African American Studies and the State of the Art

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Introduction

The field of African American Studies is a relatively new institutional feature of higher education in America. The focus of this field is on 1) the experiences, 2) the problems, and 3) the prospects of individuals and groups whose heritage, wherever they may be, is African. The field examines the historical records of black people in Africa and the Western hemisphere. The sociological conditions confronting African Americans and Africans (seen from both in-group and out-group perspectives) are stressed. The problems aspect of this new field deals with theoretical questions of several kinds: a) conceptual theory for thinking about how best to approach the black experience, b) pedagogical theory or sets of ideas and concepts on how to study the black experience, and c) strategic or social advocacy theories. As in any field, of course, the experiences, problems, and prospects components in African American Studies frequently overlap. Although the study of the black experience is old, institutional support for it at the level of course concentrations is relatively new. The youthfulness of the field is indicated by the fact that it is known by a variety of names: “Afro-American Studies,” “African American Studies,” “Africana Studies,” “Afro-American and African Studies,” “Black Studies,” and “Pan-African Studies.” At least one department uses the term “Africanology.” As a generic label, the term “African American Studies” will be used in the following discussion.

Until recently, African American Studies per se was a black, community-based endeavor, sparked by the work of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, itself the legacy of Carter G. Woodson, the “Father of Black History.” Although for years a few schools, such as Howard and Fisk universities, had black experience course concentrations within traditional fields and disciplines, African American Studies won institutional visibility only in the late 1960s because of student demand in the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Today more than sixty departments of African American Studies exist throughout the nation, primarily in predominantly white colleges and universities. While more than 400 African American Studies programs were funded with “soft” money, some 300 of them still exist. Ten universities offer Master’s degrees
and Temple University, University of California at Berkeley, Emory University, Harvard University, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Michigan State University, and Yale University offer a disciplinary or an interdisciplinary Ph.D. degree in African American Studies."

**Major terms and concepts:** Afrocentricity, Afrocentrism, analytical perspectives, core/boundary, curriculum, Eurocentrism, epistemology, legitimacy, multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, traditional disciplines, field.

### Foundation and Structure

As an institutional approach to the black experience, African American Studies takes a variety of forms. In terms of sheer numbers, the most common form is that of the program rather than department. The program enables students to complete either required or elective courses while doing most of their studies in a traditional field. This arrangement permits them to do work in single discipline departments and also in the multi-disciplinary African American Studies program. Faculty for a program may all be anchored in different traditional departments but teach a course or courses in the program. (Persons teaching full-time in programs, however, usually are not on a “tenure track.”) It is generally understood that programs have a shorter life-span than departments, being mainly dependent on elective enrollments for their institutional survival. On the other hand, the program format allows for greater ease in team teaching and interdisciplinary collaboration, a feature used by some institutions to justify this particular configuration of instruction. What has been said about programs applies also to institutes of African American Studies.

The significance of the departmental format, as alluded to above, is largely a measure of the durability of African American Studies departments over time. Of the sixty-odd full-fledged departments organized since 1969, fewer than a half dozen have been abolished or merged. Although the exact number is not known, programs and institutes have declined in far greater proportion, natural consequence of their virtually ad hoc funding and staffing arrangements. From the perspective of impact, however, the department appears to be the most significant. Thus, the most durable African American Studies unit is the department. Incidentally, it may be noted that the often-reported decline in African American Studies as a field has to do more with the decline in the number of programs and institutes rather than departments.

The departmental format also means that a college or university, at least in theory, has accepted African American Studies as an *institutionally* significant area of academic instruction, realizing the aspirations of the pioneers in the African American Studies movement. A regular departmental structure implies that a) funding is from the basic university budgets, b) the college or university tenure rules cover departmental faculty, c) the unit can offer a minor or a major leading to the bachelor of arts degree and or above, and d) it can have a full-time support staff, with standard benefits. It must be pointed out, however, that many institutions also have supported the African American Studies presence on their campuses for non-academic reasons. Some have supported African American Studies departments as “political settlements” with black students; some have funded
Black Studies programs as “insurance” against further demands. Still others have established such units as a handy way of increasing faculty ethnic diversity, without having this diversity appear in traditional departments. In any case, a Department of African American Studies is seen as the strongest possible vehicle for assuring the continued presence of this subject on a campus.

The impact of African American student demands for institutional support for the coverage of the black experience went beyond the setting up of institutes, programs, and departments. Many traditional social science and humanities departments have revised their syllabi and/or offered courses to make them more inclusive of the black experience, although proponents of the traditional disciplines say little about these changes—a reticence intended to avoid the impression of responding to black student demands. Often revision suggestions are met with overt resistance, as shown most recently by rise of such “canon” preservation groups as the National Association of Scholars and the controversies swirling around multiculturalism.

The simple fact of the major-minor formula for undergraduate instruction, which calls for successful completion of work in both African American Studies as a major and a traditional field as a minor, is often forgotten. Majors in African American Studies typically are required to take an average of thirty or more hours of instruction on various topics and aspects of the black experience and perhaps eighteen to twenty hours in a traditional discipline. Beyond the department, African American Studies majors and minors must also fulfill a given institution’s general education and course distribution requirements for graduation. Critics of African American Studies curricula often overlook these prevailing institutional prerequisites for a diploma.

While models of African American Studies departments vary significantly in curriculum content, the passage of the years has witnessed a remarkable stability of structure in so far as the delivery of instruction is concerned. The African American pedagogical objectives set forth a quarter century ago, for example, by the Yale University historian John Blassingame in New Perspectives on Black Studies (1971) in a “model” department, are still current:

- “to give students a clear conception of the complexity of American life,”
- “to acquaint students with the problems, successes, and failures of America’s largest minority group,
- “to enable students to understand the nature of the contemporary racial and social turmoil and to guide them to constructive models of thought about current issues,” and
- “to enable students to see the black experience in a world setting.”

The same is true of Harvard University’s 1969 committee report on African and African American Studies: black students want opportunities to study the black experience for the purposes of black community improvement. This report accurately matched the desires and interest of black students in many other institutions during this period. During the late 1960s, many people felt that major mainstream educational institutions had a direct responsibility to assist in improving society by supporting education and research on the racial front. Knowledge was to be socially relevant and, in the words of a much-quoted slogan of the time, African American Studies departments were to be the embodiments “academic excellence and social responsibility.” The Howard University Afro-American Studies departmental catalog of 1975, for example, announced that its depart-
mental goals were to provide “a fundamental understanding of those varied forces which have shaped the Afro-American experience in the Western Hemisphere” and to provide students with a “basic understanding of the special problems of Afro-Americans in contemporary life.” The authoritative voice of African American Studies, the National Council for Black Studies, Inc., in a 1996 convention call declared that it “works to

1. establish standards of excellence and provide Afro-American Studies programs in institutions of higher education;
2. facilitate, through consultations and other services, the recruitment of Black Scholars for all levels of teaching and research;
3. assist in the creation and implementation of multicultural education programs and materials for K-12 schools and higher education institutions;
4. promote scholarly Afrocentric research on all aspects of the African World experience;
5. increase and improve informational resources on Pan African life and culture to be made available to the general public; (and)
6. to provide professional advice to policy makers in education, government and community development.”

While the earlier stages of the movement were student-centered, the citation of services show that it covers faculty and administrators within the field and supporters in many different areas beyond campus-bound African American Studies. The African American Studies movement also has been as interested in developing new social science and humanities curricula as in critiquing existing ones. This developmental interest coincides with that of the Ford Foundation, which is now supporting curriculum upgrade initiatives in a number of major institutions. Over the years the National Council for Black Studies has been encouraging member institutions to maximize their curriculum potential around some model of the African American experience. As with the question of objectives, random examination of African American Studies course catalog listings reveals that they do indeed contain significant portions of the original Council model, with its subdivisions of 1) Social Behavioral Studies, 2) Historical Studies and 3) Cultural Studies Areas, each with four levels of treatment corresponding to the standard four levels of study generally required for the undergraduate degree. Allowing for the vagaries of staffing, most undergraduate African American Studies tend to parallel this model. The major variations in curricula are found at the M.A. level. Here students take a limited number of courses in a specific concentration. Doctoral proposals and programs structurally resemble the undergraduate course offerings in their comprehensiveness.

The concepts and polemics of Africentristm have attracted considerable notice pro and con, but insufficient attention has been given to the variety of actual instruction emphases. Some departments divide their offerings between Africa as a continent and the Black urban experience in North America. The Black Studies Department of Ohio State University perhaps has been in the forefront of this sort of configuration. For nearly two decades under the leadership of Professor James Turner, the Cornell University Africana Studies Department has split its course content between Africa and the Americas, as did the Department of Afro-American Studies at State University of New York at Albany and the University of
North Carolina at Charlotte. The Department of Africology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee has a curriculum which is Afrocentric and diasporan in its geographical and topical coverage of the black presence in the world. Occasionally, a program or department will use an areas/themes approach to orient its curriculum, the example being the Caribbean Studies Program during the Clark-Atlanta University tenure of Professor Richard Long. The Emory University Afro-American Studies faculty in Atlanta and University of California at Santa Barbara both are exploring the possibilities of upgrading their operations to offer the Ph.D.

With the mid-1990s presence of the cultural polymaths Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West, plus infusion of several millions of dollars, the Afro-American Studies operation at Harvard University has attracted the likes of William J. Wilson and bids to dominate academic discourse on the race relations aspect of the Black Studies field. With its selection of the academically prolific Manning Marable to head its newly created "Institute for Research in African American Studies," Columbia University has demonstrated a renewed commitment to this new field. Howard University is contemplating a synergistic reconfiguration of its Afro-American Studies Department, African Studies and Research Center and Moorland-Spingarn Research Center to amplify their educational impact on and off the campus. With the addition to its faculty of Ronald Walters, formerly chairman of political science at Howard and Walter Broadnax, late of Harvard, the University of Maryland increased its visibility in the study of race relations. At the time of writing, institutions offering the rare Ph.D. in Afro American Studies included Temple University in Philadelphia and, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The Temple University Afro-American graduate program is composed of two major "tracks:" the "Cultural/Aesthetic" and the "Social/Behavioral." The W.E.B. DuBois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst proudly announces that its main objective "is to produce scholars and teachers in the tradition of the Department's namesake, W.E.B. DuBois." Its curriculum consists of a three-track or concentration format: a "History/Politics Track," a "Literature/Culture Track" and a "Public Policy/Community Development Track," serving undergraduate and graduate students. The Afro-American Studies Department at Berkeley divides students' specific fields of emphasis into two general areas: "Issues of Development in the Diaspora" and "Cultural Studies." The former area includes "History of the African Diaspora," "Social and Cultural Institutions," Urban Sociology," "Politics of Culture" and "Political Economy of the Diaspora," courses also common to the above cited departments. The latter area, "Cultural Studies," includes "Comparative Literatures and Cultures," "Critical Theory, Popular Culture, Performance and Film" and "Women's Studies."

Whatever the make-up of announced curricula, the largest proportion of students enrolled in Black Studies programs and departments take African American social science courses. Since the major 1976 study of African American Studies operations across the country, repeated surveys have indicated that the typical curriculum is based on the social sciences and humanities fields, with variations as exemplified below. For example, the department of Afro-American Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara stresses cultural expression, and the University of California, Los Angeles focuses on diasporan history and community development. The disciplines of departmental organizers still influence the focus
and character of the curriculum. The Afro-American Studies Department at Howard University, for example, has a pronounced political science orientation and literature orientation, having been established under the leadership of a dean holding a political science doctorate. This tendency is underscored by the experience of the African American Studies program at the University of Maryland, which began with a constitutional historian as chair, evolved in the direction of contemporary public policy analysis under the leadership of a quantitatively-minded economist and is again under the leadership of a highly respected historian. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Africology Department presents students with two "options:" "Option A: Political Economy" and "Option B: Culture and Society."

In this new field, the construction of curricula is still influenced by faculty availability. Faculty availability, in turn, is a function of institutional location: the more geographically distant from large black population centers, the less attractive to African American prospects. As for location, it is probably no accident that some but obviously not all of the strongest departments are found near populous black off-campus communities. The list of strong departments include Temple University in Philadelphia, Harvard University near Boston with its Roxborough community, University of California-Berkeley, near San Francisco and Oakland, and Ohio State in Columbus. A few notable programs, however, are found in areas with small black populations, the Africana Program at Cornell and the Afro-American Studies departments at University of Washington-Pullman, being examples. A prospective faculty recruit might find him/herself accepting or declining a position as a result of not only location as such but also institutional expectations and competition from other institutions and disciplines.

The generic interdisciplinary African American curriculum models are often greatly altered in practice by the basic educational level of their undergraduate learners. Interdisciplinarity was the theme of the opening symposium of Columbia University's 1996 conference on "The Future of Afro-American Studies." The typical department of African American Studies is inescapably interdisciplinary because it is a species of intergroup relations. And no single discipline can adequately explain the interaction of two or more groups in what have been called "segmented" or ethnically plural societies. Interdisciplinarity poses a real pedagogical challenge to African American Studies instructors. Most undergraduates, irrespective of personal or ethnic background, are hard put to understand even one traditional discipline at the undergraduate level. True interdisciplinary learning and teaching require a fairly good grasp of at least two disciplines. This situation, in part, accounts for the somewhat interdisciplinary survey character of the syllabi of many departments. As Professor Gates stated in 1989, "scholarship in black studies tends to bring together insights from several disciplines [precisely] because black studies started as a multidisciplinary field." The slow emergence of doctoral programs, of course, will provide greater opportunities for in-depth interdisciplinary study and research.

Most fields require many years to evolve from areas of awareness to disciplines of practice. After two decades, African American Studies has yet to settle as a discipline. Initially, in the corrective drive against academic exclusion, many Afrocentrist pioneers thought that they could easily construct a reverse mirror image of the curricula they encountered. Few anticipated the difficulty of trying to a) create a new discipline, b) perform corrective functions, c) become race rela-
tions generalists; d) do Afro-locally-parentis duty; e) work as minority ombudsmen, and f) receive "precisely the same" treatment at tenure time as their opposite race colleagues with far fewer responsibilities. In many instances, black faculty often find themselves functioning as academic social workers and ethnic politicians, with comparatively less time for "pure academics" than their white counterparts. Much of the research done in African American Studies is reinterpreted secondary work, being less time-consuming and expensive than survey and original field investigation. Often secondary analysis is promoted to the position of primary activity, a situation quite common in controversial expositions of ancient African/Egyptian history. Few African Americanists have access to funds for archaeological fieldwork on the African continent or even for extensive domestic survey research. With the passage of time and the expanded presence in higher education of African Americans as a group, however, their share of opportunities for expensive primary research should correspondingly increase.

As stated above the mere existence of the African American Studies movement has had a positive effect on the curricula of many traditional departments. For example, one can now study black political life in the twentieth century in a department of political science, or African American family organization in a department of sociology. Excellent instruction in African economics is available in some economics departments, and an English department with qualified instructors can do a good job on the Harlem Renaissance. A department of philosophy with outstanding individuals such as Lucius Outlaw of Haverford College and Cornel West of Harvard can cross-pollinate African American Studies philosophy offerings. These intellectual cross-currents, however, occur against the ineluctable pull of traditional academic premises and assumptions of Eurocentric universalism. African Americanists thus are constantly involved with thinking through the premises, assumptions and histories undergirding educational communities, including their own. Intellectual independence, a key objective of African American Studies, is a hallmark of their endeavors.

The history of ideological racism in many leading mainstream educational institutions is seen as reason enough for African American Studies departments to be independent. At the turn of the century, when no "mainstream" institution thought the black experience worthy of study and research, white scholars such as William A. Dunning and John W. Burgess, both Columbia University history professors, turned out squads of smugly pro-Southern and anti-black historians of Reconstruction politics to justify the exclusion of blacks from participation in public life for over half a century. Some took to heart Burgess's dictum that "a black skin means membership in a race of men which has never itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason." In part due to the rise of Nazism and Fascism during the 1930s, American historians began a slow shift toward environmentalist and regionalist perspectives for understanding the South, including its black population. As late as the 1950s, however, as eminent a scholar as Henry Steele Commager could casually refer to African Americans as "Sambos" happy in bondage. Kenneth E. Stampp, a racially more sophisticated scholar, over-corrected in claiming that "innately Negroes are, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less," the implication being that since they actually were white, they should be treated fairly.

Like their fellow academics at the end of the last century, the mainstream sociologists tended to posit a genetic model in explaining black failure to achieve
white middle-class life-styles and living standards. As a result, the black presence in America was seen as a “problem” to be solved via racial white “uplift” operations. These historical and sociological explanatory perspectives began to change with the 1930s publication of W. E. B. DuBois’ *Black Reconstruction in America*. The publication, in 1944, of Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*, represented the legitimation of the environmentalist/regionalist explanatory paradigm of the causes of the plight of African Americans. Myrdal, the Swedish-born synthesizer of the empirical research findings of boldly liberal black and white scholars, concluded that the “race problem” was the result of a white supremacist use of social power and ethical hypocrisy in contradictions of the announced principles of the constitution. This book had a pronounced influence on white policy makers and facilitated the spread of environmentalist explanation of social behaviors. In the 1940s, the work of black scholars had to be filtered through the “neutral” hands of a Myrdal in order to have any sort of impact on white America.

In the 1950s, a judicial revolution from above and a social revolution from below brought about the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and greatly eased the way for organized African American Studies. The new cadres of black students admitted to previously “white” institutions in the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., immediately viewed the existing social science curricula as being implicitly bio-genetic in causal theory, incomplete and morally intolerable. Contemporary white professors were considered intellectually unequipped to take part in determining curricula. Some white professors concurred and demonstrated this by having black students devise their own curricula. Institutional responses to this new situation ranged from that of Dennison University, for example, which was to fund *student* travel to collect information about a Black Studies curriculum. With no institutional standards, this embryonic field had academic charlatans of all colors, with one such individual telling the writer that birth in the black community was a sufficient credential for seeking a teaching job in the field. Despite the high standards of individual African American scholars such as DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, Charles S. Johnson, Ralph Bunche, Ira DeReid, Oliver Cromwell Cox, Charles H. Wesley, E. Franklin Frazier, or John Hope Franklin, initially the newer generation of academic activists celebrated political correctness and activism more than the technical requirements of the field. The “qualifications” issue has yet to be settled, the entire topic now being complicated by the polemics of contemporary political Afrocentrism.

The field of African American studies thus has not yet evolved sufficiently to be classed as a discipline. Its adherents are still struggling among themselves for authoritative and widespread canonical definitions, a common vocabulary and rules of procedure. A combination of youthful minority advocates, political momentum and status quo defensive reactions have greatly complicated core and boundary definitions and developments in African American Studies. Bristling under hostile critiques by conservative scholars, African Americanists have continually pointed out that the so-called “established” disciplines are still defining and re-defining themselves, with virtually no one questioning their basic value. Even more complicated is the matter of the interdisciplinary nature of the field. African American Studies departments recognize that the interwoven nature of the black experience calls for holistic coverage, though they also recognize the impossibility of setting up reverse image, black micro-universities within the confines of the larger ones. Hence, departments now settle for limited “tracks,” “options,” and “concentrations.” Fu-
ture studies of curriculum construction will doubtless focus on disciplinary questions. In one way or another, however, these departments do attempt to address fundamental issues and problems of knowledge, an inevitable and natural result of their concern with retrieving, correcting and promoting some version of the black presence on the globe. Thus African Americanists pursue their work within a three-ply helix of epistemology, Afrocentricity and ideology.

**Epistemology, Afrocentricity, and Ideology**

Epistemology is defined by *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* as “the theory or science of the methods and grounds of knowledge, esp. with reference to its limits and validity” (emphasis added). Epistemology involves the examination of the rationales of orientation and the axiologies of choice in interpretations of the social world. African American Studies specialists claim that since the traditional disciplines evolved without an accurate awareness of the nature of the subjective, internal communities of persons of African descent, their vaunted “objectivity” is compromised by their practitioners’ a) social distance from blacks, b) basically tourist/anthropologist methods of research on blacks, c) lack of intimate familiarity with the negative effects of the actions of the larger societies on black social formations and psyches, and d) deliberate distortion of the African American and African social record, past and present. The emerging black academic research communities reject the intrinsic elitism and cultural ethnocentrism of establishment academics as flawed at best and degradingly unfair at worst. In their zeal to right ancient errors of perception, some black academics indeed have become somewhat guilty of substituting one exclusivistic vision for that of another. But on balance, Afrocentrists have been seeking to develop their own epistemological versions of social truths.

This rejection of establishment academic perceptions has deep roots in the black intellectual experience. Little-known now, but quite visible during its day, the American Negro Academy, established in 1897 under the leadership of Alexander Crummell, endeavored to provide an educated historical voice for the black experience. Carter G. Woodson, the best-known exponent of this view (and in 1926 the founder of Black History Week, now Month), saw his work as a corrective endeavor. Since the establishment in 1915 of Woodson’s Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, critical black thought has moved from accepting the “myths of the Negro past” through a rejection of blacks as deviations from the stock of humankind and from the standards of “host” societies to a prideful assertiveness which recently has sprung forth as Afrocentrism. For the first time the concern of professional African Americanists have spilled over into popular media and public discussion. The Afro-Eurocentric battle is larger than any campus; it is a battle over the contents of what every epistemology promotes: a given version of reality which its adherents regard as self-evident, and thus the point of departure for giving it social meaning and significance. Extracted from the polemics of the epistemological contest are the following versions of Africentrism, some of them overlapping, but all of them rejecting epistemologies of marginality and stressing the absolute significance of the experience of black people in human affairs.
The purest form of Afrocentrism posits ancient Africa via Egypt as the source of civilizations, especially Western cultures and their most fundamental ideas and inventions. Art, agriculture, literature, music, philosophy, logic and mathematics all appeared first in a black Egypt, facts contemporary Europeans wish to keep ethnically “clean” by denying their hidden Afro-Asiatic roots. For this group of scholars, this brand of Afrocentrism allows room for personality “centering” in the present to be guided by “Kemetic” centering from full knowledge of the black African/Egyptian past. Adherents to this school of thought assert the primacy of Egyptian Africa as the creative locus of the major ideas and practices which undergird the foundation of humanity. They declare that not only did humankind split off from the simian or ape world in East Africa, but assert that this African segment of humankind generated a still-living stock of ideas during its long history alongside the Nile River Valley. Consequently black people in particular and the remainder of the world in general, should acknowledge their debt to black Egypt (Kemet) and revive those ideas from which sprang earlier black achievements. This school avers that recovery of ancient Egyptian knowledge would fill the contemporary spiritual void and raise the deflated self-esteem of modern descendants of Africans everywhere. The most prominent exponent of this version of Afrocentrism is Dr. Molefe Asante, former chairman of Temple University’s African and Afro-American Studies Department. Through his many writings and with the assistance of black professors at other historically white institutions, Asante has made “Afrocentrism” the lightning rod for the ethnic tensions in the on-going cultural wars. This epistemic vision has been called “Nile Valley” Afrocentrism.

Continental Afrocentrists hold that the entire African continent is the true source of the culture of black trans-Atlantic communities. Adherents of this school celebrate their version of authentic black cultural values and practices in the diaspora and declare that they are prerequisites for the revitalization of African American communities. They hold that a common Afrocentric worldview can be synthesized out of the complex of traditional African life and history through careful study of existing artifacts and print materials. It is a conviction of this group that African social values are more humanistic than those derived from Europe. For them, the entire continent of Africa and the sum of African history and culture constitute the authentic interpretative foundation for understanding the black experience. Afrocentrists tend to celebrate ancient Ethiopia, Axum, Meroe, Napata on the eastern edge of the continent and medieval Ghana, Mali and Songhai on its western side. They suggest that the ethical foundations of the peace and tranquillity enjoyed by these civilizations at their apex should be rediscovered and put to modern use. Knowledge of the great African kingdoms should be as much part of the modern learners repertoire as that of colonial Portugal, Spain, France and England, not to mention ancient Greece and Rome. The traditional African values and practices, this group declares, could very well be the revivalistic catalyst for the spiritual and secular salvation of a sundered race.

Afrocentric infusionists urge the positive value of infusing or blending Africa-based ideas, concepts, values and historical data into the curricula. This school claims that all Americans can profitably share positive African values, viewpoints, experiences and practices. While such blending would have the effect of reducing stereotypes and enhancing conceptions of others about blacks, sharing would enable people to discern the common humanity of European and African societies. *This group seeks close collaboration with public school curriculum specialists.*
Afrocentric infusionists see black Americans as persons with a rich and valuable African heritage which has been devalued, underused and ignored to the detriment of this society. Several school systems, mainly in northern urban areas, have attempted to adopt the Afro-infusionist social studies curriculum models, with critics being quite concerned about issues of accuracy and content balance. Perhaps the best known package is the Portland, Oregon Baseline Essays, designed to assist public school teachers in revising their instructional units to accommodate Africentric materials. Professor Asa Hilliard of Georgia State University is perhaps the leading advocate of infusionism, even though he also is partial to the Nile Valley School.

Social Afrocentrists, on the other hand, place great stress on the use of knowledge and resources in protecting and promoting the best interests of black people as members of the localities in which they live. They do not use African background data as much as the other Afrocentrists. They agree that the heritage of America’s black population is insufficiently appreciated, but hold that it is not possible nor desirable to try to reproduce ancient Africa in a world beginning the twenty-first century. Adherents of this school take an interest group approach to the topic of Afrocentrism and hold that intellectual fads wax and wane but that group interests are permanent. Thus, social Afrocentrists do not see the black experience as so specialized that only blacks may be involved in exploring it. This version of Afrocentrism is less “hard line” about who can participate in the work of using education to promote the concerns of African Americans. It recognizes the complexity of human experience and the difficulties in identifying the culturally “African” from the non-African elements which societies absorb over time. Africa per se is more of a target of interest than of inspiration. In a sense, this conception of Afrocentrism is but a continuation of the integrationist position taken by the first wave of individual black scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier in the era of segregation.

The types of Afrocentrism cited above represent the thinking about how to avoid the negative aspects and consequences of traditional curricula and attitudes toward people of African origin, independent of its nuances. The very concept of Afrocentrism has stimulated a great deal of debate about the roles of different epistemic perspectives in guiding instruction and research in the field of African American Studies. At the level of practice, African American studies departments are 1) endeavoring to create an accurate, authentic, and autonomous intellectual vision of the social world, free of the misleading claims of Eurocentric “universalism” and “objectivity,” 2) still trying to develop and present once-omitted factual material to their students, 3) hoping to evolve from multi-disciplinary to inter-disciplinary instruction, 4) responding more effectively to issues of curriculum balance in the area of cognitive skills, and 5) still constructing their institutional foundations. Despite its developmental problems, the field of African American studies has already made major contributions in the area of ethnic and cultural diversity, by raising anew questions about the nature, content, and direction of American education. In this context, epistemology supplies the grounds for a given explanatory paradigm. Epistemology, then, provides the given, the axiomatic premise for thinking about and evaluating social process.

The following is a brief summary of the most common used explanatory ideologies of which students of Africa and African America ought to be aware. One of the most concise discussions of the dual character of epistemic orientations and

Booker T. Washington, of course, is known as the great accommodator, supporting industrial individualism and political avoidance on the part of the black community. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and DuBois were quintessential assimilationists and liberal idealists, each believing in open participation in an economically restructured American society. The range of views inherent in the assimilationist perspective, presumed a continued African American presence intertwined in the larger social system. In the self-determinationist camp were the Garveyites who advocated a separate society in the shadow of the existing one here and in Africa, under a single leader, such as Marcus Garvey himself. The various Afro-Islamic groups in America, of course, currently support a structural and cultural separation, their brand of separatism arising out of frustration with American mainstream politics and the shortcomings of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

The psychological black nationalist label may be applied to many of the students who demanded the establishment of African American Studies programs (and in some cases, separate cultural facilities), with distinctly social uplift agendas. The point here is that the various perspectives suggested both categories of understanding and ideologies of behavior. The debate on ideological behavior, of late, has brought about much of the controversy over "political correctness."

**Socio-Scientific Trends**

While Africentricity and other ideologies have emerged as debates over the proper philosophy and perspectives African American activists should take toward their work and the best action-oriented strategies they should propose to the African American community, it is helpful to understand what has been the nature of the themes and theories guiding previous academic efforts, especially in the context of their usages of the concept of "Community." The term "African American (or Black) Community" has been used to mean a) the collectivity of Americans of African ancestry, and b) blacks as a cohesive socio-political group. The idea of an African American or black community has been used most explicitly in the fields of history, sociology and psychology. These disciplines, respectively, deal with 1) the historical dimensions of the black experiences, 2) the sociological dilemmas of racial stratification and subordination in a democracy and 3) the impact of the community's historical legacy and its contemporary effects on the mentality of black people.

Like most other scholars, African American intellectuals appear to have developed their analytical philosophies in reaction to their own socialization experiences, their individual attitudes toward the canons of their professional disciplines, the major intellectual currents of their eras, and the particular topics, problems and/or questions addressed by them. If these scholars are unified by a
single orienting ideology, it would be the ideology of freedom. The individuals and books cited below are to be understood as examples of the themes and theories explaining the character of the black community.

Black scholarly production in the United States originated in the field of history. It began as an effort to have people of African descent seen as complete human beings and not as animated commodities in the economic systems of other peoples. Consequently, the central themes and objectives of black historiography have attacked obliterate racism. In the words of historian Earl E. Thorpe, "the central theme of Black History is the quest of Black Americans for freedom equality and manhood" (sic). John Hope Franklin, the dean of African American historians, has noted several distinct thematic phases in the evolution of black history. From the publication of George Washington Williams' *History of the Negro Race in America* (1883), to about 1915, writes Franklin, "the common objective of the writers of this period was to define and describe the role of Afro-Americans in the life of the nation." The few black historians of the era tried to counteract this by writing amateur histories and biographies as correctives to the widespread belief that no matter where located, Africans were incapable of contributing to history as originators of ideas and artifacts.

The next phase began in 1915 with the founding, by Carter G. Woodson, of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Woodson declared that the objective of his new organization was to "save and publish the records of the Negro, that the race may not become a minor factor in the thought of the world"—hence, the establishment of *Journal of Negro History* in 1916 and the *Negro History Bulletin* a decade later. The practical intent of historical contributionism was the bolstering of community pride and confidence in an era of official racism.

The third phase covers the years between 1935 and 1960, a period which saw the appearance of Nazism overseas, the urbanization of the black community in North America and the beginning of its Civil Rights revolution. In 1933, Woodson wrote *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, a work of epistemology or the study of the ideological foundations of knowledge itself. In this work, he urged blacks, lettered and unlettered alike, not to depend on the majority group for the definition of themselves and of social reality. Two years later, the multi-disciplinary DuBois made a declaration of black intellectual independence with a fresh and provocative interpretation of history. Black history also became overtly critical of how the larger social order was structured and how it functioned. This historical sociology made it easier for historians to use sociology in their pleas for a more equitable society. An excellent example of this is *The Negro in the United States* (1949), a work of sociological history of the American-American community by E. Franklin Frazier, the eminent sociologist.

The fourth and current phase is one in which no level of historical analysis is omitted. Black historiography now includes works from Thomas Holt's *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (1877) to the global sweep of St. Clair Drake's *Black Folk Here and There* (1990). Moreover, very large numbers of scholars of both races are employing a variety of methods to study and reconstruct the history of the black community from a host of analytical perspectives. Just as African American historians moved from narrative to analysis, so did the black scholars in the field of sociology. Even before emancipation, free blacks were producing narrative reports on the condi-
tions within their communities. In 1897, with his *The Philadelphia Negro*, DuBois did for African American sociology what Carter G. Woodson did for history: he explained, in scientific terms, the black community to itself and the larger society. He and other sociologists such as Charles S. Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier used an evolutionary approach to the study of the black community. Many of these early works measured the development of the black community in terms of rates of growth in income, health, education and occupational diversity.

By the 1940s, as black historians strove to promote racial and community pride via the contributionist approach, African American sociologists sought to understand the contemporary status of the race through a number of theoretical perspectives: acculturation, deprivation, segregation, discrimination. By conceptualizing the social conditions within the white community as the norm, in the black communities' inequalities were seen as negative. The implication of intrinsic human equality espoused by black historians and the sociological observations of group inequalities sparked the search for theories to explain the latter.

Thus began the *pathological* theory of the black community. This hypothesis assumed that the African American community was "ill," and that the white community was not. Sociologists then sought internal and external causes for the "illness" of the community. Some sociologists pointed to the legacy of slavery and hypothesized a culture of black dependency. Others saw the difference in "inappropriate" African cultural "survivals" which had the effect of slowing down the evolution of the race toward technologically oriented culture. Still others wrote of a "culture of poverty." Sociologists who assumed the existence of external sources of the black community's problems called for a return to an interactionist approach as the best way to understand the black community. This meant, again, stressing the conflicitive relations and power disparities between the two communities of color. Thus *deprivation* theories were used to guide sociological research on the African American community. The revisionist argument held that persistent racism and discrimination by white America had deprived black communities of opportunities to evolve at the same rate as white immigrant communities. In the 1960s, some scholars defined the black community as an internal *colony*, existing to be exploited by a callous "mother country." Some scholars saw the black community as a "nation within a nation" and several brands of "black nationalism" gained prominence among the more radical black intellectuals.

Internal and external causation theories were blended in the "systems theory" approach, which mainstream sociologists applied to the total social order, an approach that, at bottom, justifies the status quo on a law-and-order basis. In reaction to the inherent conservatism of this conception of the social order, a group of radical sociologists contributed to *The Death of White Sociology*, edited by Joyce Ladner. They called for a new sociology to supersede black community pathology theories and escape the ideological trap of systems theory. They sought a black sociology powerful enough to do this. Major volumes aimed in this direction is *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) and *When Work Disappears* (1996) both by William J. Wilson, the most prominent black sociologist of the 1990s. These works place the black community in a vortex of social forces but recognized the role of conscious decision making government as a major factor influencing the quality of life in black America.

The theories of the African American community advocated by black psychologists embody the concatenated effects of its historical past and sociological pre-
sent. Some psychologists (and social psychologists) have argued that polarities of racial status and dualities of black-white interactions have created a cultural split resulting in a schizoid mentality for African Americans. At the beginning of this century, W.E.B. DuBois, West’s model, wrote of this split in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) when he asserted in the case of the black Americans that “one ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unrec-
onciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” Although not normally cited as a social psychologist, the philosopher Cornel West in his *Race Matters* (1994) writes as one when explaining the reason for black leadership disarray “is the gross deterior-
ation of personal, familiar, and communal relations among African Ameri-
cans,” relations which “constitute a crucial basis for the development of a collection and critical consciousness and a moral commitment to and courageous engagement with causes beyond that of one’s self and family.”

In both DuBois and West we find an ethical yearning for psychological wholeness or “one-ness” which would contribute to the strength of community. The functional stress of the “two-ness” or double-consciousness to which they both allude, has cre-
at pathological problems for the black community, among them an enervating sense of collective inadequacy and individual impotence. For at least two genera-
tions, this has been a common theme of black and white psychologists using “refer-
ence group theory,” a theory which posits that the basic template of personal iden-
tity is the group of which the individual in a socialized member, whatever the status of the group. The unquestioned low status of the African American community in the society thus forces self-concept and self-esteem among blacks to be correspond-
ingly low. The famous 1930s doll-choice experiments of the psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark illustrated the pernicious effects of enforced inferior status on the self-concept of black children who showed self-rejection and low-esteem behaviors by their unwillingness to choose dolls in their own self-image. The accepted models of preference were those of Caucasian imagery, especially as related to skin color, hair texture and facial features. Neither nature nor nurture permitted these youngsters to be what they apparently wished to be. In the 1950–1960 period, themes of socially enforced differences and deprivation undergirded arguments aimed at influ-
encing public policy. The results of the doll-choice experiment were key elements in the plaintiffs arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court in the school desegregation case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). This essentially environ-
mentalist explanation of diversity was not seriously affected by the spurious black cognitive deficiency arguments of works such as Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994).

During the 1960s heyday of the Civil Rights movement, however, the thematic emphases of black psychologists began to shift. Black was “beautiful,” including skin, hair and physiognomy. Following the prideful contributionism of the histori-
an of the 1930s and rejecting the pathos of pathogenic sociological themes of the 1940s–1950s, black academics began promoting what Maulana Karenga called the “adaptive vitality” model of black community sociology and psychology. In his *Introduction to Black Studies* (1982) Karenga declared that “the adaptive vitality school contends that adaptation by Blacks to socio-economic pressures and limitations must not be seen as a pathology but a strength.” This was the psychological theme of Andrew Billingsley’s highly influential *Black Families in White America* (1968), continued in his *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder* (1994). Adelbert Jenkins, in the

The work of black psychologists suggests that the following tasks are of major interest and importance:

- defining and developing a concept of “normality which is scientifically sound and socially positive;
- creating “treatment” protocols for the African American community strong enough to cover the in-group status diversity of its members; and
- generating implementation strategies powerful enough to neutralize the negative effects of community subordination and socialization in this society.

Whatever the ideological future of Afrocentrism as currently debated, this overview of the themes and theories permeating the work of African American historians, sociologists and psychologists indicates that perspectives arise from the nature of the work done as they do from the work anticipated. Regardless of their individual ideological “isms,” black academics are deeply interested in having their labors make a positive impact in the battle to liberate the African American community. By ties of affection and circumstance, black intellectuals are bound to the primary community through which they, as human beings, entered this world. Its struggle is inescapably their own.

Summary

Originating out of the concerns of black students newly present on the campuses of predominantly white institutions of higher education in the later 1960s, African American Studies is a new field of instruction and research. In the context of that socially expansive and innovative time, proponents of African American or Black Studies were keenly disappointed to discover that the black experience was of minor concern to the educational establishment’s adherence to “traditional” academic disciplines. More than 60 colleges and universities responded to the African American Studies Movement by establishing full-fledged departments and by setting up more than 400 programs and institutes. Of the various institutional arrangements, the department became the most durable type of unit and constitutes the basis for the further evolution toward master’s and Ph.D. level instruction in the field.

Reluctantly accepted by the academic establishment, professional African Americanists confronted problems of a) faculty recruitment, b) field and disciplinary definition, d) curriculum construction and d) legitimating a counter-perspective on the nature of the black experience in the world. Since traditional academics had failed formally to explore this experience, the small pool of qualified black academics was the primary source for faculty. Defining the field and creating curricula within it have been especially difficult, for many African American Studies departments have tried to squeeze into small units a reverse-mirror image of the entire range of received historical and social reality.
Thus far, curricula redefinition in this field has evolved around the social sciences and humanities. Most African American Studies departments offer the bachelor of arts degree, although a half-dozen offer the master of arts and two or three now offer the doctorate. When professional African Americanists attempted to share their curricula perspectives with inner city public schools, the theoretical and practical problem of legitimizing African American Studies beyond the college campus attracted much attention among hitherto indifferent segments of both black and white communities. The popular media saw Afrocentrism as "news," one of the rare times an intellectual concept from the black academic community has gone national.

African American scholars have been concerned about the epistemological, political and pedagogical consequences of their endeavors. A review of influential works by African American scholars in history, sociology, and psychology suggests that social and situational circumstances stimulate the evolution of a variety of approaches to the academic treatment of the experience of communities containing persons of African descent. This evolution spans at least a century, and is characterized by the contributions of a small number of especially influential individuals, such as W.E.B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, Kenneth and Mamie Clark, to name a few. These scholars were lonely warriors during days of official racial segregation and uncontested white control of public school curricula throughout the nation. In the last two or three decades, a second and larger group of African American intellectual leaders emerged, examples being John Blassingame and Thomas Holt in history, Andrew Billingsley in Sociology and William Cross in psychology. The black intellectual community has not only grown larger in numbers and stronger in resources, but also has produced several public intellectuals, among them Molefe Asante, Derrick Bell, Stephen Carter, Michael Dyson, Gerald Early, Henry Louis Gates, bell hooks, June Jordan, Maulana Karenga, Randall Kennedy, David Lewis, Glenn Loury, Manning Marable, Toni Morrison, Nell Painter, Orlando Patterson, and Cornel West, among others. Whether or not each of these thinkers can be classified as Afrocentrist, at least they represent the presence of African Americans in the intellectual life of our time.

Afrocentrism, then, is an evolving movement, carrying with it the momentum of previous African American scholarship and concern with epistemological perspectives through which people perceive and evaluate experience. Afrocentrism as ideology arrived on the American educational scene at the precise moment the traditional mono-cultural perspective is being challenged by a nascent multi-culturalism. Afrocentrism appears to be far more disturbing than the multiculturalism because it challenges the very foundations of the old perceptual orders and canons. In contrast, multi-culturalism is at the contributionist/appreciation stage of historical and cultural analysis. When it inevitably advances to the analytical/critical stage, multiculturalism too will come under intense scrutiny.

Afrocentrism has also been nurtured by the persistent and perhaps atavistic racism within the larger society and by color-coded communities in daily life. In reaction to this historically enforced racial separatism, Afrocentrists represent a continuation of the academic and social struggle of African Americans to locate an authentic perspective which reflects the deeper truths about themselves and the society they are seeking to liberate from racial paranoia and color irrationality. Thus, from its inception to the present, as institution, as instruction and as ideology, the African American Studies movement has stimulated discussion and debate about the nature and direction of American education.
The debate among African American scholars has not been limited to epistemological and science methodology. It has also extended itself to action-oriented approaches or ideological strategies to guarantee the survival of the Black community in a predominantly white repressive society. The image held of the black presence in this society has ranged from the pathological, to the deficiency and defective model, on to the adaptive vitality image. African American Studies professionals represent the first large cadre of scholars from within the community. While the African Americans' presence in this society antedates that of the Mayflower, only in this century has there emerged from within a body of scholars committed to understanding it and sharing that understanding. Larger than any single individual, this development has generated a healthy debate over the nature of the knowledge process and over what its contents should be.

Study Questions and Activities

1. What factors and attitudes led to omission and distortion of the black experience in the American education system prior to the 1950s?
2. What accounts for the rarity of African American or Black Studies Departments on the campuses of historically black colleges and/or universities?
3. What were the developmental stages of African American Studies prior to the 1960s? Since the 1960s?
4. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the concept of Afrocentricity as an approach to defining basic knowledge.
5. What is the role of epistemology in the development of a discipline?
6. Compare the ideological assumptions of multiculturalism with the ideological presumptions of Afrocentrism.

References


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