

Leadership and Performance in African American Studies: Towards an Introductory Discourse

by

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Abstract

This paper is a qualitative exercise that suggest that African American Studies is a performance and performativity phenomena, because it is an ‘event, ritual, or cultural presentation’ (Turner 1986) that over time operates in a ‘stylized repetition of performances [to] constitute identity’ (Butler 1988) in and outside higher education in the U.S. wherein we have come to expect particular activities and symbols when discussing or performing the anthropology of African American Studies. Second, the paper argues that there is a performance discourse related to the identity, content and context of African American Studies in higher education, and thus the relatively recent 40th anniversary celebrations of the discipline point to a common and expected historical performance of the discipline in the academy, and it also supports the notion that leadership and events can be “read” as performative texts to reveal meaning and culture. And last, the paper suggests that there is a synergy between the study of performance in its various forms and African American Studies.

Introduction

In this discussion African American Studies is defined as an interdisciplinary academic discipline devoted to the study of the history, culture, and politics of people of African heritage, created in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of a new consciousness and activism articulated by the African American community, and according to Rogers (2012), between 1965 and 1972, African American students at upwards of a thousand colleges and universities in the U.S. organized, demanded, and protested for Black Studies which organically took its inspiration from the Black Power Movement.

In this context, the process was steeped in three phases of struggle consisting of conflict (1967-1973), accommodation (1974-1992) and general institutionalization (1993 to present) which transitioned from a national or regional focus to an international focus as representative in the ongoing shift in its naming process (i.e., Black Studies, Afro-American Studies, Pan African Studies, African American Studies, Africana Studies, Africology). And additionally, this work contends that African American Studies is a performance and performativity phenomena, because it is an ‘event, ritual, or cultural presentation’ (Turner 1986) that over time operates in a ‘stylized repetition of performances [to] constitute identity’ (Butler 1988) in and outside higher education in the U.S. wherein we have come to expect particular activities and symbols when discussing or performing African American Studies. These cultural presentations, stylized repetition of performances, and particular activities and symbols have thus arrived in the form of holidays such as Kwanzaa and Juneteenth, and cultural presentations like the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, a conference of the National Council for Black Studies, and cultural events like the annual Bayou Classic college football game between Grambling State University and Southern University, featuring the battle of the marching bands.

Hence there is a performance discourse related to the identity, content and context of African American Studies in higher education. The relatively recent 40th anniversary celebrations of the discipline point to this common and expected historical performance of the discipline in the academy, and supports the notion that leadership and events can be “read” as performative texts to reveal meaning and culture. Therefore in this endeavor, this paper will briefly review how leadership is linked to performance or performativity, the importance of Performance Studies (PS) theories in relationship to African American Studies, and key performance or performativity thinkers in PS. And interestingly, in this construction, a limited amount of supportive literature has been found, a reality which makes this discussion essential.

Leadership

The relevancy of leadership to performance and performativity in the prism of African American Studies links to the need for a Black political performance aesthetic that hooks (1990) mentions in reference to jazz trumpeter and singer Louis Armstrong (1901-1971) appearing on the Ed Sullivan Show (a TV variety show, 1948-1971), however at the time there were no Black folks engaged in writing a critical cultural analysis, therefore, limiting the possibility of a Black political aesthetic discussion of how Armstrong was being treated (Denzin (2003:5). Hence, the idea of a Black person developing a written critique may have never entered the imagination of the audience, because at the time (1956-1966), the status quo via television dictated a negative politics of culture on how society should respond to Black people, famous, or not so famous. Second, in retrospective, we are not sure if Armstrong saw his performance as an opportunity for leadership or as an ‘intervention, a method of resistance, a form of criticism [or as], a way of revealing agency’, so that his performance would become a political statement, open for public pedagogy (ibid. p.9).

Had Armstrong been involved in the Black Arts Movement (1965-1976), perhaps he would have been more aggressive in reference to how he was imaged on the Ed Sullivan Show. Nevertheless, others took the leadership and became the voice of a post-Black Power era artistic movement.

Amiri Baraka founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem, NY; the Harlem Writers Guild was led by John O. Killens, which included Maya Angelou, Jean Carey Bond, Rosa Guy, and Sarah Wright among others. And as 'the movement matured, the two major locations of Black Arts' ideological leadership developed, particularly for literary work were in California's Bay Area via the *Journal of Black Poetry* and the *Black Scholar*, and the Chicago-Detroit axis of the *Negro Digest/Black World*, Third World Press in Chicago, and Broadside Press and Naomi Long Madgett's Lotus Press in Detroit. Hence, poet Askia Touré was a visiting professor at San Francisco State and arguably, the most influential poet-professor in the Black Arts movement (Zulu 2012), and in the same context of leadership, playwright Ed Bullins and poet Marvin X had established Black Arts West, Dingane Joe Goncalves founded the *Journal of Black Poetry* (1966), and thus, the cadre of Ed Bullins, Dingane Joe Goncalves, Amiri Baraka Sonia Sanchez, Askia M. Touré, and Marvin X became a major nucleus of the Black Arts leadership (Salaam). And more recently (contextually), Benston (2000) offers an interpretation of Black cultural expression since the Black Arts Movement, exploring drama, music, poetry, sermons, and criticism, and modern Black performance's role in realizing African-American aspirations for autonomy and authority.

Dramas of Living and Social Drama

In the context of theory, the 'dramas of living' as outlined by Kenneth Burke (1945) in his attempt to answer the question of: what was done (act), when and where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how (agency), and why something was done (purpose) are applicable to leadership and performance in African American Studies. Hence, in the beginnings and presently, many what to know: (1) what happened when African American Studies arrived on campus (2), what action or actions were implemented or eliminated regarding the new discipline, (3) what was the thinking about the discipline, (4) the location of the action and its background (e.g., urban college campuses), (5) who was involved in the action and their roles (students, faculty, staff, community people), (6) how agency was established and implemented, and (7) why did particular agents act and what did they desire?

Second, Victor Turner (1986) has a 'social drama' theory of social arrangement that arise in conflict situations relevant to African American Studies that involve breach, crisis, redress of action, and resolution. In the construction of the first department of African American Studies at San Francisco State University (then San Francisco State College), this process unfolded (T'Shaka 2012).

San Francisco State University

The breach occurred in a historical context with a history of grievances African Americans had with racism and discrimination in California and throughout the U.S. Then in 1963 the Negro Student's Association was created, and three years later (1966) the name was changed to the Black Student Union (BSU) and membership grew from 12 to 400 members. Thus African American students at San Francisco State University decided that they needed a Black intellectual and activist narrative to articulate their history and presence to set the foundation for a campus-wide and community supported strike to demand 'Black Studies' courses (T'Shaka 2012). Subsequently, the students introduced Black history courses through the SFSU Experimental College, employing Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Sonia Sanchez, and Mary Lewis as visiting faculty (1967-1969). Here the 'overt nonconformity and breaking away' is present, which Turner defines in his four-phase 'social drama' structure. In 1968 the crisis became apparent when the BSU in association with the Third World Liberation Front called a strike to demand a full and independent Department of Black Studies with a full staff with Nathan Hare as the head, and during the course of the strike, the students were joined by the AFT (American Federation of Teachers).

In the third phase (redressive action), the university President made an offer to 'squench the crisis from further disruption' by offering the strikers: 11.3 professorships (instead of 20), a Black Studies Department under the leadership of Nathan Hare and Joseph White (an associate director of financial aid), and a promise to fill 128 unfilled special admission slots. After discussing the President's offer, the BSU decided to accept the offer, however AFT accused the BSU of scabbing on the strike and thus the BSU agreed and refused to accept the administration's offer. But once the AFT demands were met, they escaped the strike leaving the BSU with the 11.3 positions demand; however, the position for Nathan Hare was no longer included in the original offer of the President. In the resolution phase, after a five month strike (1969), the college President was able to restore peace while the BSU and the Third World Liberation Front received: a Department of Black Studies, 12 full-time professors, authority to grant a Bachelor of Arts degree in Black Studies, the right to hire and fire professors in the department with the advice and consent of a community review board, 128 new African American students without regard to traditional criteria, total amnesty for more than 90 percent of the students arrested, and the development of a School of Ethnic Studies featuring the departments of La Raza Studies, Asian American Studies, Native American Studies, and Third World Studies (Bunzel 1968).

This performance of breach, crisis, redress of action, and resolution in the early formation of African American Studies was also evident at several colleges and universities in the U.S. during the emergence of the discipline. Thus, I selected the history of African American Studies via the web-sites of Ohio University, Boston University, and Harvard University, and in doing so; I noticed aspects and full demonstrations of the 'social drama' mentioned by Turner (1986).

Ohio University

First, in a rather quick resolution at Ohio University (a public university located in Athens, Ohio founded in 1804) in 1969, a seven-member Black steering committee composed of three faculty members, one administrator, and three students met with university administrators to discuss a proposal to establish an Institute. The proposal also called for the Institute to have “the degree of autonomy that will enable its faculty, students, and administrators to develop innovative programs.” Such autonomy, the proposal argued, would discourage interference from “traditional institutional procedures and individuals who may be personally opposed to the program”. Second, the committee called for Black administrators, curricula, housing, open admissions, a scholarship-recruitment program, a resource center, and activities fees paid by Black students to go into a Black students’ growth fund. This proposal seem to be well formulated with advanced help considering that faculty and students were part of the committee to resolve what they deemed to be a gap in the curriculum and services of the university. Not knowing the full details, I would guess that a breach of trust or confidence came before the formation of the committee, which perhaps created a need for the committee to form, and thus the committee was a way to correct a lack of academic and program services relevant to African American students and staff at the university. Hence, the committee sought a resolution in the crisis; however its student element sought immediate redress which resulted in nearly 250 African American students gathering in “solidarity” around the front entrance of a campus building on April 25, 1969. And thereafter, the university administration made a written commitment for a Black Studies institute which became the Center for Afro-American Studies, that eventually became the Department of African American Studies, and interestingly enough, it began as a college on the same day of the solidarity meeting, April 25, 1969. I am sure this quick resolution was surprising, but given the general social unrest of 1968, such as when nine South Carolina highway patrol officers in Orangeburg fired into a crowd of unarmed South Carolina State University students and local high school students protesting racial segregation at a local bowling alley, hitting most of them in their backs (3 men were killed, 28 injured and after the shooting stopped, two others were injured by police in the aftermath, and a pregnant woman had a miscarriage due to a beating by highway patrol officers) and the revolts (Chicago, Washington, D.C., Detroit, etc.) after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., a quick resolution was perhaps wise as a new willingness to confront authority developed in the consciousness of many during that era.

Like Ohio University, the ‘social drama’ of implementing African American Studies at Boston University (a private nonsectarian university, but historically linked to the United Methodist Church, founded in 1839) was executed swiftly after a few campus meetings in September 1969 as the university’s newspaper announcement that “a program leading to the Master of Arts degree in Afro-American Studies is being offered by the University this year for the first time.” However the decision to start the M.A. program was based on a university admission program, which enrolled four students in response to a 1968 incident wherein an African American student approached Sociology professor Adelaide Cromwell about the need for some kind of department at Boston University, focused African American issues.

Thus, in my opinion, the university didn't start the program because of their wish to advance the study of African American history, culture and life, but to avoid a greater crisis of public debate and possibly conflict surrounding the institution of the field of study at the university. And second, I think the swiftness of redress at Boston University also reflected upon the social and political dynamics ('social drama') of the era. For example, the U.S. was at war in Vietnam, in 1968 President Lyndon Johnson decided to not seek another term, Boston University alumnus Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee which triggered riots in Washington, DC, Chicago, Baltimore, and elsewhere; President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968 which outlawed discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing based on race, religion or national origin; presidential hopeful Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated, there was rioting at the Democratic National Convention in August, and the previous year (1967), Detroit had a five day riot which left 43 dead, 467 injured, over 7,200 arrested, and more than 2,000 buildings destroyed. Thus, in the wake of this major social turmoil, Boston University decided to establish the first graduate African American Studies program in the country, an initiative that essentially was the result of conversations that became the beginning of African American Studies at the university.

Harvard University

The performativity of African American Studies at Harvard was similar to the ritual of constructing an identity in academe at San Francisco State University, Ohio University, and Boston University, and therefore symbolizing a new cultural-political awareness among African American college students and their supporters in the academy and the community which juxtaposes Turner's breach, crisis, redress of action, and resolution phases. Hence, I will briefly highlight the applicability of Turner's quartet to the history of the effort to institute African American Studies at Harvard, as I've done for San Francisco State University, Ohio University, and Boston University above.

The 'social drama' involving African American Studies at Harvard emerged on April 10, 1968 when the Black student organization 'Afro' published an advertisement (hence, the breach) in the *Harvard Crimson* (the daily student newspaper of Harvard University) calling for the university to establish an endowed chair for a Black professor, courses relevant to Black people, a more diverse level of Black faculty, and the admission of Black students proportionate to the percentage of the U.S. population as a whole.

Four days later (the crisis), approximately fifty members of the Black student community voted to establish a ten-member body to be the sole articulator of the demands of Black students to the administration. Five days thereafter, the 'Ad Hoc Committee of Black Students' was formed and modified the original student demands and thus called for (1) a chair in Black Studies instead of a chair specifically for a Black professor; (2) the admittance of a greater number of qualified Black students rather than a specific percentage; and (3) the establishment of an African-American Research Center.

Subsequently, on April 29, the university admissions department announced (the redress of action) its intention to recruit and admit more Black students, the Dean invited a group of nine faculty members to accept appointments on a select faculty Committee on African and Afro-American Studies, joined by two students observers nominated by the 'Ad Hoc Committee of Black Students'. Then in May a general education subcommittee on social sciences approved plans (resolution) for a course in Afro-American Studies titled 'The Afro-American Experience'. Next, in October (1968) students called for the creation of a Department of Afro-American Studies which put pressure on the select faculty Committee on African and Afro-American Studies to present some results. Thus in January 1969, a report of the committee recommended: (1) the creation of a standing faculty committee on degrees in Afro-American Studies to develop and supervise a combined major and to grant degrees starting with the class of 1972; (2) the establishment of a coordinating committee on African Studies to oversee the increase of course offerings in African Studies; (3) the building of a social and cultural center for Black students; (4) the establishment of a Center for Afro-American Studies; and (5) a major effort to increase Black enrollment in the graduate school and to earmark fifteen to twenty fellowships per year for Black graduate students. Hence a resolution was about to be reached, thus in February the faculty accepted the recommendations of the report (resolution) of the faculty committee which prompt the Dean to create a search committee for faculty appointments in Afro-American Studies that included three students selected by the Ad Hoc Committee of Black Students and three members of the faculty. And in April, in a climate of widespread student unrest led by the Students for a Democratic Society, which resulted in rallies, sit-ins, strikes, and protests against the college-based officer training program for training commissioned officers of the U.S. Armed Forces (ROTC) and labor policies at Harvard, African American students marched on the Dean's office to reiterate their demands for student roles in setting up curricula for Black Studies and the hiring tenured faculty.

Realizing the reality of student unrest and the general era of national social change, the faculty committee approved the students' demands to establish Afro-American Studies as a department and for them to have a voice in appointing faculty for the new Department, a decision which caused the committee chair and a professor to resign from the committee. Nevertheless, nine faculty appointments and seven new courses for the Fall term were announced, with ten more planned for the Spring, and simultaneously, the committee proposed the establishment of a W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research (a goal realized), and in October, Ewart Guinier was named the first chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University.

As this selective review demonstrates, there was a definite ritual ('social drama') in the early organization of African American Studies which not only set its national identity, but also shaped its tendency to articulate an activist agenda in addition to the traditional academic mission of colleges and universities throughout the U.S.

Third in this roster of applicable theories is Conquergood's (1998) triad of mimesis, poiesis and kinesis which offers African American Studies a perspective in regard to its 'yearnings, struggles, stories, tensions, symbols and performances' (Madison 2005:166) that can perhaps be: a mirror or reflection of the Western centered academy (mimesis), a search for greater meaning and effect (poiesis), and a stage when reflection and meaning evokes intervention and change to represent the view of performance as a phenomenon that not only describe the world, but also offers great possibility for the world (ibid., 170).

Performance/Performativity

In understanding that 'performativity' has the capability of resistance, the historical quest for the establishment of African American Studies is a 'subversive performativity' agent as it disrupted the Euro-centric and hegemonic status quo of the academy. Hence, the battle at Cornell University in 1970 with the institution of the Africana Studies Center and it being completely burned to the ground, coupled with the strike for Black Studies at San Francisco State University in 1969 which signaled a political performativity that engulfed the nation (Lowery 2009). And consequently, by 1970 'around two-thirds of U.S. four-year colleges offered courses related to Black Studies, and three years later, over 1,200 colleges and universities offered over 5,611 courses in Black Studies (Ogbar 2004: 137).

In this context, Sell (2008) suggest that the performative vision of Black Studies enabled the Black Arts Movement to enter mainstream institutions of higher education and scholarly-critical methodology, and therefore 'it is difficult to comprehend the Black Arts Movement without comprehending the role of performance in the movement as an aesthetic mode, an epistemological issue, and an institutional imperative'. Continuing, Sell says that via Conquergood (2002) 'we can examine the interrelated fates of performance and nonacademic cultures as the Black Arts Movement and the Black aesthetic ideals entered the discourse of higher scholarship and education in the 1970s and '80s' Hence, he concludes to posit that Conquergood's critique 'provides an important perspective on this entrance, shedding light on the zone between the Black Arts Movement understood as a revolutionary, counter-institutional, performance-based movement and the Black Aesthetic as a recognized academic subject and methodology whose relations to performativity are distinct in motive and form from the movement that provided its impetus' (Sell 2008).

Historically, the performance element in African American Studies has often been over looked for the strictly political aspects of the movement. Hence, Joyce (2005) in her interviews with Amiri Baraka, Askia Toure, and Sonia Sanchez, and the *Journal of Pan African Studies* (vol.4, no.6, September 2011) have attempted to express this diversity.

And Sells (2008) points to the fact that ‘about a dozen performance-oriented, art-and-education institutions such as the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School, Black House, Spirit House, Black Arts West, BLKARTSOUTH, and others, were founded in urban centers across the country’ and thus operated as ‘counter-institutions’ that ‘explored modes of analysis, artistry, and activism’ (predating the Birmingham School and academic Performance Studies, including Conquergood's Northwestern program) that were ‘designed purposefully to provide alternative leadership structures and evaluative standards to the strictures of academia as well as provide alternative models of scholarship that valued aesthetic creation and activism as much as careful, dedicated study, and thus valued the "authority of experience" as much as the authority of academic rank and degree’. And like Performance Studies as described by Conquergood, the above mentioned performance-oriented, art-and-education institutions, ‘cast the notion of scholarly objectivity into critical crisis, established firm ontological grounds for an intertwined economic, cultural, and political struggle; and invented institutional structures for an ongoing and mutually critical crossing of the gap between organic and traditional intellectuals and institutional formations’ (Sells 2008). Thus, some of the alternative models to working within the traditional academic institutions included Malcolm X Liberation University formed in 1968 in Durham, North Carolina (which relocated to Greensboro, NC in 1970); the Institute of Positive Education/New Concept Development Center established in 1969 in Chicago, IL, and the Institute of the Black World created in 1969 as a part of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center in Atlanta, Georgia (Belvin 2004, Harding 1969, White 2011).

Conclusion

I contend that the above theories and ideas help in articulating and defining leadership and the early process of performance in African American Studies, and will perhaps add value to a more extensive investigation in the future like Rogers (2012) which can be outlined on a national level (U.S.) in inspiring struggle. And therefore illuminating the complex nature of one of the most transformative educational movements in American history to provide a prehistory of Black student performative narrative from abolition through the 1960s via the synthesizes of records from more than three hundred colleges and universities, including documents from 163 college archives, into one national story, essential to understanding modern American higher education.

And notwithstanding, in the above discussion, there is an obvious synergy between an academic field concerned with the study of performance in any of its various forms (i.e., Performance Studies) and African American Studies that involve the critical and interpretive methods used in their theoretical and ethical presumptions that guide their work. More research should be conducted in this area as we collectively engage in qualitative methods that can assist us in the exploring of ideas, the understanding of phenomena; and in the answering of questions by analyzing and interpreting unstructured data. Therefore, perhaps the ‘dramas of living’ presented by Burke (1945) can be answered.

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