

Rethinking the Americas, Rethinking African American Studies

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Indeed, it is an honor to be asked by accomplished and highly respected colleagues to participate in a symposium devoted to rethinking the bordered configurations of landmasses which have been defined, constructed, and maintained, with force, as the various racialized and ethnicized nation-states and regions of the “Americas.” And, devoted, as well, to rethinking the disciplinary and interdisciplinary ventures in terms of which knowledges of various kinds regarding these Americas are produced, validated, justified, legitimated, mediated, institutionalized, refined, and maintained; by and in service to whom; according to what agendas. I am, then, pleased to share in these rethinking efforts, but more than a bit chastened by the challenges to be faced in accepting the task of offering reconsiderations of “African American Studies” as my contribution.

However, these are exhilarating challenges, thus I welcome the opportunity the invitation has provided to join colleagues in collaborative rethinkings which, if we continue our efforts and are successful, may well substantially alter the terms and means by which we produce and mediate knowledges of matters “American” at Vanderbilt University, certainly. (We must get on with the production and mediation and leave to others beyond Vanderbilt judgments of the propriety and significance of our efforts.) To a substantial degree, our University is in transition: is being subjected to willful renovations of a number of its intellectual and social organizational agendas intended to enhance its mission and the fulfillment of it. As part of this process, we are compelled to rethink not only what we do in many areas of knowledge-production and mediation, *but to rethink who we take ourselves to be and whom we serve* in the production and mediation of knowledges. Rethinking, then, cuts deeply...

Which is why I am so challenged by joining in these efforts as, in part, Director of African American Studies, a program that has waxed and waned at Vanderbilt (more the latter than the former, I think) for more than two decades. Its emergence was very much a part of developments throughout the USA from the late 60s through the 70s

during which nationalist sentiments and agendas were relatively ascendant among the political, economic, social, and, more broadly, cultural projects of dispersed Negroes-becoming-Black folks, becoming Afro-Americans, becoming-African Americans, becoming-Africans in the US, in the Americas. Out of the quest for “Black Power!” there emerged pressured quests for greater access for black folks to educational opportunities in Historically White Colleges and Universities (HWCUs), soon followed by pressured quests for education (courses, programs, pedagogy) more *relevant* to the needs and aspirations of persons more highly conscious, self-conscious, and self-affirming of their being of African descent, being a *black people*, as *they* defined their needs and aspirations; then pressured quests for more black educators (and support staff and resources such as Black Cultural Centers and programming) to produce and mediate this more appropriate and relevant *black knowledge* by and about black people(s) to black students, first and foremost, but on terms and in ways that would serve the decidedly *progressive* historical development of black folk in US America, and elsewhere (for example, in decolonizing Africa and the African diaspora).

Thus, the mission of Black Studies knowledge-production and mediation: to facilitate the liberation of black peoples (and, by extension, white folks, too, though this was not on most Black Studies agendas early in the struggle) from the ravages of white racial supremacy and to promote black self-determination and healthy self-affirmation; and, as well, to re-educate all regarding the full and undistorted truths of the histories of African peoples and their descendants, on the African continent and throughout the Diasporas, of these peoples’ and descendants’ achievements and contributions to the storehouses of human civilization, of their future possibilities beyond the limitations of suppressive racial apartheid. A two-fold mission, then, one both academic and socio-political in the fullest senses: production and mediation of decidedly new knowledges in the Academy, but in service to the needs and aspirations of black folks generally for *freedom* and unfettered opportunities to fashion and enjoy lives of flourishing to the fullest extent available.

The production and mediation of knowledges in service to liberation and flourishing of black folks, knowledges to be shared with all. However, fulfilling this mission requires coordinated knowledge-production and mediation of a number of disciplines, especially History, Religion, Sociology, Political Science, Economics, Creative Production (i.e., Art, Literature, Music, Dance, other Performing Arts), and Psychology according to a model articulated by Maulana Karenga in the

most prominent textbook in Black/African American Studies.¹ That is, as *the critical and systematic study of the thought and practice of African people in their current and historical unfolding...*,² such studies require the resources of all disciplinary ventures in knowledge-production having to do with human beings, though in this case particularized to inquiries and articulations with black folks as both subject-matters and Subjects, both the objects and producers of the knowledges, historically and contemporarily, wherever black folks have been and are.

This imperative, then, sets yet another challenging requirement: the coordinated production of knowledges of black folks, as dispersed peoples, in various life-worlds and geo-political settings. Hence the need to attend to studies of black folks throughout the Americas. This need was recognized and attended to by many in the early days of establishing programs of studies, indicated by the naming of particular endeavors as “Pan-African Studies Programs / Centers / Institutes” (University of Pittsburgh, Temple University); or “African and African American Studies” Programs / Centers / Institutes / Departments; or, later, “Africana Studies” Programs / Centers / Institutes / Departments. Last Spring, members of Vanderbilt’s African American Studies Committee, while rethinking aspects of the Program, agreed that, as part of the renovation of the Program, its name should be changed to “Africana Studies” to both guide and reflect a broadening of our focus from folks of African descent in the USA, primarily, and in continental Africa, to folks of African descent in the Caribbean and the Americas, as well. This symposium, then, is especially timely in occasioning further considerations of this needed refocusing and renovation of our African American Studies Program. For in ‘looking southward’ from the USA, we will need the assistance of colleagues working the Americas as we develop and refine more expansive understandings of African and African-descended peoples in terms of their Diaspora-creating relocations to New Worlds and the resulting processes and consequences of intra- and inter-group relations in the ongoing shaping and living of life in the Americas with all of the consequent diversities, even among black folks.

These were matters that engaged scholar-researchers long before the rupture of political struggle over knowledge-production and mediation in the 60s and 70s. Melville Herskovits was an early pioneer, as were

¹ Maulana Karenga, “The seven basic fields of Black Studies...” *Introduction to Black Studies*, Third Edition (Los Angeles, CA: University of Sankore Press, 2002), 28.

² *Ibid.* 3, emphasis in the original.

W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, William Leo Hansberry before (1800s) and after him. One early challenging issue for these knowledge-workers, perhaps even more challenging today, is the matter of determining just what makes for the defining characteristics of persons and peoples “African,” especially after forced and voluntary relocations to, and long stays in, locations in which cross-generational more or less communal lives have had to be made in contexts complicated by varying degrees of diversity as a function of the presence of other bio-cultural population groups in political unities virtually always structured by racialized super-and sub-ordinations. Herskovits, for example, devoted considerable intellectual energy to the development and deployment of strategies for empirical determination of the degrees of persistence of various aspects of characteristic continental ethno-cultural life of Africans in New World settings, with explanations as to where and why the greater or less persistence of particular characteristics and, overall, of the “retention” of Old World characteristics in New World settings.³ Others, Du Bois in particular, but Martin Delany and other “black nationalists” as well, worried about the prospects for folks of African descent were they to become more fully integrated into political and economic unities in which the bio-cultural hegemony of white racial supremacy persisted, through inertia if no longer as a function of explicit, enforced programs. “Integration,” “assimilation,” “segregation,” “separation,” “emigration”—these continue to be competing, not always clearly delineated options debated by black folks facing the challenges of forging viable life-worlds of freedom and justice in which to flourish in the context of nation-states and regions plagued by legacies and consequences of white racial supremacy and enriched otherwise by the challenges of bio-cultural diversity.

The organization and pursuit of the production and mediation of knowledges by and about black folks have always been conditioned by such concerns, even so far as to compel some knowledge workers involved to craft epistemological norms explicitly designed to serve the needs and interests of black folks. Hence, the much maligned and misunderstood, in far too many cases the willfully not understood, normative notion of *Afrocentricity*⁴. While this is not an appropriate

³ Melville J. Herskovits, “Problem, Method and Theory in Afroamerican Studies,” in *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afroamerican Studies* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1966), 43-61.

⁴ See, for example, Molefi Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Buffalo, New York: Amulefi Publishing Co., 1980); *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990).

occasion to flesh out all that is involved in this highly charged heuristic notion, I must say, though, that it is *imperative* that those of us involved with “rethinking the Americas” in part by rethinking the resources and agendas we bring to bear on the production and mediation of knowledges regarding the Americas and the peoples therein, give studied, respectful attention to efforts at knowledge-production and mediation that seek to be “Afrocentric”: that is, that seek to ground or “center” knowledge-production and mediation about, by, and for black folks on or in the histories, cultures, experiences, needs, accomplishments, and aspirations of black folks *as defined by and for black folks*, though without invidious concerns for peoples who are neither African nor African-descended.

What is at issue here are matters of no small consequence to knowledge-production and mediation: the “situatedness” of *all* knowledge-production and mediation; and, especially, the calling into question of the pernicious, distorting lie that all knowledge-production and mediation in the so-called “West” in general, in the USA in particular, among *the* driving forces of “Modernity,” have proceeded as enterprises exempt from and thereby uninfluenced by—thus, not in service to—the racialized organization of modern European nation-states, the global expansions of peoples of Europe to other lands where they and their descendants established racialized nation-states, and the brutal establishment by cooperating, nation-state-based white folks of a hegemonic World System defined, in significant part, by racialized capitalism. Put differently, we must give serious, critical consideration to “the Afrocentric initiative”⁵ the better to satisfy the necessity of giving serious, critical consideration to “Eurocentrism”: what Samir Amin characterizes as a collection of ideas and ideals; norms and practices; attitudes, sentiments, customs, and habits—in short, a cultural complex—that motivated, informed, and legitimated social, political, and economic orderings of life, of peoples. Two key aspects of this complex had to do with racialized hierarchies of peoples ordered by notions of white racial supremacy (and anchored by a metaphysics and ontology of The Great Chain of Being⁶) and by a capitalist political economy with universalist aspirations—that is, a desire of peoples of Europe to dominate the globe economically, civilizationally, and racially.⁷ I am firmly convinced that the ideals and models of “Reason” and “rationality” that long have been taken to be normatively definitive of

⁵ Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 45-49.

⁶ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1936, 1964).

⁷ Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).

European and Euro-US American Modernity, and thus normative for all who would “reason” properly in the production and mediation of knowledge, were intricately and intimately associated with the imperialism and racism of Eurocentrism, claims to the contrary notwithstanding, likewise the denials, certified ignorance, and fearful refusals-to-see of many white savants in the discipline of Philosophy who have devoted their careers to being guardians of proper Reason while suffering the illusion of epistemological neutrality and innocence. The Afrocentric initiative is a call for an explicitly partisan epistemology as a necessary corrective to the invidiously partisan epistemology and politics of Eurocentrism that drove the formation of the “Americas.” Consideration of Afrocentric and Eurocentric initiatives must be a part of any appropriate rethinking of knowledge-production and mediation in the Americas, regarding peoples African and African-descended in particular.

Yet, as I noted at the outset, rethinking cuts deeply. So, too, for even the most committed Afrocentrist, especially when the rethinking proceeds as a collaborative venture with others who have similar, but different, commitments and in the context of an institution historically and predominantly white in the US American South. Black, African American, Africana Studies generally, via an Afrocentric orientation and agenda particularly, have always been conditioned by concerns for identifying and anchoring—finding anchorage for—what have been thought to be the constitutive racial/ethnic and/or cultural characteristics determining the identity, authenticity, and thus the very integrity of African and African-descended persons as peoples *as such*, and for setting political agendas by which to achieve appropriate, persistent conditions for flourishing lives of freedom and justice. During the last two decades or so, there has been an explosion of academic interest in racial matters, one consequence being the marshalling of substantial effort to make the case that identities defined by raciality have no scientifically real biological or anthological bases, thus neither ethical nor political legitimacy; consequently, we are urged to get on, with renewed urgency and assurance, with eradicating all conceptions and practices of life-world fashioning and maintenance, all valorizations, that invest in notions of raciality.⁸ I, however, am not so persuaded: either

⁸ See, for example, Kwame A. Appiah, *In My Father's House*, a work in which such a position is argued by a most respected friend and colleague with whom I've had numerous debates regarding the propriety of regarding particular self-reproducing population groups as “races.” See, also, his “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections,” in K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The*

that we can or should eradicate *all* conceptions of raciality, though I am devoted to struggles to counter and minimize, to the greatest degree possible, invidious racialism or racism.⁹ Just how to forge a middle way between racist and ‘no race’ positions is a continuing challenge, one that I think is a defining feature of the unfinished project of democratic nation-formation that is the United States of America. Those of us responsible for African American Studies thus have weighty obligations in the rethinking effort: to make a viable case for racialized or ethnicized identities and thus for the production and mediation of knowledges in their behalf, but on terms and in ways that further, as well, the increased and enhanced realization of democratic, racially and ethnically pluralistic life in the Americas.

When considering this challenging obligation that is at the same time a wonderful opportunity for a knowledge-worker, I often have recourse to an effort by Du Bois to work out a framework of understanding by which to proceed. This was set forth by Du Bois in a presentation he made to a conference of social science teachers in Charlotte, North Carolina during April 1960, and published in *Quarterly Review of Higher Education Among Negroes*, July 1960, Vol. 28, pp. 135-41: “Whither Now and Why.”¹⁰ The matter of concern to Du Bois was the consequence of the increasingly successful realization by Negroes of equality in citizenship in the USA:

The American Negro has now reached a point in his progress where he needs to take serious account of where he is and whither he is going. This day has come much earlier than I thought it would...what we must now ask ourselves is when we become equal American citizens what will be our aims and ideals and what will we have to do with selecting these aims and ideals. Are we to assume that we will simply adopt the ideals of Americans and become what they are or want to be and that we will have in this process no ideals of our own?¹¹

Du Bois’s answer to the last question was an emphatic but carefully negotiated “No! What I have been fighting for and am still fighting for is

Political Morality of Race (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 30-105.

⁹ See, for example, my “On Race and Philosophy,” the introductory essay to the collection Lucius T. Outlaw (Jr.), *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906-1960*, Herbert Aptheker, ed. (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 149-158.

¹¹ Du Bois, *The Education of Black People*, 149.

the possibility of black folk and their cultural patterns existing in America without discrimination; and on terms of equality...We must accept equality or die. What we must also do is to lay down a line of thought and action which will accomplish two things: The utter disappearance of color discrimination in American life and the preservation of African history and culture as a valuable contribution to modern civilization as it was to medieval and ancient civilization."¹² The exhilarating challenge in this call is the delicate, fraught-with-danger quest for affirmations of heretofore racialized identities and cultures without fear-motivated aspirations for either dominance or revenge, the quest for unity *and* diversity, for pluralistic democracy affirming racialities and ethnicities without chauvinism. How? From Du Bois, again: on the basis of ideals that "must always be in accord with the greater ideals of mankind."¹³ And what Du Bois urged of Negroes, I think is pertinent to those of us involved in rethinking the Americas and rethinking our ventures in knowledge-production and mediation. Namely, that such ventures are to be devoted not to ourselves and our agendas as cloistered professionals, but to the education of those who are and will be citizens of the constituent communities, organizations, institutions, populations, and nation-states of the Americas: "...what American Negroes must remember is that voluntary organization for great ends is far different from compulsory segregation for evil purposes."¹⁴

To my mind, this is one of the profound and crucial challenges facing knowledge-workers today, especially those committed to thought and praxis concerning the production and mediation of knowledges, especially terms and values by which to organize life democratically in racially and ethnically pluralist polities: namely, how to achieve and sustain voluntary organizations of racial and ethnic groupings (and multiracial and multiethnic groupings, too) for great ends while curtailing compulsory segregation for evil purposes. This, indeed, is a major impetus for me to join others in rethinking the Americas, rethinking the ventures in knowledge-production and mediation in terms of which we think, and *live*, the Americas.

¹² *Ibid.* 150, 151.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁴ Du Bois, *The Education of Black People*, 152.