10

Black Studies: A Critical Reassessment

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From its beginning black studies has had both an academic and social thrust and mission rooted in the social theory and struggle of the sixties (Hare 1969, 1972). As an emerging discipline, black studies sheltered the assumption that the black experience clearly represented a truth worth knowing, but also one worth living and offering as a paradigm for human liberation and a higher level of human life. Conceiving of intellectual emancipation as a prerequisite and parallel support for political emancipation, black studies advocates posed the discipline as a synthesized and synthesizing enterprise that links thought and practice into a paradigm of active self-knowledge. At its best, such a paradigm represented a quest for self-realization that expresses itself as both self-knowledge and self-production. That is to say, a people critically grasping its inherent possibilities and self-consciously bringing these into being both as a distinct people and as a fundamental part of society and the world (Karenga 1997).

Certainly, we are constantly confronted with challenges of the reactionary right in response to the development of black studies and its continuing commitment to raise and pursue issues of both intellectual and social significance. And this response can be rightfully read as a central aspect of the larger effort to contain, compromise, and essentially defeat the ongoing struggle for an expanded realm of freedom both in the academy and the society. But it does not seem very useful to continue to point attention to it without at the same time saying what black

studies is going to do about it. In fact, our argument is that our defense lies essentially in our development—in our maintenance of our commitment to our mission, with its dual thrust of educational excellence and social responsibility.

I advance the proposition in various writings that challenges successfully met enhance possibilities, and I see no reason why we should not take this posture with black studies. It is the history of humankind that overcoming social and natural oppositions strengthens them and pushes them further along the road to ever higher levels of thought and practice. And, therefore, we should welcome these struggles, for the struggle to defend and develop black studies offers similar possibilities of development in the academic as well as the social world. I repeat, the need of black studies to defend itself is at the same time a demand to develop itself.

Moreover, whatever unsure steps or stumbling there is or was in the past offers us a wealth of lessons for the future, which will aid a quicker pace of development. For, as an African teaching says, "To stumble is not to fall but to go forward faster." The need, then, is for bold and critical thought and planning, greater intellectual production, more vital research, effective organization, systematic exchange and development with other scholars of similar understandings of the world. And in fact, we must even dare discourse with those that oppose us. In a word, the need is for self-conscious action that not only answers critics but, more important, answers the critical question the discipline must continually raise for itself in the constant redefining and expanding of its capacity to carry out its academic and social mission (Stewart 1992).

Black studies, however, has shown a remarkable capacity for development and expansion in spite of its critics. And it must continue to do so. Few, if any, of the traditional disciplines have shown such adaptive vitality in meeting new and internal challenges to expand and change. Part of this receptivity to and capacity for change in the expansion of black studies is undoubtedly due to its relative newness, the absence of long-term entrenched contentions grown hoary and semisacred with age. Moreover, black studies is an open-textured and open-ended project, interdisciplinary and receptive to diversity, as expressed in its ability to include various subject areas and various intellectual perspectives and schools of thought (Turner 1984; *Afrocentric Scholar* 1993).

But, more important, black studies reflects also the history of the context in which the discipline emerges. It came into being in the midst of the black freedom movement as an emancipatory project that sought to

be both an ongoing and profound critique and corrective, intellectually and socially. Thus, if it holds true to its academic and social mission, black studies is compelled to practice internally what it demands externally, i.e., self-criticism, self-correction, and the posing of a new paradigm of what it means to be human. The key to black studies' continued growth and expansion and its continued vanguard role in the multicultural challenge to the established order paradigm, then, is maintaining its open-texturedness, its open-ended character, which allows for and encourages the creative challenge of diversity and an intellectual rigor and relevance that disarm its severest critics and honor its original academic and social mission (Karenga 1988, 1995a). And the mission remains one, as Mary McLeod Bethune (1939) said, of our discovering the dawn and sharing it with the masses who need it most. For it is by bringing the fruits of knowledge to the masses that we contribute definitively to laying the basis for maximum human freedom and human flourishing.

What I want to do is pose five fundamental projects I think are important for this challenge: (1) the ongoing dialogue with African culture; (2) the expansion of our internal dialogue; (3) the continuous development of a new language and logic; (4) new models of social and human possibilities represented in social policy emphasis; and (5) social engagement, the practice that proves and make possible everything.

Speaking from the philosophical framework of Kawaida Theory, I would argue that the fundamental point of departure for African American studies or black studies is an ongoing dialogue with African culture (Karenga 1997, 2000). That is to say, continuously asking it questions and seeking from it answers to the fundamental questions of humankind. For example, how do we define and defend the dignity and rights of the human person in the midst of a rapidly and ever changing technological world? How do we pose and bring into being a just and good society? How do we define the human, the just, the good in a context of rampant consumerism, rented wombs, cloning, and ongoing degradation of the environment? What does African culture have to say about the spiritual and ethical void and social alienation that lead to Jonestown, Guyana or mass suicide in Rancho Santa Fe, California or the murders at Columbine High in Colorado?

Cheikh Anta Diop (1982:475ff.) has rightfully asked, What does African cultural philosophy have to offer in enhancing human reasoning and sensitivity in the world? And Kawaida Theory asks, What does black studies have to offer in the ongoing quest of African people to bring forth

the best of their history and heritage and to pose paradigms of the best of what it means to be both African and human at the same time and in the fullest sense of the word? In this process it seems to me that black studies must reaffirm its original mission and rationale and constantly develop itself. For the respect it receives will inevitably be based on contributions that black studies makes as a discipline, the new knowledge that it brings forth, as well as the critique and corrective that it offers.

There are seven fundamental intellectual and social contributions made by black studies that prove its value as a discipline (Karenga 1992:15ff). The first, of course, is that black studies is a contribution to humanity's understanding itself, using the African experience as a paradigmatic human struggle and achievement. Second, it is a contribution to the university's realizing its claim of universality, comprehensiveness, and objectivity by demanding and facilitating a holistic approach to the study of truth and the class, race, and sexual contradictions, which constrain and distort that truth. Third, it's a contribution to U.S. society's understanding itself by critically measuring its claims against performance in its variance with the paradigmatic just society. It is also a contribution to the rescue and reconstruction of black history and humanity from alien hands and the restoration of African classical culture on and through which we can build a new body of human sciences and humanity (Diop 1982; Williams 1993).

The fifth is also a contribution to the creation of a new social science and humanities, more critical, more corrective, more holistic, more ethical, more inclusive. Sixth, it's a contribution to the creation of a self-conscious body of capable and committed black intellectuals who self-consciously choose to use their knowledge and skills in the service of the black community and, by consequence and extension, in the interest of a new and better society and the world (Du Bois 1996; Strickland 1975). And, finally, black studies finds its grounding and meaning in its ongoing contribution to the critique, resistance, and reversal of one of the greatest problems of our time, the progressive Europeanization of human consciousness (Reed 1997). And by that I mean the systematic invasion and effective transformation of the cultural consciousness of the various peoples of the world by Europeans through technology, education, and the media. So that at least three things occur: (1) the progressive loss of historical memory of these peoples; (2) the progressive disappreciation of themselves and their culture; and (3) the progressive adoption of a Eurocentric mode of assessment of self, society, and the world, inducing cogni-

tive distortion and deprivation and the destruction of the human richness we find in human diversity.

The second major challenge of the discipline is to expand its internal dialogue. A discipline by its very nature is not only an organized and systematized body of research and literature created by a community of scholars who have common interests but also a process that allows for and encourages these scholars to exchange among themselves and to ask themselves critical questions about the direction, the content, and the future of the discipline itself. Such a functional internal dialogue is clearly evidenced in the development of black women's studies as a major field within the discipline (Sudarkasa 1999; Terborg-Penn and Rushing 1996; Aldridge 1992). But it also speaks to the constant self-questioning concerning further development of the field in technology (Hendrix et al. 1984), curriculum (Little, Leonard, and Crosby 1993), multicultural education (Karenga 1995a), and other areas (Gordon 1981; Stewart 1992).

Molefi Asante's (1990) position is that black studies at its best is Afrocentric, for it compels, even deems indispensable, critical dialogue internal to the culture and discipline. Clearly there are other schools of thought in Africana studies, but there is no substitute for centering oneself in one's own culture and speaking one's own cultural truth. This does not mean that we in Africana studies are going to speak about African people in isolation. On the contrary, we must and do engage in critical exchange with the rest of the world, bringing our own special cultural truth to the table. Often, labeling Afrocentric scholars relieves one of the responsibility of thinking critically about the issues engaged. In fact, what some people often do is sum up Afrocentric discourse with labels like *separatism* and *essentialism*. These, however, are merely catchwords that sometimes offer useful insights but also cultivate embarrassing illusions about having found a truth that was already discovered. What I want to stress here is that a discipline is a self-conscious system of research and communication in a defined area of inquiry and knowledge, a definite literature created by a body of scholars in an ongoing, mutually challenging, and productive dialogue. This requires that they center themselves, then, and that they begin to pose a new or definitive historical paradigm that involves both models of practice and possibility (Karenga 1988).

Third, we must continue to develop a new language and logic for the discipline so that we are not conceptually imprisoned by the logic and language of the established order. This is an important point Malcolm X made in a lecture at Harvard in which he stressed the need for an emancipatory logic that would undergird and inform emancipatory practice (Malcolm X 1968). What Africana studies does is offer an enrichment and expansion of the educational project in its stress on both critique and corrective, which both require a new language and new logic. Black studies evolved in the midst of the emancipatory struggle of the sixties that linked intellectual emancipation with political emancipation, campus with community, intellectuals and students with the masses, and knowledge in the academy with power in society. What emerged in the process of both struggles on campus and society was a paradigm of critique and corrective designed to critique and end domination, to expand the realm of freedom, to create a just and good society, and to pose a new paradigm of what it means to be human. Moreover, an Afrocentric critique, at its best, requires focus on contradictions in society, especially those of race, class, and gender, looking again not only for what is present and distorted in the discourse but also for what is absent and undiscussed, not only for codified ignorance but also for canonized illusion. In a word, we must then contest the present and pose paradigms of possibility for the future.

In fact, one of the most important achievements of black studies scholars is to have put forth contestation in Africana studies as a fundamental mode of understanding self, society, and the world. In such a process Africana studies seeks to create a space and process for students to recover, discover, and speak the truth and meaning of their own experience, to locate themselves in social and human history, and, having oriented themselves, to bring their unique contribution to multicultural exchange in the academy and society (McAdoo 1999; Hamlet 1998). Ideally what results from this critique of established order discourse and contestation over issues of intellect and life is the multicultural cooperative production of knowledge, rather than its Eurocentric authoritative allocation.

Another contribution it seems to me that black studies must make to a paradigm of a new educational project is to stress the ethical dimension in education. That is to say, to treat social problematics as life issues, as concrete issues, rather than abstract intellectual problems. The very practice of generating reflective problematics and correctives from the African experience, which is defined by oppression, resistance, and the creation and maintenance of free space for proactive practices in spite of social oppression, raises continuous ethical questions. Both oppression and resistance unavoidably generate ethical questions. Also, the stress on the ethical dimensions evolves from our ancient tradition of emphasis on civic moral education in Africa extending back to ancient Egypt with its concern for

moral leadership in a just and good society (Karenga 1994). Likewise, this tradition is reflected and reaffirmed in the ethical teachings of the Odu Ifa, which stress the moral obligation "to struggle to increase good in the world and not let any good be lost" and cites as the first criterion for bringing good into the world "full knowledge of all things" (Karenga 1999:229ff.). This translates further as the moral and technical "wisdom to adequately govern the world" so that the good of work and wealth are always a shared good in both creation and benefit.

The Afrocentric stress on ethics also becomes the way to begin to integrate the disciplines, for it rightly raises questions about the relevance of knowledge and its pursuit for the human person in the human community. This means that ethical questions about the world or ethical questions of life and death are no longer safely assigned to religion, but rather that each discipline raises its own questions as well as participating in discourse on general ethics.

Finally, one of our greatest challenges is to contribute intellectually and practically to the creation of a just and good society that is self-consciously multicultural (Reed 1997). And by a multicultural society I mean a society that respects diversity and that has at least four fundamental aspects to it: mutual respect for each people and culture; mutual respect for each people's right and responsibility to speak their own special cultural truth and to make their own unique contribution to the way in which this society is conceived and reconstructed; mutual commitment to the constant search for common ground in the midst of our diversity; and, finally, mutual commitment to an ethics of sharing: shared status, shared knowledge, shared space, shared wealth, shared power, and shared responsibility for conceiving and building the world we want to live in.

Postmodern critiques do not give grounding or a sense of values or a sense of human possibility. They slash and burn, undermine and overturn, but they often leave nothing in their wake except the routine competence for criticism and the urge to fondle the familiar declarations of faith against essentialism, fundamentalism, and the host of anti-isms that serve as both a pabulum for the newly initiated and a prophetic engagement with illusion for the veteran. The essential question, then, is what framework and foundation can we offer to grasp and engage this challenge called life, this world of problem and possibility, this time of reaction and fundamental turning. As I (Karenga 1995b) noted in the *Million Man March/Day of Absence Mission Statement*, we must reaffirm our social justice tradition both intellectually and in practice. And this at a minimum

means reaffirming respect for the rights and dignity of the human person, the well-being of family and community, economic justice, shared political power, meaningful political participation, cultural integrity, mutual respect for all peoples, and a constant struggle against all forces that would deny and limit these. In such a thrust black studies reaffirms its intellectual and social mission: an essential and ongoing contribution to the reconception and reconstruction of the human project and prospect.

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