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A Black Studies Manifesto

Characteristics of a Black Studies Mind

DARLENE CLARK HINE

I wrote this essay to present at the December 2011 Yale University African American Studies: Past, Present, and Future conference organized by Professor Elizabeth Alexander. For years, since joining the Department of African American Studies at Northwestern University, I have been thinking about the particular mind-set of African American studies scholars and the distinguishing intellectual characteristics that cohere the discipline. I did this because, though African American studies is a younger field of study than many of the traditional disciplines such as history or sociology and is very frequently practiced under the umbrella of these conventional departments, we often forget that black studies is an intellectual discipline characterized by different objects and methods of study than other disciplinary formations in the university. Coming from almost three decades of tenure in history departments, I knew that a singular characteristic of the historical mind was the embrace of the concept of "change over time." My longstanding research interest in the history of black lawyers makes clear the habits of a legal mind. Or, put another way, within ten minutes of talking to a person, it is rather easy to determine whether he or she is a lawyer by the way they articulate critical issues. Though law schools do not teach or require students to learn or memorize every law that has been passed, students do, however, learn how to think like lawyers. How do we characterize thinking like scholars and teachers of black studies? The dynamic and provocative scholars who presented at

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the 2011 conference, both senior and up-and-coming professors reflecting a broad range of disciplines, constituted the black studies academic universe. Rather than report on my ongoing research projects, I offered these reflections about the constitutive characteristics and habits of the black studies mind. I should be clear that when I use the phrase "the black studies mind," I do not mean a physical or biological entity shared by all practitioners of black studies. Rather, I refer to a set of historically sedimented and diverse practices and modes of thought. Given that black studies existed outside of the walls of mainstream academe for so long, it is of utmost importance that we discuss, develop, and refine a set of protocols about what it is that we think we are doing when we say that we "do black studies." Not doing so will only aid in the institutional marginalization faced by many black, Africana, and African American studies departments across the United States. In addition to being on institutionally shaky ground, black studies are still often derided for their lack of "intellectual rigor," which is then used as a justification for dismantling black studies departments and programs.

A glaring instance of this can be found in the response by Naomi Schaefer Riley to a major conference, A Beautiful Struggle: Transformative Black Studies in Shifting Political Landscapes—A Summit of Doctoral Programs, held by the department of African American studies at Northwestern in 2012, and which brought together for the first time representatives from all eleven doctorate-granting black studies departments in the country. In a blog post titled "The Most Persuasive Case for Eliminating Black Studies? Just Read the Dissertations" on the website of the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* Riley takes to task the dissertation projects of several graduate students in the department of African American studies at Northwestern without ever having read them, describing these dissertations as useless and intellectually unsound, thus calling for the elimination of all black studies departments. Although the involved graduate students and the department's faculty authored collective responses to this piece, Riley's vicious attack on the black studies project highlighted how easy it is to do so without having any knowledge of the field whatsoever. Examples such as these make this short manifesto urgent and necessary so as to stop the institutional dissipation and the attacks against the intellectual practices of black studies.

The objective of the presentation was to delineate the five characteristic topics and approaches that constitute what I call "the black studies mind." What is it that we teach, mean, think about, develop, research, aspire to convey when we call ourselves black studies professors, graduate students, undergraduate majors, writers, and editors—and are called so by others? I have refined the presentation and turned these five habits of mind, five concerns, or characteristics that frame the black studies mind into this black studies manifesto.

1. Intersectionality

African American studies is intersectional to the extent that it is concerned with interrelationship between distinct categories of

identity and the ways in which they reflect specific relations both to dominant or hierarchical power structures and to each other. The key identity characteristics/markers are race, gender, class, sexuality, and location (geographic regions, nation, space). Intersectionality allows us to analyze how these categories interact to strengthen or undermine each other while not losing sight of their historical and geographical variability. Though articulated as a concept in black feminism in the 1990s, we can see intersectionality operating in earlier Afro-Diasporic political organizations such as the Combahee River Collective, the Black Panther Party, the Pan-African Association, and the National Association of Colored Women.

2. Nonlinear Thinking

Black studies is as much concerned with the past as it is invested in transforming the present to anticipate and bring about a better, freer future. Black studies recognizes that revolutions can and often do turn backward and occur with interrupted irregularity. Thus, understanding previous historical eras is especially important or relevant to the development of strategies and goals to sculpt an improved future. Black studies scholars do not and must not labor under the illusion that we are all on a steady march toward a more progressive, perfect, or even better future. Black studies remains fully aware that gains may be reversed at any time and thus considers essential continuous vigilance and deep investment in developing new ways of thinking about and researching the dynamics and history of the social struggle that brought us here. It is equally urgent to understand the fierce determination of hegemonic power and the extent to which it will go to retain its grip on all the levers that control distribution of resources and life chances. Black studies scholars must commit to sharing knowledge across disciplines and areas of specific concentration. Black studies exists because black studies scholars know that the struggle continues.

3. Diasporic Perspectives and Comparative Analyses

Black studies students and scholars are not bound by any geographical location. We consider the world to be our purview and thus it is necessary to study black experiences within global processes of racial ordering in the Americas, Europe, Africa, the Pacific, and Asia. Black studies scholars connect, draw parallels, and chart discontinuities between people of color in diverse locations, at disparate times or eras. Black studies scholars explore all societies that have had historical or contemporary experiences with slavery, colonialism, segregation, and apartheid. In other words, because black peoples have had to engage in freedom struggles and wars of liberation even in the aftermath of slavery, they have often had to contend with de jure slavery such as the legal disfranchisement and segregation in the Jim Crow era. Because the end of colonialism has often been followed by political and economic neo-colonialism and vestiges of colonial racial stratification such as colorism, freedom struggles remain ongoing imperatives.

4. Oppression and Resistance

Black studies scholars investigate and seek to understand the mechanisms of oppression while simultaneously excavating the affected population's myriad forms of resistance—for instance, indigenous subaltern resistance, the development of specific counter narratives, distinctive cultural practices and belief systems executed in ways to preserve collective and individual humanity in the face of genocidal conditions. Black studies scholars meditate on and probe the significance of incremental change to the overthrow of oppression, injustice, exploitation, and end to both psychological and physical terror. Black studies scholars seek greater understanding and excavations of silences, gaps, and erasures of resistances by probing not only the outspoken performances, but also those practices that are often veiled or dissembled. We unravel and reveal the myriad rituals and cultural creations that nurture and sustain oppositional consciousness while appearing to signal acquiescence, accommodation, and adaptation. In fact, these activities are often indicative of the transformative realities and alternate futures that already exist; black studies' continued flourishing under hostile conditions is living proof of these realities.

5. Solidarity

A black studies mind acknowledges and embraces solidarity with all those subordinated by power relations, analyzing the layered connections between anti-black racism, settler colonialism, xenophobia, and imperialism; as well the as the situation of other non-white and non-European groups such as Latinos, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, and Arab Americans.

In other words, black studies scholars stand in solidarity with fellow scholars of ethnic, gender, and sexuality studies. Thus, a black studies intellectual and political imperative is to appreciate, support, and advance the interests and intellectual work of scholars and students who share histories of oppression and exclusion. Thus, black studies remains sensitive to others previously denied academic legitimacy who are engaged in creating and strengthening programs, departments, and centers that produce and promote new knowledge and new ways of understanding, nurturing, appreciating, and publishing sophisticated scholarship. In short, black studies scholars, while committed to dissecting the myriad operations of oppression, must avoid the overt and covert machinations of those forces that seek to divide and conquer by fostering unnecessary competitions over resources such as institutional space, fellowships, professorships, budgets, and course loads. A black studies mind recognizes the importance—indeed, imperative—to study and theorize the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, geographical location, and culture of African diaspora populations around the globe, and to develop intellectual orientations and essential skills to undertake comparative analyses across time, space, language, and ethnicity. In addition to fields of study that may fall under the rubrics of history, literature, political science, culture, and gender studies, black studies should always remain attuned to the needs of and issues circulating

in black communities near and far. Toward this end, we need to discuss the creation of new programs, institutes, and departments as well as curricular changes in black studies departments. These curricular changes should address the needs of faculty, staff, administrators, and students affiliated with black studies. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that black studies departments consider developing specific centers, institutes, and/or arrange an annual conferences rotation on, for instance: African American Poverty Studies: The Carceral State; Where are the Jobs?; Unions, Community, and the Social Contract.