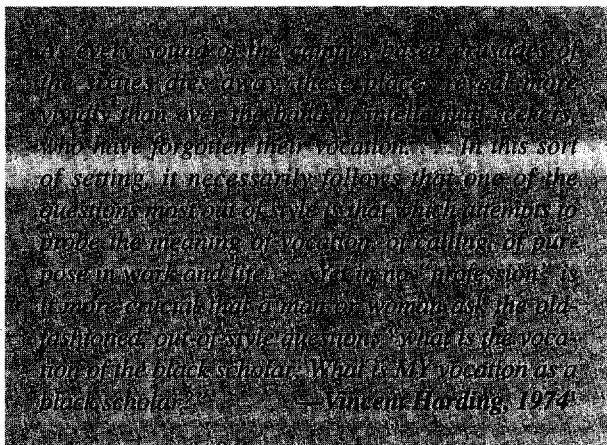

Black Studies *in the New Millennium:* **Resurrecting Ghosts of the Past**

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Ls African American studies as a field responsible for addressing critical contemporary issues that impact the Black community? What are the responsibilities of Black studies intellectuals in the context of the current political situation in the United States and internationally? In 1974, the historian Vincent Harding asked these questions in a different way, but more important, he answered them with a simplicity that masked his profundity. For Harding and his colleagues at the Institute of the Black World, the role of the Black scholar, and by extension of African American studies, was to

“speak the truth to the people.”²² Much has changed since Harding asked Black scholars to commit themselves to writing, teaching, and working for “the people.” Nevertheless, I contend that his answer, the solution advocated by 1960s-era Black activist intellectuals, is still the right one.

A thorough answer to these questions should be situated in the context of the socio-economic, political, and educational transformations that have occurred since the 1960s. Therefore, my response will briefly survey the historical development of Black studies, emphasizing its origin as part of an

insurgent social movement. Second, I will discuss the sociohistorical context and processes by which Black studies became a part of the academy. I contend that Black studies should build on the values and orientations enunciated by Harding and other radical intellectual activists when the field was forged in the 1960s. Finally, I outline a radical agenda for renewal and redirection.

Harding's generation developed Black studies as a radical project of intellectual recovery, personal renewal, and social action. Born in the steam of reform and the flames of rebellion, the roots of Black studies, like those of ethnic and women's studies, lie not in the academy but in the new social movements. Black studies was created at the nexus of the Black freedom movement, as the campaigns for civil rights were transformed into battles for Black power. Black studies reflects this juncture. Consequently, the desegregation of higher education was the essential process that facilitated campus-based struggles for the power to decide the content and meanings of education. The arrival of the first large generation of Blacks and other students of color on predominantly white campuses was the foundation on which Black and ethnic studies units were erected. These students and newly hired faculty launched the struggle to deconstruct a hegemonic racist Eurocentric curriculum and replace it with a multicultural liberatory one. At its inception, Black studies represented an oppositional intellectual and artistic socioeducational project and, as such, it had a dual purpose: (1) to recover subjugated knowledge, that is, to reconstruct research and instruction on the Black experience; and (2) to rewrite the historic relationship between the campus and the Black community. It is this legacy, the insurgent tradition of the committed intellectual who not only produces engaged scholarship but also is actively engaged in the Black free-

dom movement, that Black studies scholars must revive.

How was Black studies transformed from a field pursuing a radical educational and political agenda into an almost conventional area of inquiry? After a brief surge of development, in the early 1970s, the new field was attacked by rightist politicians, administrators, and academics, who questioned the intellectual validity of Black studies. Influenced by economic crisis, transnational corporate capitalist restructuring, rightward political realignment, and murderous COINTELPRO repression of the radical wing of the Black freedom movement and the national liberation movements, university administrations retrenched. In the midst of President Richard Nixon's complex and contradictory policy of "benign neglect," student aid was cut, Black studies budgets were slashed, and many academic units were dismantled. Black studies survived the right-wing onslaught, but most units were forced to jettison or at least reframe their liberatory mission.

America's corporate rulers and governing elites responded to Black studies with the same strategy that they applied to the broader Black freedom movement. Robert L. Allen, in his book *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, described corporate liberalism as a strategy that entailed creating a new stratum of managers, technicians, and dependent entrepreneurs.³ The academy was central to this strategy. It was a policy that combined selective incorporation with judicious repression. Through their policy of "contain, crush, and incorporate," the Johnson and Nixon administrations contained the urban rebellions; crushed the radical tendency; and incorporated the liberals, moderates, and conservatives. Two examples amplify this point, one from the social movement and another from academe. First, Charles R. Garry, a Black Panther Party (BPP) attorney, claimed that from January 1, 1969, to December 5, 1969,



Seeking Inspiration. Photo by Kristen Clarke.

twenty-eight members of the BPP were “killed by police.”⁴ The FBI’s destruction of the Panthers represented the federal government’s strategy toward Black radicals. In contrast, in 1970 the Nixon administration used government contracts to convert the National Urban League, the most moderate of the civil rights establishment organizations, into “a service delivery agency for the government.”⁵ According to Robert C. Smith, the additional revenue from this arrangement allowed the league to “substantially expand its general staff and services.”⁶ Simultaneously, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the most militant of the former civil rights organizations, witnessed a sharp drop in its fundraising.⁷ Because U.S. rulers understood that

relationship between Black studies and the Black freedom movement, they approached it with the same intent.

Applying his analysis to Black studies in 1974, Allen suggested that governmental agencies and private foundations were positioning themselves to decide the future of Black studies. He claimed, “By selecting certain programs for funding while denying support to others, government agencies and foundations could manipulate the political orientation of these programs and the direction of academic research.”⁸ Allen’s fears were confirmed in the 1990s when Black studies was incorporated into mainstream academia, albeit grudgingly and tangentially. The Ford Foundation’s reports, 1985 and 1990, established, as Allen had predicted, the

sites and research paradigms that foundation money would be marshaled to support.⁹ The consequence, according to Manning Marable, was that Black studies units that resisted academicization and attempted to continue a radical liberatory agenda were "left to fend for themselves."¹⁰

Nightmare: The Contemporary Condition of Black Studies

Over the past fifteen to twenty years, Black studies scholars have largely renounced the field's extra-academic mission and repudiated its radical heritage. This transformation was guided by corporate largesse, but it also reflected Black scholars' responses to socio-economic transformations and their attraction to new intellectual formations.

This change is due in part to the drastic cuts in federal and state financing. Along with antistatist budget slashing came the hostile conservative reaction to the institutionalization of multicultural pedagogies. As state legislatures reduced funding, university administrators turned to corporations as alternative sources of revenue, with the result that corporate culture has penetrated and compromised universities' relatively democratic cultures and public missions. Black studies has borne a disproportionate amount of the attack on academia by right-wing cultural warriors.

Since the mid-1980s, Black studies has been dominated by culturalism: Afrocentrism on the one hand, postmodernist theories on the other. These two intellectual projects have vastly different philosophical orientations: The main objective of Afrocentrism is to locate people of African descent at the center of analysis, whereas postmodernism opposes "centers" and seeks to de-center dominant discourses. But despite essential differences, Afrocentrism and postmodernism are not simply antagonistic al-

ternatives. They have far more in common than is generally acknowledged. Both reject the European Enlightenment, repudiate positivism, share a belief in cultural relativism, and are preoccupied with discourse and issues of representation and identity. More important, the premise of both projects is that Euro-American culture is hegemonic; consequently they view African Americans as characterized by either internalized racism or alienation. Both privilege cultural analysis, whether it is conceived as "infrapolitics" or national culture formation. The point is that both nationalistic Afrocentrism and inclusionist postmodernism evade political economy and slight critiques of economic exploitation and structural oppression.

The field of African-American urban history provides potent examples of the positives and negatives of this transformation. Largely in response to the dominance of the race relations paradigm, 1960s-era Black scholars began to look inward. During the early 1970s, African-Americanist historians began challenging the ghetto thesis, the dominant lens through which Black urban communities were studied during that period. Disturbed by the "pathological" portraits at the center of the "ghetto synthesis," the historian John Blassingame proposed a new theoretical framework for studying African-American urban communities. Blassingame called for historians to adopt an approach that concentrated on Black community building. This new approach demanded that scholars shift their focus from external to internal factors. According to Blassingame,

When, however, scholars attempt to study the black community from the inside, focus on people rather than solely on real estate, analyze black hopes as well as black frustrations, and the solutions blacks proposed as

well as the problems they faced, we will begin to understand the impact of urbanization on blacks. We need to know as much about black dreams as we do about white fears of blacks, as much about black institutions as housing patterns, black occupations as unemployment and black successes as black failures.¹¹

Unfortunately, historians who adopted his framework failed to create a balance between examinations of the external and structural forces that condition African-American life and the internal factors that reveal the social relations, cultural values, and sociopolitical architecture of the Black community. During the 1990s, Black historians began to deemphasize examination of external factors, such as deindustrialization, contingent employment, and dwindling municipal services. Structural factors such as housing stock, zoning laws, building codes, city planning, urban renewal programs, subdivision regulations, and transportation and communication systems were also neglected.

As scholars looked inside they began to emphasize expressive culture, Black cooperation, and independent institution building. Kenneth Going and Raymond A. Mohl call this approach "the agency model."¹² Today, agency is the dominant framework in African-American urban history. For its adherents, agency, whether termed resistance or the Black community-building process, is a protean force that encompasses *every action* taken by Black people, regardless of ideological perspective or class interest.¹³ Nevertheless, the emphasis on African-American internal relations represented a tremendous advance over the ghetto synthesis model. The internalists expanded the areas of investigation to include women, popular culture, and the African-American working class. The new African-American urban history incorporated new methodologies for studying

memory and space and for including ethnography and discourse analysis. Proponents of this approach corrected most of the misconceptions and imbalances endemic to the ghettoization model, yet by ignoring or minimizing external and structural forces these scholars muted or, worse, abandoned serious engagement with capitalist exploitation and white supremacy.

Haunted by History: Academic Excellence and Social Responsibility

*I know we got to keep
ORDER OVER HARLEM
Where the black millions sleep
Shepherds over Harlem
Their armed watch keep
Lest Harlem stirs in its sleep
And maybe remembers
And remembering forgets
To be peaceful and quiet
And has sudden fits
Of raising a black fist out of the dark
And that black fist
Becomes a red spark.¹⁴*

In "Air Raid over Harlem," Langston Hughes's most politically incendiary poem, Hughes evokes the potency of memory and history. In the lines, "And maybe remembers/And remembering forgets/To be peaceful and quiet," Hughes saw repression and historical consciousness combining to "stir" the Black masses to revolutionary action. For him, freeing the specter of the repressed nightmares of racial oppression was the surest path to Black liberation and socialist revolution. To address critical contemporary issues that impact the Black community effectively, Black studies professionals must confront and embrace the ghosts of Black studies past.

If Black studies is to address crucial issues affecting the Black community, then it must develop research/teaching niches constructed around specific problems, such as poverty, joblessness, health, or racialized incarceration.

Most Black scholars of past generations, whether radical or liberal, inclusionist or nationalist, procapitalist or socialist, have believed fervently in praxis, the unity of research and social action. Black studies must reconnect with its radical legacies. Although demonized in these conservative times, the spirit most deserving of embrace is the Black radical tradition.

If Black studies is to address crucial issues affecting the Black community, then it must develop research/teaching niches constructed around specific problems, such as poverty, joblessness, health, or racialized incarceration. Such an agenda would necessitate changing current reward structures and shifting both human and material resources toward these focus areas. It would require that Black studies units and professional organizations make social action research an essential, if not *the* essential, criterion for resource allocation. An added benefit of such research/teaching niches is that they would create the social conditions (team teaching, research teams) by which Black studies could truly become interdisciplinary. Additionally, it would necessitate that teaching and learning be reconstructed to emphasize collaborative work, especially community-based projects and internships.

Black studies can undertake such a radical repositioning only if it transforms its current internal and campus-based social relations. Ironically, to confront the contemporary problems that are devastating the African-

American community requires that Black studies begins not in the community but on campus. The following are a few suggestions:

- Construct a radical pedagogy that builds on critical and culturally relevant pedagogies and aims to recast faculty-student relationships
- Build bridges from the community to education and other professional programs, schools, and colleges
- Consolidate programmatic links to ethnic studies and women's studies
- Build progressive coalitions on campus to contest efforts to convert universities back into enclaves for the privileged

Black studies scholars and students must stimulate campus-based resistance to "revanchist" policies, such as rising tuition, cuts in student aid, anti-affirmative action initiatives, assaults on multicultural education, and efforts to further erode the university's democratic culture. The point is that Black studies must be transformed back into an intellectual resource for the Black freedom movement.

The responsibility of Black studies intellectuals is, in Harding's words, to "speak the truth to the people." First, this requires that Black activist intellectuals develop a theory that explains the origin, development, and essential processes of racial oppression.

Second, it calls for Black studies scholars to teach Black working and poor people the skills to analyze the historic and contemporary manifestations of racial oppression. Third, it requires that Black scholars be possessed by the spirit of the Black radical tradition—that is, that they transform themselves into committed intellectuals and immerse themselves in the everyday struggles of the African-American people. Here are a few practical suggestions:

- Provide relevant research for community activists and progressive politicians
- Infuse Black studies content and perspectives into public education via in-service programs and summer institutes for public school educators
- With community-based activists, build radical educational projects based on popular education pedagogies
- Promote coalition building across color lines
- Join a community-based Black liberation formation
- Construct a contemporary project along the lines of the Institute of the Black World

In sum, it requires that Black studies scholars move beyond merely critiquing and deconstructing systems of oppression and begin to confront and transform them.

Notes

1. Vincent Harding, "The Vocation of the Black Scholar," in Institute of the Black World, ed., *Education and Black Struggle: Notes from the Colonized World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Review, Monograph No. 2, 1974), pp. 4–5.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 7. Harding is quoting the title of one of Mari Evans's superb 1960s-era liberation poems. See Mari Evans, *I Am a Black Woman* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), pp. 91–92.

3. Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970).

4. Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Black Panthers Speak* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), p. xxvi.

5. Robert C. Smith, *We Have No Leaders: African Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 96.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Herbert Haines, "Black Radicalization and the Funding of Civil Rights: 1957–1970," *Social Problems*, Vol. 32, no. 1 (October 1984), pp. 31–43.

8. Robert L. Allen, "Politics of the Attacks on Black Studies," *Black Scholar* (September 1974), p. 5.

9. Nathan Huggins, *Report to the Ford Foundation on Afro-American Studies* (New York: Ford Foundation, 1985); Robert L. Harris, Darlene Clark Hine, and Nellie McKay, *Three Essays, Black Studies in the United States* (New York: Ford Foundation, 1990).

10. Allen, "Politics of the Attacks on Black Studies," p. 5. Manning Marable quoted in Bob Wing, "Educate to Liberate!: Multiculturalism and the Struggle for Ethnic Studies," *Colorlines*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (Summer 1999), p. 18.

11. John Blassingame, "Before the Ghetto: The Making of the Black Community in Savannah, Georgia, 1865–1880," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 6 (Summer 1973), pp. 463–488; quote from p. 485.

12. Kenneth Goings and Raymond A. Mohl, eds., *The New African American Urban History* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1996).

13. Goings and Mohl, *The New African American Urban History*; Joe William Trotter Jr., *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth Century Norfolk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," in *Hine SIGHT: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1994), pp. 37–47; Richard Walter Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915–45* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Robin D.G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 80 (June 1993), pp. 75–112; Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

14. Arnold Rampersad, ed., *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Knopf, 1994), p. 186.