

Africana @40: Looking Back on False Narratives of “Progress”

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April 17, 2010 Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University

For the *HOMECOMING: AFRICANA ALUMNI ON THE ACADEMY AND LIFE AFTER CORNELL: ROUNDTABLE*

Some of us are terribly concerned over what we interpret to be an absolute war over the destiny of Africana Studies and we are prepared for battle. We worry about the future of what is—in our view—more than a mere academic discipline but an investigation of a people’s history and condition. We are more than scholars. We are the custodians of our community’s culture, history, and political destiny. Africana studies, in its very name, is a broadly encompassing pan-African cultural and *political movement* whose purpose is the safe-keeping of our legacy through intellectual rigor and *vehement conflict* with the academic arm of a hostile empire. In fact, one of this conference’s participants, Gloria Joseph, once upon a time described well the institutional struggle in which Africana Studies is still engaged. She said that:

Schools and schooling in capitalist America are very little different from other institutions and their methodological processes in capitalist America. Institutions operate from a well-programmed blueprint, which is designed to serve the people in an unequal and hierarchical manner. To “serve the people” can be readily translated into “serve the devil.” The heinous nature of capitalist America gives easy rise to a feeling of existing in a living hell for the majority of the exploited.

Our own Dr. Turner, too, realizing this function of education and our need to impose a focus on African culture, once said:

The social sciences were {are} integral to the maintenance of bourgeois rule not only in the United States, but over America’s expanding colonial empire in the South Pacific, the Caribbean and Latin America. The American colonial empire was also domestic in the colonization of the dark-skinned racial groups of the South and West, Indians, Mexicans and the largest “internal colony,” Afro-Americans.

In response the Black Power and Black Studies movements culminated in a mission reflected in this institution's statement that, "Black Studies is a demand for a new encounter with {that} Black experience in American education." In other words, this has always been a *political movement* designed to address the immediate material and spiritual concerns of African people here and abroad.

The fight within this nation's academic institutions to carve space for African-centered cultural development is what brought Turner and others into a Black Power/Black Studies movement and what, according to a recent presentation from Greg Carr, brought him to the Howard University uprising of 1968 for what turned out to be, unbeknownst to him at the time, his meeting and "interview" with Cornell students who would later nominate him to be the founding Chair of the Africana Studies and Research Center. And we are convinced that the continuing fear inspired by these developments result from what Paula Giddings has said of Ida B. Wells. For Wells, and *unlike* all of her contemporary Black leaders from Douglass to DuBois, because her single "imprimatur" was the Black community, she was free to engage in *any tactic* in search of liberation. From journalism to sit-ins to armed self-defense Wells employed a broad arsenal making her a most uncommon threat. Africana Studies represents that academic equivalent and, therefore, by definition is in a pre-revolutionary permanent peril. This explains why Africana Studies has spent its first 40 years under constant siege from critics both within and outside the academy.

So, given these circumstances, what does it mean to "look back" and "move forward" as this conference has encouraged us to do? Materially, the last forty years have produced no relative positive difference in the conditions of African people. In terms of net financial assets, proportions of the nation's wealth, employment, equal (if not integrated) education, Africans and Latin Americans are no better off and in key areas—such as mass incarceration—the conditions have worsened. And if we include the particular issue of imprisonment for political reasons, we must also say that there has been no observable improvement. More broadly speaking, what are the conditions of Africans around the world? The recent story from the *Guardian* may speak to that, where

they reported that over precisely these last forty years £1 trillion have been taken out of the continent and deposited in the West with no more than 3% attributable to African corruption. So 40 years after the founding of Africana Studies, despite the celebrated election of Barack Obama, the material reality of African peoples remains imperiled.

But what of Africana Studies itself? In what ways has the academic wing of the Black liberation movement developed and progressed in the last 40 years? Certainly, we join our colleagues in celebrating the accomplishments and successes that have allowed Africana Studies to grow and thrive. However, at the same time we remain dissatisfied with our own accomplishments to the extent that many of the issues faced by African people 40 years ago must still be faced today. And we remain, as Dr. King once said, “divinely dissatisfied” with the extent to which scholarship produced has been forcibly reduced to individual self-aggrandizement as opposed to encouraging the work required for collective uplift.

So we remain concerned about some critical shifts that have occurred within the discipline, and we would like to raise some important questions about certain trends. We must pause to evaluate such shifts within the context of the theme of this conference: “Looking Back Moving Forward.” For example, how have “new frontiers in African Diaspora Studies” really contributed to the growth and evolution of Africana studies? Paul Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic,” which examines the contributions of Black people to the modern world has been hailed as cutting edge and innovative. But his main argument is by no means new to the Africana tradition and can be found in the works of Du Bois, Eric Williams and Walter Rodney.

In this sense many ideas that are perceived to be “new” to Africana studies, even the concept of diaspora, really represent a repackaging of concepts that have been foundational to Africana studies. What is new is the pointed attempt of Gilroy and others to disconnect African diaspora studies from the history of Africa, from the tradition of black nationalism, from the history of Pan-Africanism, the politics of African resistance to oppression, from our transnational history of struggle and of course from activist engagement, which has been and must continue to be a critical component of Africana

studies. So, while we acknowledge the ways in which some more recent interventions have helped us to broaden our analytical frames, we must be critical of trends that disregard the efforts of those who have gone before us and that fail to acknowledge the *current* plight of our people by denying the importance of the link between scholarship and activism.

For those of us who have come to see Africana as the “pastoral” – or the place of solace and spiritual rejuvenation – that John Henrik Clarke has described as being so necessary, and especially after having left for the intellectually desolate wastelands of Western academia, recent events, treatment of faculty and perceived intellectual re-directions, have us worried. And as someone who is deeply engaged with varied community—in the classroom, political organizations and in radio—the breadth of our radical tradition is what inspires not only a sound analysis but the confidence to infuse and act upon it. For instance, to be in a media environment (Pacifica Radio) where radicalism is defined by Frederic Jameson, Noam Chomsky and Amy Goodman it becomes necessary (and fun) to air our debates like that between Kwame Ture and Molefi Asante and show our audiences that there need not be uniformity for there to be a more appropriately re-defined radical intellectual tradition. And returning to Greg Carr’s statements, which were delivered last year at the Smithsonian museum’s entombment of Black Power, it was he who reminded us that this is a “*living tradition*” one whose remaining need is matched by work being done by suppressed and omitted scholars around the country and world. Because, as Ayele Bekerie made clear years earlier, it is the theft and displacement of our intellectual and material artifacts in Western museums that determines *for them their worth* as a “civilization.” But we are alive, if not entirely well, and clearly have more war to wage.

So what do we mean when we “look back” but “move forward?” Is our backward gaze one meant to gather wisdom for contemporary or future preparation? We believe it should be. But we wonder if the conference theme’s insistence on “moving forward” is an indication that some folks believe that we’ve overcome a need for the past. If so, we imagine that many in our African-centered circles would shudder even at the suggestion

of this kind linearity. And we believe that we need to seriously interrogate the notion of “progress.” Our view is that the “living tradition” and the founding principles of Africana Studies must be adhered to if Africana Studies is truly going to “progress” in generations to come. Our “living tradition” includes present members of a movement to build the African Heritage Studies Association (among others) to save ourselves from the ravages of unchecked Eurocentricity. This was precisely what was meant when in 1969 Dr. Turner, who today continues to represent that “living tradition,” described as one purpose of Africana Studies the need to stem the “growth and spread of ideas and attitudes” among “White Americans” that “are not only incorrect but *destructive*.” Equally important he noted was that this made too many within the Black community “sadly vulnerable to the corrosive effects of American racism.” But have we successfully succeeded in this regard?

For instance, here in the year 2010, in a time when we have seen the birth of Black feminism, Africana Womanism, where “some of us are still brave” —and here at Cornell, Dr. Turner sponsored a program about “Engendering Africana Studies”—how can it be that Black women are still viewed as “black bitches” (or “damn bitches”)? This is clearly a violation of our “living tradition” and the founding principles of Africana Studies, and, even more, is an embarrassing example of the incompleteness of our efforts.

Another example of an incomplete task can be found in the original plan for Africana Studies to engage in “field work” in the Black community (as Dr. Turner mentioned Thursday as his own greatest regret). The specific call by the Africana Center to implement this program defined the particular nature of this field’s political component, one meant to permanently destroy concepts of scholars as distant intellectuals whose research is for tenure and books which no one in their communities will read, understand or act upon. It is this “living tradition” that must be maintained as a guide—even strengthened—considering that we now live in a time of worsening conditions which are by the day more difficult to discern. At a recent discussion of whether or not Barack Obama’s election was good for Black people Dr. Turner made the point that this was no time to reduce or limit our Blackness. In fact, he called upon us to “be more

Black!” In the context of Africana Studies we interpret this to mean reaffirming our dedication to intellectual production, analysis and political strength for continued – heightened – “critical interventions” into Western dominance. This requires that, at minimum, our Africana “pastoral” must be sustained as such and protected against assailants who come from abroad or within. Thank you.