ESSAY REVIEW

From State of Siege to State of Art: The Maturation of Black Studies


"Somehow, at some time, we have got to make it clear that Black Studies is not a mere cultural phenomenon which one relates to by parading around in the latest nationalist garb and talking bad." These determined sentiments were written by University of California, Berkeley, graduate student Ronald Davis in 1970. At the time, the fledgling academic discipline known variously as Black Studies, Afro-American Studies, and Africana Studies was beset by a multitude of problems. As Davis told Negro Digest readers, further development of the specialty was being jeopardized by the fact that a good number of existing programs were "non-functional." College teachers and administrators all too often lacked a firm commitment to the field, while students were said to be "shuckin' and jivin'" in the classroom—expecting high grades on papers which, in essence, said little more than "I'm doing my thing." Lacking both seriousness of purpose and well-defined standards of excellence, Black Studies was in danger of betraying the ideals of its founders. "This is not the way to liberation," wrote Davis, "and I think we should stop letting people believe that it is."

Bloody battles fought within the halls of the academy in subsequent years revealed the intensity of the debate over Black Studies. Inextricably entwined in the late 1960s-early 1970s atmosphere of "black power" protest, anti-war activism, and general societal unrest, Black Studies could not escape controversy. In response to charges that their movement for academic reform was intellectually flawed, overly politicized, racially chauvinistic, and destined for an early grave, supporters provided a detailed rationale for their programs. If properly funded, they said, Black Studies departments could train a cadre of skilled professionals devoted to solving the nation's most vexing social problems. Moreover, the new curricular emphasis would destroy the intellectual underpinnings of white racism even as it provided blacks with a new, informed understanding of their history and culture. By legitimizing the black experience as a scholarly field of study, higher education would be made relevant to modern-day life in an increasingly pluralistic society.

Moving beyond rhetoric, many Black Studies supporters worked to establish a secure foothold in the university. They hoped to solidify their position through professional certification and published scholarship. Although this endeavor created new tensions and led to much disaffection, this traditional approach to academic survival answered Ronald Davis's most fundamental concerns. With the formation of the National Council for Black Studies and the growth of new scholarly publishing outlets such as Black American Literature Forum, Callaloo, and the Journal of Black Studies, among others, a solid infrastructure was constructed atop the jerry-built arrangements of the discipline's earliest years. As noted in recent evaluative overviews of the field, such efforts have garnered new respect for a component of American Studies that once was thought to consist of little more than esoteric exercises in racial breast-beating. The three books reviewed here both describe and reflect the maturation and institutionalization of Black Studies.

_The State of Afro-American History_ is composed of a series of essays and related commentary originally presented at the American Historical Association Conference on the Study and Teaching of Afro-American History held at Purdue University in 1983. Readers will find that these collected...
papers are, in terms of overall quality, above average for a volume of conference proceedings, but they also will be reminded that academicians do not always save their most fully-developed material for presentation at scholarly conferences. Insights are scattered widely amidst chronology, conjecture, and commonplace. Perhaps, in all of this, one is merely witnessing certain of the less fortuitous consequences of Black Studies’ academic institutionalization.

The State of Afro-American History focuses on research and writing as well as on the dissemination of black history through classrooms, textbooks, and the popular media. Following John Hope Franklin’s brief scene-setting essay, “On the Evolution of Scholarship in Afro-American History,” Leslie Owens, Armstead Robinson, and Kenneth Kusner present historiographical commentary on slavery, emancipation, and urban studies. William H. Harris and Nathan Huggins offer somewhat more wide-ranging remarks on recent trends within Black Studies, while essays by Bettye Gardner, James D. Anderson, Carole Merritt, John E. Fleming, Robert Brent Toplin, and Darlene Hine consider teaching methodology and textbook writing, material culture and cultural preservation, film, and women’s history. Introductory and concluding chapters by Thomas Holt and Vincent Harding provide a conceptual framework for the volume. The topical breadth and inclusive nature of the collection make it a useful supplement to more narrowly conceived studies such as August Meier and Elliott Rudwick’s Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980 (1986).

Although not of one mind in terms of ideology, the contributors are in remarkable agreement on the state of the world and of black history. Taking their cue from Franklin, they describe their discipline as “alive and vibrant” (p. 22)—newly recognized as a respectable field of intellectual endeavor. This is not, however, a celebratory festschrift. The essays warn of future peril if current standards are allowed to atrophy. It is only through the “legitimation of Afro-American history” (p. 139), notes Harris, that continued funding for research will be found. Moreover, Gardner adds, classroom enrollments and public interest in black history have peaked. As a result, scholars must now “take stock and perhaps chart a different course for the twenty-first century” (p. 173). According to Harding, this will be no casual undertaking because “a new darkness” (p. 282) of cynicism, opportunism, and militarism is afoot in the land.

Collectively, the Purdue conference participants meet the challenge of the day by refusing to rest on past accomplishments. They are realistic in their assessment of changing societal priorities, acknowledging that the late 1960s hope for a fundamental reconceptualization of American history with the black experience at its center remains an unfulfilled dream. Nevertheless, as Harding writes, the images of “a new world” that appeared all too briefly
some twenty years ago must not be forgotten. The practitioners of black history must return to "some of those best visions" and "create new visions" in and through their writing and teaching (p. 284). Having established black history as a legitimate endeavor within the profession, they must continue in their attempt to change the profession, to refocus its male-dominant, Eurocentric view of the world. To do so, valid counter-interpretations to received traditions must be developed. Histories that imply "alternative ways in which the world might have been made" (p. 8) must continue to appear. As editor Hine notes, "we have only just begun our work" (p. xi).

Each of the chapters speaks to a portion of this research agenda. What topics merit examination in the near future? Suggestions range from slave housing patterns, to the process of social differentiation among ex-slaves, to the role of black newspapers in urban black communities. More basically, the contributors seek an end to disciplinary parochialism. They want to make black history more inclusive by placing greater emphasis on the experiences of women and children. Then, they want to compare these experiences with those of non-black working-class and immigrant groups. By avoiding what Huggins terms "mindless territoriality" (p. 166), the discipline both will remain on the cutting edge of scholarship and will be in a much better position to have its perspectives incorporated into a new synthesis of American history. As explained by Holt, the task of establishing linkages between the Afrocentric and the universal is formidable, but necessary. Historians of Afro-America must strive to "occupy two vantage points simultaneously." They must "do history inside out and back again" so that all Americans will recognize black history's claim to centrality in the national experience (p. 6). Although the essays in The State of Afro-American History exhibit certain mild but recognizable symptoms of "conference-paperitis," this common spirit of dedication and direction should inspire admiration and—one can hope—widespread imitation.

If Hine's book radiates with the spirit of modern Black Studies, two new works in Afro-American biography and autobiography by R.J.M. Blackett and William L. Andrews reflect the maturity and polish evident in the discipline's published monographic scholarship. Blackett's Beating Against the Barriers (an offshoot of the author's Building an Antislavery Wall: Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830-1860 [1983]) chronicles the reformist careers of James W.C. Pennington, William and Ellen Craft, Robert Campbell, John Sella Martin, and William Howard Day, several of whom had ties to Pennsylvania. Blackett presents the life histories of six nineteenth-century blacks whose contributions to the fight against slavery and discrimination have been noted only in "obscure footnotes to larger events" (p. 1). In seeking to correct this oversight—and to extend the scope
of Afro-American biography beyond the Douglass-Washington-DuBois triumvirate—Blackett employs an extensive array of data culled from published lectures and convention proceedings, newspapers, reform journals, private correspondence, and county record books. The result is a thorough, impressive study that not only provides us with a great deal of information on the six reformers, but also joins their experiences in such a way that their lives take on a more universal meaning.

Blackett holds that their efforts in support of black education, suffrage reform, the Negro Convention and Free Produce movements, freedmen’s aid, African emigration, church, and vigilance committee work made this group of reformers “standard-bearers for black America” (p. 400). From within the ranks of the oppressed, they exploited the limited opportunities available to them and, at considerable personal sacrifice, articulated the hopes and aspirations of their people. In doing so, they called the nation back to first principles. Certainly, here are historical characters with “Horatio Alger accomplishments” (p. 400). Their life experiences are well-suited for incorporation into a new version of American history. The reformers’ efforts were assaults on the barriers to the fulfillment of all human potential within an oppressive social system.

Beating Against the Barriers differs from many of the biographical works produced during the early years of Black Studies. Like John Hope Franklin’s George Washington Williams: A Biography (1985), these essays are both amply documented and critical. Aware that a biographer’s involvement in the life and times of a historical personage can transform the finished work into hagiography, Blackett is careful to point out the all-too-human failings of his subjects. By revealing Campbell’s mercurial temperament, Day’s vanity, Pennington’s alcoholism, and Martin’s addiction to laudanum, he distances himself from earlier writers whose desire to create flawless “movement heroes” surpassed their concern for the presentation of honest, fully-developed biography. Moreover, Blackett’s thoroughgoing coverage of the tensions, rivalries, and schisms which plagued the various reform movements serves as an important reminder that there were both white and black barriers to Afro-American advancement.

In discussing these sensitive matters, Blackett does not hesitate to rank the causal factors involved in limiting black achievement. Organizational disunity and personal failings pale in comparison to societal racism as explanations for reform’s leaden pace. It was America’s continued refusal to “exorcise the demon of discrimination” (p. 398) that first broke the will and later the spirit of many of its black critics. Rebuffed in their attempts to participate on an equal basis in American institutional life and forced into an intellectual isolation engendered by white racism, they lived their lives fully aware that all of their commitment and talent could not guarantee
material reward or psychological security. Their country "simply relegated all its black citizens to the ranks of the inferior" (p. 83). If, on occasion, Blackett's condemnatory brush seems to sweep too broadly across the social fabric, his documentation of the reformers' numerous personal confrontations with racial discrimination gives credence to the view that this same spirit of white exclusiveness accounts for many Americans' underestimation of the black reformers' contributions to American history.

Like Blackett's study, William L. Andrews's treatment of pre-Civil War black autobiography represents a significant advance over earlier, related works. Andrews is not content to provide readers with distilled plot summaries or descriptions of the uses to which abolitionists put the black-authored narratives; rather, he offers an artfully constructed, technically intricate literary framework for the study of this important genre. Adhering to the perspective forwarded in The Art of Slave Narrative, edited by John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner (1982), and The Slave's Narrative: Texts and Contexts, edited by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1985), Andrews reminds us that early autobiographical works are more than "sourcebooks of facts about slavery" (p. 16). Subject to the same processes of composition as any other literature of this kind, the black narratives can be treated as discourse as well as history. Unwilling to view their task as the simple, objective reconstruction of past events, black autobiographers recorded their life stories in order "to open an intercourse with the white world" (p. 17). Andrews holds that these creative literary acts were uniquely self-liberating—"a very public way of declaring oneself free, of redefining freedom" (p. xi). Thus, To Tell a Free Story is a case study in the art of dissecting and evaluating autobiographical forms and functions. It also serves to delineate, in a fresh and creative manner, the evolution of black Americans' sense of self-definition and self-realization.

In Andrews's chronicle of slave and travel narratives, spiritual autobiographies, and criminal confessions, the earliest works differ greatly from what he considers "the culmination of black autobiography" (p. 165) in this period—Frederick Douglass's My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), and Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), and J.D. Green's Narrative (1864). Early narratives were highly solicitous of the white reader's empathy and approval. Contemporary aesthetic standards dictated that personal histories which exposed the brutal facts of slavery were preferred over those which might reveal the subjective views of an individual narrator. The most reliable accounts were thought to be those in which the author placed "the self" on the periphery instead of at the center of the story. Unfortunately, to write of personal experience in this fashion was to alienate oneself from one's past and "to banish oneself in the most fundamental ways from one's own autobiography" (p. 6).
As the nineteenth century progressed, black writers rejected these confining literary conventions. They began to move beyond the recitation of “white notions of the facts of black experience” (p. 6), recognizing that their life stories were important for far more than factual content. Thereafter, their writing was infused with “a sense of an individual authorial personality” (pp. 98-99). In these mid-century narratives, truth to the self became a priority. No longer would the blacks’ story be drawn according to the standards and expectations of an alienating culture. Afro-American writers placed themselves outside the accepted conventions of discourse, explored the theme of marginality, and, by doing so, transformed the writing of autobiography into an act of self-liberation.

While historians may wish that he had made additional connections between the nineteenth-century literary, political, and social spheres, Andrews’s description of the autobiographers’ shift from transcription to interpretation will be of value to both intellectual historians and literary specialists. Andrews’s careful mapping of the “detours, deadends, half-blazed trails, and roads not taken” (p. 15) in the evolution of black autobiography should serve as a model for all Black Studies scholars.

*Beating Against the Barriers* and *To Tell a Free Story* lend considerable support to the notion that Black Studies has matured into a state of vigorous adolescence. This is not to say that there is nothing left for future generations to do. Blackett’s close focus on individuals involved in organized Anglo-American reform makes clear the continuing need to learn more about the lives and beliefs of the truly inarticulate. Similarly, Andrews’s extensive use of terms and concepts not commonly employed by non-literature specialists—e.g., “self-referentiality” (p. 23), “emergent meaning” (p. 12), “distanciation” (p. 65), and “comic undignification” (p. 288)—provides a dual challenge to the profession. Black Studies will make further advances only if the various “branches” of the discipline can communicate with one another. Equally important is the notion that Black Studies scholars can avoid the paralysis of parochialism only if they are willing to venture into unfamiliar territory. By combining the insights, information, and terminology gleaned from a wide range of academic sources they may very well succeed in linking the Afrocentric and the universal. While this work has just begun, the “way to liberation” now has been cleared of many formidable obstacles.

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