-bridled descriptive polemics by un-trained ratings driven pundits that make up the fodder on radio and talk shows is far removed from the paradigms, concepts, theories and models used and developed in African-centered Black Studies in the 21st Century. This work is not maintaining that African American media focused entertainers should not be allowed to speak about Black issues; however, this work does posit that personal opinions, unguided conversation and popular group speak is not a substitute for empirically based, research driven information concerning the Black world.

In this regard the clarity of Carter G. Woodson is just as instructive now as it was in the first third of the 20th Century, Woodson (2000) wrote, “What Negroes are now being taught does not bring their minds into harmony with life as they must face it” (p. 38). The hypothetical, anecdotal, speculative conjecture that is usually supported by emotion, feeling and opinion which usually drives the media personality’s positions is problematic. Consequently, when taken seriously by the average man or woman on the street the rhetoric may lead to a false sense of reality, because in many cases the media’s polemicist’s have not been vetted in the scholarly universe or investigated empirically for sound conclusions to be drawn. This type of celebrity driven, market inspired dialogue does not maintain or support the benefits of an egalitarian discursive civic universe that is at the core of a liberal arts education.

Conclusion

Black Studies is at an important moment in how it must insinuate itself back into everyday conversations in the public sphere about contemporary Black life. It must concurrently maintain high standards of rigor and uphold institutional standards in the academy and also speak to the Black world on issues of consequence. The space of intellectual occupation for Black Studies should continue to be centered on producing research that investigates the fluid and unique zeitgeist of the Black thematic universe. As a vital component of a complete liberal arts education Black Studies articulates its meanings to the larger human story. Over the course of four decades Black Studies has institutionalized itself as a critically important hermeneutical enterprise for the 21st century, and clearly the liberal arts and human sciences benefit greatly from its contributions.

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