

Dude, Where's My Black Studies Department? The Quagmire of Interdisciplinary Black Diaspora Studies

by

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In 2007 Cecil Brown wrote *Dude, Where's My Black Studies Department?: The Disappearance of Black Americans from Our Universities*, a critique of how African Americans were being systematically excluded from higher education in California. Some laughed and joked, but Brown was serious as he, like others witnessed the disappearance of African American students from the campus of the University of California at Berkeley (he earned a Ph.D. in African American Studies, Folklore and Narrative in 1993 at U.C. Berkeley). And as he argued, Black youth are seen more in the California prison system, than in the university system.

On May 12, 2018, I attended the commencement exercise at California Memorial Stadium at U.C. Berkeley with family to congratulate my nephew by marriage upon his graduation from the Department of Architecture. I was indeed proud of his accomplishment that day, but as I looked at the crowd in the Stadium, the title of Brown's book struck me, and I began to ask myself and others, where are the Black folks, what happened?

Some 4,000 students graduated that day, U.S. Senator Kamala Harris was the scheduled commencement speaker, but she had to withdraw due to an ongoing labor dispute, and among the Black graduates from anywhere, I could count them on my hands, I seen maybe ten Black graduates among the 4,000. I was disappointed and sadden to know that very few Black students were in the crowd, graduating that warm afternoon, "... a place where the brightest minds from across the globe come together to explore, ask questions and improve the world (<https://www.berkeley.edu/>, accessed 10-30-18 at 1:13 AM)."

As I walked out the Stadium, those few Black folks laboring as guides to the event or concession workers said 'congratulations', meaning that it is only a few of us, but were still happy that my nephew had graduated from a top-ranked university, despite the odds. However, that moment of congratulations felt odd, so odd that I felt that more should have been done to get more Black students in the university and to graduation, instead of being directed towards other less productive avenues in life.

Brown seem to have ‘hit the nail on the head’, university officials, administrators, professors, and students are seemingly ignoring the phenomenon of the disappearing Black student – in both their admissions and hiring policies, and Black Studies departments have seemingly shifted their focus from the affairs of the African American community on or off campus to ‘Black Diaspora’ interests at the expense of those in the African American community who fought for Black Studies at Berkeley and at other select universities in the U.S.

It is all indeed a complex twist; the original advocates have been diminished to almost a footnote in the pages of Black Studies and replaced with an evasive program that clam to be in unity with the original mission of Black Studies, as a unit of scholar-activism and social change. And interestingly, the push from the origins of Black Studies is being organized through an interdisciplinary scheme centered on ‘Black Diaspora’ interests. Recently, such maneuvering became a new awareness when the former Department of Africology at the University of Wisconsin became the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies. My question is why? What is/was wrong with Africology? I thought the Department of Africology at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee was a leader in further advancing Africology in academe, but to my disappointment, they have taken another direction, and they are not alone, others have taken a similar road, but most interesting about the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee is that after their description of their program, they state that “African and African Diaspora Studies is relevant to everyone, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, nationality or religion” (<https://uwm.edu/african-diaspora-studies/>, accessed 10-30-18 at 2:15 AM).” I don’t think such a notice is needed, but it seems to meet some requirement, and simultaneously, it seems to be part of a pattern to let Black folks know that ‘this is not just for you all’.

Later in the day of my writing (10-30-18 at 6:26 PM), I was informed October 30, 2018 (3:45 AM) by professor Jeffrey W Sommers (sommerjw@uwm.edu) [cc:Rachel Elizabeth Hegland rhegland@uwm.edu] that the name was changed after the Department conducted surveys of their graduate students and of most Departments with graduate students nationally that could be termed ‘Black Studies’, thus, a significant majority their graduate students expressed their wish for a new Department name, as they reported that Africology was a liability, in the job market. And of those canvassed nationally (with a survey), by significant margins, Africology had the least favorable perceptions of the roughly half dozen names used for Black Studies departments. Thus, the faculty (with one dissenting voice) felt that Africology was insufficiently descriptive to make readily apparent to those outside the Department of the character and scope of the Department’s research and teaching. Therefore, with enrollments declining and a state legislature and board of regents that can only be deemed unfriendly, the Department opted to change the name to one that was more descriptive of what it is that the Department does in hopes of growing enrollments, and enhancing the prospects for survival, generally.

Third in this exercise, at the University of Texas at Austin, the graduate program in African American and African Diaspora Studies mentions engaging interdisciplinary approaches for examining the lives of people of African descent throughout Africa and the African Diaspora, including the United States which suggest some hesitation in regards to including people of African descent in the U.S. as part of the African Diaspora. I hope that is not the case, otherwise favoritism may set in and actually exclude people of African descent in the U.S., commonly known as African Americans.

Next, by looking at the African and African Diaspora Studies program at St. Mary's College of Maryland, one may suspect some additional 'funny business', because their program is designed to "... help students explore, examine and critically analyze the African presence in a global context, stretching back to antiquity in Europe and Asia, and for centuries in the Americas (<http://www.smcm.edu/africandiaspora/>; accessed 10-30-18 at 2:38 AM)" One has to wonder if the "... stretching back to antiquity in Europe and Asia, and for centuries in the Americas" is a way to avoid the issues of people of African descent in the U.S. I can almost hear Cecil Brown yell *Dude, Where's My Black Studies Department?* And one can say it went to the Diaspora, or perhaps to the cosmos as the 2014 established Black Diasporas Research Cluster at the University of Southern California states, "... because Black Studies is an endeavor whose purview is the entire globe and perhaps extends into the cosmos..." (<https://dornsife.usc.edu/ase/black-diaspora/>, accessed 10-30-18 at 2:50 AM)". The *cosmos* is the universe, so perhaps they are correct, but why is it associated with their Black Diasporas logic? I suspect that overall, there is no solid boundaries of discourse or program formation there.

Fourth, at Kenyon College, in part of their four goals for students in African Diaspora Studies is the odd goal to "help students explore the variety of cultural types and formations in the African Diaspora" (<https://www.kenyon.edu>; accessed 10-30-18 at 3:113 AM). I am baffled, "cultural types and formations", are they mixing anthropology with genetics to discover a special 'African Diaspora'? I don't think an answer is needed, my point should be open, the "Black Diaspora" wave in academe is here, and it rhetorically and exuberantly argues, like Vanderbilt University that it "offers an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and comparative study of the lived experiences" of Black people dispersed throughout the world from the continent of Africa, a dispersion (and its causes) referred to as the African Diaspora (<https://as.vanderbilt.edu/aads/>, accessed 10-30-18 at 3:35 AM).

In short, the Black Diaspora cadre work to theoretically and structurally dismantle Africology (or Africana Studies) as they guide students to graduate studies in disciplines like economics, political science, sociology, history, English, anthropology and communication as mentioned by the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee (<https://uwm.edu/african-diaspora-studies/>; accessed 10-30-18 at 4:00AM). Thus, there is no effort to enhance the particulars of Africology or the two units in academe (Temple University and Eastern Michigan University) named the 'Department of Africology and African American Studies'.

Yet, at Eastern Michigan University, the mission of the Department of Africology and African American Studies is similar to the Black Diaspora cadre in an effort to provide robust and critical programs of study, research and service on the African world experience as the department also pursues its mission by cultivating successive cadres of students imbued with community consciousness and equipped with intellectual tools for shaping the world of the present and the future via community engagement and pertinent careers (<https://www.emich.edu/aas/>; accessed 10-30-18 at 4:06AM). And likewise, at Temple University, the Department of Africology and African American Studies provides students with a textured intellectual experience through the systematic Afrocentric study of the thought, behavior and practices of African people, globally focused on pursuing knowledge from the perspective of African people as both agents and subjects of experience while remaining open to plural understandings emanating from the multicultural society, as their classes interrogate African frames of reference, from the classical to the contemporary, tracing continuities and transformations from Africa to numerous Diaspora communities worldwide (<http://bulletin.temple.edu/undergraduate/liberal-arts/africology-african-american-studies/>; 10-30-18 at 4:12 AM).

In this matrix of Black Diaspora Studies, Berkeley is “recognized as a pioneer in the area of African Diaspora Studies” wherein its PhD program in African Diaspora Studies was the first program of its kind in 1997 to train students to “theorize the African Diaspora and racialized blackness across history, social institutions, culture and geographical location”; and specifically educate them to direct the future research trajectory of African Diaspora Studies as a field, emphasizing a rigorous interdisciplinarity, particularly strong in “African American and sub-Saharan African history; cultural studies (with emphases in literature, performance, visual culture, and creative practice); women’s, gender & sexuality studies; education; sociology; and African languages” (<https://africam.berkeley.edu/about-the-program/>).

This history and focus coming from Berkeley is interesting because they participated in the battle for Black Studies. In their 40th anniversary of African American Studies (starting in the Spring of 1970), they acknowledge their actions as “a milestone to be celebrated in every possible way” that is “not only a celebration of an academic department but of a movement and the many people who made it happen and have kept it alive, grounded in the broader national and global struggle for human and civil rights; and thus, the institutionalization of Black Studies at Berkeley created the space for African Americans (and other hyphenated Americans) to be included in the university curriculum; and in the process, it changed the fundamental character of higher education forever. And consequently, “over a span of 40 years, the Department has evolved into an academic unit that is respected as a model among departments nationally” as an “interdisciplinary, multi-racial intellectual center that hosts, attracts, and produces some of the most diverse, complex thinking, scholars and scholarship in the world”.

Indeed, “the 40th anniversary of Black Studies at Berkeley presents a unique opportunity to chronicle more than four decades of efforts to create a stable academic unit in the face of daunting challenges both within the university and without” as mentioned in an essay originally published in the April 9, 2010 issue of *The Daily Californian* newspaper titled “Forty Years Later: African American Studies Still Flourishes” by Ronald Williams II with a contribution by professor Ula Y. Taylor, the H. Michael and Jeanne Williams Department Chair and the 2013 University of California at Berkeley Distinguished Professor Teaching Award recipient, an award received by only 5% of the academic senate faculty [she is the second African American woman in the history of the university to receive the award] (<https://africam.berkeley.edu/history/>; accessed 10-30-18 at 8:35 AM).

Further, in my interview with Charles P. Henry, professor emeritus of African American Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, and the former president of the National Council for Black Studies about his 2017 book titled *Black Studies and the Democratization of American Higher Education* (“Black Studies and the Democratization of American Higher Education: An Interview with Charles P. Henry” in *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.11, no.4, March 2018, pp.90-95), he said that “... we are now firmly entrenched in the academy, but it takes continual vigilance”, [hence] a viable Black Studies must rest on a department structure, and that the discipline will not advance without the ability to look at ourselves critically, via constructive criticism that “must continually support perspectives that might challenge our own”, all points I agree with and encourage our Diaspora enthusiast to acknowledge and remember as we move forward in a Sankofa process, a process that ask us to look back to recapture and reclaim our past, and also allow ourselves to move forward as we understanding the dynamics of why and how we came to be who we are today (see “The Sankofa Precess”, *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.1, no.6, September 2006, p.1).

In retrospect, the formation of African American Studies and African Diaspora Studies at Berkeley should be of no surprise, because overall, the university has more than 130 academic departments and 80 interdisciplinary research units, and folks asking ‘where is my Department’ are in limbo, not realizing that the university has reconfigured itself, and if you can’t find your spot, they will conveniently scatter you and your consciousness outside your homeland and into a new space, a new Diaspora with convincing arguments as to why you should be complacent to your unpleasantly difficult and perplexing predicament, because they can explain your siltation, and when asked the thorny question of “what is the difference between African Americans and more recent immigrants from Africa?” as they asked at Indiana University and subsequently answered “More recent African immigrants may view themselves as distinct in their ethnicity and culture from native-born Americans who have descended from West African slaves.” How interesting, “... native-born Americans who have descended from West African slaves”, it that all, did Black folks just volunteer to be enslaved?

One would think that African American and African Diaspora Studies at Indiana University would know better, because they were part of the Black Studies movement when in the spring of 1968 African American students organized on campus demanding more representation, an increase in Black faculty, the admission of more Black students, and the introduction of a program in Black Studies (<https://aaads.indiana.edu/about/history/index.html>; accessed 10-30-18 at 10:01 AM). But something must have thrown them off their historical-cultural grounding.

I can again metaphorically hear Cecil Brown yelling *Dude, Where's My Black Studies Department?*, and I can only answer, ‘man I don’t know, they have moved us to the Diaspora, wherever that is, somewhere, perhaps at the African and African Diaspora Studies program at the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs at Florida International University where they have “... organized around a robust interdisciplinary curriculum, cutting-edge research agendas and active outreach”, but don’t hold your breath, my brother, you may need some Diaspora literacy, a phrase coined by U.C. Berkeley African American Studies professor VèVè Amasasa Clark (1944-2007) that involves the ability to understand and/or interpret the multi-layered meanings of stories, words, and other folk sayings within any given community of the African Diaspora’ (“Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness” [pp.40-60] in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex and Nationality in the Modern Text* edited by Hortense H. Spillers).

Most recently (October 2018), Columbia University announced the opening of its department of African American and African Diaspora Studies, hence, the university like the others, will work to “place itself in the forefront of robust scholarly work that addresses vital intellectual, social, and cultural issues while offering a model of excellence, collaboration and innovation in teaching and scholarship” (http://senate.columbia.edu/archives/resolutions_archives/resolutions/18-19/aaad_dept_res_20180928.pdf; accessed 10-30-18 at 12:25 PM).

Such action is *all well and good*, but Columbia’s effort like the others have a seemingly lackadaisical fluidity or quality (I may be wrong), because I don’t see elements of discipline (body/branch of knowledge) building, I see no solid subject fields or paradigm approaches (in Africology, there are seven: social, communication, historical, cultural, political, economic and psychological; and three paradigm approaches: functional, categorical, and etymological [Asante, Molefi Kete. *African Pyramids of Knowledge: Kemet, Afrocentricity and Africology*. Brooklyn, NY: Universal Write Publications LLC, 2015, pp.15-16), so I am a bit puzzled by the enthusiastic reception of African Diaspora Studies in the U.S. when ‘Africana Studies’ has entrenched itself in academe, and Africology is having some success in academe, but as Charles Henry said (as I mentioned above), “... although we are now firmly entrenched in the academy” ... “it takes continual vigilance”. And I agree, a protracted alertness, attentiveness and watchfulness is needed until perhaps self-defined alternative institutional structures are developed outside the often oppressive Eurocentric eyes of the academy.

As we journey through this African Diaspora Studies trending phenomena, I also wonder about (1) the position of the African and African American activist-intellectual tradition that gave birth to Black Studies (now Africology or Africana Studies), (2) the question of relevance (how it is or not linked to the African ethos), (3) the level of dialog with African culture rather than a dialog about African culture, usually spoon-feed from the elite orientations of Europe, (4) the formation/accumulation of theories and concepts that can effectively organize specialist knowledge, (5) the specific research methods of Black Diaspora Studies, and (6) perhaps the most important, the conceptual framework of the phenomena, and if it will place itself alongside other pluralism without hierarchy and the seeking of hegemony, or will it seek to establish an elitism and empire of Intellectual imperialism to thwart disciplinary development and enhancements in Africology? Recognizing that the art of using words effectively or persuasively in speaking or writing or the art of prose composition (rhetoric) is not efficient in the era of Africology, the Africology Endowment Fund (EIN: 83-651-0684) has been establish in California to fund new scholars and scholarships in Africology in the U.S., and elsewhere.

