

Walking ‘The Way of the New World:’¹ An Interview with Nathaniel Norment, Jr., Ph.D.

by

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Dr. Nathaniel Norment, Jr. (nathaniel.norment@morehouse.edu) was the chair of the African American Studies Department at Temple University for 11 years before retiring in 2012. He has published several groundbreaking articles and texts including *The African American Studies Reader*, *The Addison Gayle, Jr. Reader*, and his upcoming Black Studies textbook, *African American Studies: The Discipline and Its Dimensions*. Dr. Norment, Jr. sat on countless master’s thesis and doctoral dissertation committees in the discipline of African American Studies demonstrating his priority to train the next generation of Black Studies scholars academically, professionally, and pedagogically. He has over 40 years of experience teaching Black students not only in higher education, but in grades K-12. Currently, he is teaching Advanced Composition and Major African American Writers in the English Department at Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA.

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¹ From *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* by Addison Gayle, Jr. (Anchor Books, 1976).

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JJ: Jessica James

NN: Nathaniel Norment, Jr

AG/JJ: Please describe your academic background. What discipline or disciplines are you formally trained in, and where/when were you trained?

NN: I earned my B.S. in English and history at Ball State University (1965), a M.S. in Secondary Education (English) and Curriculum at Saint Francis University-Indiana (1969), and my Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with concentrations in Curriculum Theory/Design, Applied Linguistics (TESOL) and Rhetoric and Composition at Fordham University (1984). I have a New York State permanent certification for English 7-12 and a New York State permanent certification as a School District Administrator and Superintendent.

AG/JJ: How long have you been teaching in Black Studies? What courses have you taught? Have you ever taught in a discipline outside of Black Studies?

NN: I taught my first class in African American Studies at Temple University in 1992. Throughout my tenure as a faculty member at Temple University (1989-2012), I taught a variety of courses: *Undergraduate Courses* -AAS-1296: Introduction to African American Studies, AAS-1268: African American History since 1900, AAS-2248: Public Policy and the Black Community, AAS-2142: The African American Novel, AAS-2151: Blacks in Cinema, AAS-2934: Literature of American Slavery, and AAS-4248: Dimensions of Racism; *Graduate Courses* -AAS-8001: Graduate Prose Seminar, AAS- 8006: African American Literature, AAS-8432: African American Family, AAS-9462: African American Literature, AAS-9662: The African American Novel Seminar, and AAS-9001: Teaching African American Studies. I began teaching in the English Department at The City College of New York in 1969. I taught Basic Writing, Composition, ESL, and Black Literature (i.e. novel, poetry, short story).

AG/JJ: What made you choose to dedicate your personal life and your academic career to Black Studies?

NN: Interest in learning and teaching about the extensive contributions of African people to world civilization; the contributions of Blacks to the making of the United States; and the intellectual and artistic contributions Blacks have made to ALL the bodies of knowledge [literature, history, art, education, music, dance, anthropology, religion, political science, economics, philosophy, sociology, psychology, science and technology, film and sports].

AG/JJ: How has the climate changed for African American students on predominantly white campuses over the past several decades?

NN: Incidents of discrimination and racism still occur on many campuses. A majority of them are never made public. It all depends on the region of the country where the college or university is located, the political and social environment, and the percentage of Black students. Black students are still harassed, mocked, and threatened by white students and by white fraternities and sororities.

AG/JJ: You've taught at both Predominantly White Institutions (PWI's) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's). What differences have you observed between HBCU's and PWI's, particularly in terms of climate?

NN: I have forty plus years of experience at PWI's (CCNY and Temple University). At CCNY, Black administrators, faculty, and students were not welcomed or treated well. There was tension—always. White faculty openly expressed their beliefs that Black faculty and students were not as qualified and were there because of special considerations. At Temple, administrators, faculty and students were not as blatant with their racism, but there was a similar covert climate. Note that both institutions are in the center of Black communities in Harlem and North Philadelphia. I have only taught at an HBCU (Morehouse College) for three semesters. The climate on this all-male campus is friendly, embracing, empowering, and supportive. Faculty and students embrace the traditions of academic excellence, brotherhood, community responsibility, and cultural awareness. However, at both HBCU's and PWI's, Black students still have similar complaints about financial aid, housing, the bookstore, food in the cafeteria, and advisement.

AG/JJ: What are the key factors in African American student success at PWI's?

NN: Probably, the most important factors for African American students' success at PWI's is that (1) the school was their first choice, (2) they embrace the campus culture, (3) they become involved in campus activities and organizations, (4) can establish relationships with faculty and students in their major, and (5) achieve and maintain a high academic GPA. Other factors include Black students' relationships with other students, faculty, and administrators, a diverse and supportive campus environment that provides academic and social supports, and the opportunities to interact with people of different economic, social, political, and racial or ethnic backgrounds.

AG/JJ: What is the role of Black Studies in transforming the wider university campus? Is the role today different than it was in the past?

NN: The role of Africana Studies in universities across America and the African world, it remains imperative that we continue to (1) produce work informed by the expansive genealogy of African-centered thinkers prior to 1968-70, and (2) synthesize critical scholarship created in the discipline over the last 40 years. The ever-evolving paradigms that characterize the discipline must adhere to a strict, still developing, normative theory that emerges from the long-view genealogy of African-centered thinking. Thus, building a strong discipline is contingent upon forming a connection to the past that is not simply rooted in nostalgic hero worship, but also in developing pragmatic approaches to solving problems in the global African community. Further, the paradigms giving rise to a purposed discipline in Africana Studies must also adhere to a framework that allows the marriage of theory and praxis. The discipline's survival depends on its ability to operationalize an African-centered view of the theories, methodologies, and practices that arise from the work of scholars who identify themselves as the intellectual contributors of the discipline going forward.

AG/JJ: What is the role of Black Studies in transforming the African/Black community? Is the role today different than it was in the past?

NN: Historically, the mission of Black Studies has been two-fold: scholarship and service. The intellectual development is only part of the discipline's mission. The other component is how we transform our scholarship into a social ideology that helps to redirect the lives of African American people. An important part of the mission of African American Studies is to serve as a resource to our communities. Simply said, Black Studies is never Black Studies if there is no community component. Almost all organized Black Studies programs have in their objectives some reference to community service and campus relations. A common objective is often worded thus: "To do research in and provide services to Black community and its organizations by jointly identifying and analyzing its problems, offering consultation, and establishing service channels into the community from the diverse resources of the college or university." This is one of the main components that separates Black Studies from every other discipline in the academy, and was part of the original mission of Black Studies when it was first established in the late 1960s. The discipline was founded by members of the community, and was never intended to be an endeavor which lent itself exclusively to the academic world. One of the missions of African American Studies is its responsibility to build and empower our communities.

The core principles of African American Studies embrace a commitment to serve the community and to enhance community access to the university's resources where access has been, heretofore, limited; thus, building relationships between the university and Black communities. Hence, Black Studies issues will never be completely resolved in the classroom for the very being of Black Studies insists that the voices of the excluded are heard and included.

AG/JJ: How have students' expectations and preparedness for college changed over the years?

NN: One of the biggest challenges that must be addressed through college and career readiness reform is the grave disparity in preparation for African Americans and other ethnic groups, as well as low-income and first-generation college students. In particular, African American students are far less likely to be ready for college, with those in high-poverty urban schools being the least prepared. Much of the discussion about college readiness for African American students has centered on the deficiencies of the students, families, and communities. Lack of academic achievement for African American students is often attributed to environmental and cultural differences that impact school performance (Stewart, 2007). African American students are thought to be unfit for college and directed to low-wage work or trade schools following high school completion. However, the primary reason these students lag behind their peers is because their schools provide inadequate courses, resources, and support.

AG/JJ: Describe your pedagogy and teaching style and how you teach Black Studies, especially to Black students.

NN: I adhere to an African-centered approach which places the African American student at the center of the educational experience as a subject rather than an object. This placement of the student at the center allows for an inclusionary process, which gives equal representation of all groups rather than one group over or below any other group. With African-centered education, the African American child is culturally placed at the center of the learning process, whereas with Euro-centric education, they are culturally outside of the educational experience. African-centered education is holistic, meaning that the student will be involved in cross-disciplinary learning, meeting state core curriculum goals and guidelines, critical and creative thinking, self-concept development, character development, and moral education.

I am an accessible, engaging teacher who promotes student-centered learning. It is important to me that students are aware that my classroom serves as a space in which ideas are shared openly and where various perspectives are encouraged. Their arguments and opinions are an important, integral part of the course.

I function as a facilitator of discussion, an interpreter of theory, and a guide to resources. I position myself not as an authority, per se, but as a knowledgeable scholar who is equally involved in the learning process, for I recognize that students arrive with knowledge and experiences I may not have, particularly in this ever-changing global world influenced by contemporary popular culture.

Each student is unique in his or her own way; they come from a different place with different experiences in life, made up of diverse cultures and backgrounds. I connect with my students in a variety of ways. I take time early in the semester to learn about my students, what their majors are, what they are most interested in, where they come from, and what they've experienced in life. I pay particular attention to their emotion and disposition throughout the semester, as well as their quality of their work. I meet with students on assignments, during office hours, before and after class, and will also have many discussions with them either through cell phone, email, or just being around campus.

As a teacher, I seek to teach my students about the meaning and the ways of the African/Black world, and have them also understand their positions within this world. This cannot be done without critical thought and analysis in our search for our past. The idea is to unsettle my students' minds by challenging what is accepted, what is propagated as the truth, and expose them to the realities existent in the world. I confront my student to THINK -THINK by raising "deep thought" questions; I encourage them to challenge everything. I teach them to have their own intelligent form of investigation where they can define and critique concepts/ideas for themselves with confidence and clarity. I encourage my students to confront the most difficult and complex questions, to be open minded in the construction of new concepts/ideas, to think critically, and to be open to change.

I draw students into classroom discussions to explain, in a comprehensible way, their perspectives about the topic/focus of the lesson. This concept of an advance organizer would provide me as a teacher with a chance to see what students may already know. It gives me the opportunity to learn prior knowledge, generalizations, or presuppositions that students may have. I set high academic standards for students and, at the same time, equally respect and welcome intellectual diversity into the classroom. Intellectually, I set an excellent example which, by and large, is shaped my own philosophy of teaching.

I believe the study of African and African American historical and cultural experiences provides us all with valuable tools for understanding how the past informs the present and inspires action towards social and political change. In my teaching, I encourage students to think of history and society as an evolving negotiation among diverse peoples, leading to the development of varying belief systems, social formations, and cultural practices. I promote critical analysis through class discussion, critical writing assignments, the development of critical thinking skills and logic, and the introduction to ideas and concepts of importance to the course/discipline.

AG/JJ: Have you made any changes to your teaching style and pedagogy over the years? If so, what changes have you made?

NN: I've not only changed, but greatly improved my teaching style and pedagogy. (Pedagogical) content knowledge: I have a deeper knowledge of All subjects in African American Studies. I consider the ways students think about the content. Quality of instruction: I develop effective questioning and review previous learning, provide model responses for students, and give adequate time for response. Classroom climate (I assess student outcomes): I encourage and facilitate interactions between me and all students. Classroom management: I make efficient use of lesson time, coordinate classroom resources and space, and manage learning. I explain the purposes and aims of the content. Professionally: I participate in professional development, interact with colleagues, and keep updated with relevant and related research in the discipline.

AG/JJ: You also taught the doctoral seminar at Temple University entitled Teaching African American Studies. Why is it important for future Ph.D.'s in Black Studies to be trained in teaching and pedagogy?

NN: Pedagogy and strategies for teaching African American Studies that incorporate (or combine) different models and styles of teaching should "practice" identifying the approaches taken in light of the purpose, rationale, and philosophy of the discipline.

The teaching of African American Studies must be value based. Its focus must be on African centered education. With African centered education, the African American student is culturally placed at the center of the learning process. African centered education is holistic, meaning that the student will be involved in cross-disciplinary learning, meeting state core curriculum goals and guidelines, critical and creative thinking, self-concept development, character development, and moral education. It must be relevant, the student must be able to see its theoretical perspectives and praxis, and recognize their benefits to African American people.

AG/JJ: How have your publications, specifically *The African American Studies Reader* and your forthcoming African American Studies textbook, influenced your pedagogy or the pedagogy of other scholars in the discipline? What influence did you hope these texts would have on Black Studies?

NN: Textbooks about the African American experience are an important learning resource. Textbooks consequently serve as an important learning aide for learners and as a consultative tool for teachers. African American Studies textbooks can provide learners with interesting new facts and information.

When I taught my first Introduction to Black Studies class, I didn't think there was an introductory textbook that provided a comprehensive overview of the discipline, nor was there a representative source for all of the scholars who had worked to develop Black Studies. *The African American Studies Reader* was intended to reflect the diverse thinking of the many scholars who have helped shape the discipline, and the articles provided readers with historical, theoretical, political, and philosophical perspectives of African American Studies scholars, perspectives that have evolved throughout the struggle of African people since the 1960's.

The purpose of *African American Studies: The Discipline and Its Dimensions* is twofold. Essentially, it is written to provide a comprehensive resource book to identify the development of the discipline of African American Studies. Its second purpose is to provide a basic reference source for the sixteen areas of knowledge of the discipline.

AG/JJ: Should Black Studies programs have service learning requirements? Why or why not?

NN: Historically, the mission of Black Studies has been two-fold: scholarship and service. Black Studies called for the discipline to produce socially responsible scholar-activists. Therefore, Black Studies departments must require service-learning in their curricula. Service learning projects offer students a chance to volunteer in their local community through various organizations. African American Studies must fulfill its mission to liberate African American people and to commit itself to the communities' needs. There is an urgent need for African American Studies to provide directions to non-academic communities in order to confront existing socio-political and economic challenges. Perhaps, the central goal in the years ahead should be for African American Studies to have an impact on the quality of life for all African American people through service and community building.

AG/JJ: Should Black Studies programs have peer mentoring programs? Why or why not?

NN: Yes, colleges and universities use various mentoring strategies to increase the success and retention rate of students. Such programs can also enhance the academic success and graduation rate for Black students. Typically, faculty and students will work with students enrolled in classes in African American Studies. This can include faculty mentoring senior students who then mentor first and second year students.

AG/JJ: Has Black Studies positively influenced Black student success? Is Black Studies still important to Black student success today? Why or why not?

NN: Not only has Black Studies positively impacted Black students' academic success, Black Studies has helped to increase Black students' self-esteem, self-identity, and self-worth. There are several dissertations that have examined the effect of majoring in and taking Black Studies courses on the academic success of Black students. See: "It Just Opens Your Eyes Up:" The Impact of African American Studies Courses on Students in a University Setting" by Patrick Spearman, Ph.D. - Temple University, 2000. Black Studies is even more important today than in the 1960s because of the absence of African American history and culture in the public school curricula.

AG/JJ: What is the biggest obstacle the discipline of Black Studies faces in the future and how do we overcome it?

NN: As Black Studies [African American Studies] comes of age in the twenty-first century, it still has important intellectual and institutional challenges to confront. What has always been one of the major obstacles to the full development of Black Studies/African-American Studies programs and departments is a lack of financial resources available to students and faculty. Many universities and colleges only provide Black Studies programs with small and insufficient budgets making it even more difficult for departments to hire the faculty and staff needed to expand. Because the budget allocated to Black Studies is limited, some faculty have joint appointments therefore, causing faculty to leave Black Studies to teach in another discipline. Budgetary issues make it difficult for Black Studies programs and departments to fully function and grow. There must be institutional support and a commitment for faculty and resources to maintain Black Studies for the future.

In addition, those scholars who have earned Ph.Ds. in African American Studies must determine the future of the discipline. Their scholarship and epistemological perspectives must inform and define the purpose, curriculum, content, theories, topics, methods and ideologies for African American Studies.