

## The Future of African American Studies

### Allison Blakely

This is a topic with a history that began in parallel with the **sudden creation** of **hundreds** of African American Studies Programs in the 1960s and 1970s, including this one in 1969. Since this was all mainly in response to student **protests**, it is not surprising that the number of programs dwindled dramatically by a decade later. The question of their value has continued to draw attention **within academe all along**; for example, the City University of New York and The Schomburg Center, among others, have periodically sponsored **conferences** on The State of African American and African Diaspora Studies. However, this topic is **now** being taken up more frequently among the broader public. In 2008 (the summer before the Presidential election) in the Phi Beta Kappa magazine The American Scholar, the Afro-American novelist, philosopher, and English Professor Charles Johnson published an article entitled "The End of the Black American Narrative." Most famous for his 1990 **novel** *Middle Passage*, which won a National Book Award, in his American Scholar article Johnson stated that "A **new** century calls for **new stories** grounded in the present, leaving behind the painful history of slavery and its consequences." He went on to say that "The **conflict** of this story is first slavery, then segregation and legal disenfranchisement. The **meaning** of the story is group **victimization**, and every black person is the story's protagonist." He declared **that** story to be outdated in the **Obama era**, a period that climaxes a generation that has seen **thousands of black elected officials, CEOs at AOL Time Warner, American Express, and Merrill Lynch, two Secretaries of State, Nobel laureates and Ivy League Professors**. He admits that

there remain serious social and cultural problems, but attributes them now to **class**, and not any longer to **race**:

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need new .... concepts, and new vocabularies and grammar based not on the past but on the dangerous, exciting, and unexplored present, with the understanding that each is, at best, a provisional reading of reality, a single phenomenological profile that one day is likely to be revised, if not completely overturned.

In a similar vein, the **Pulitzer Prize – winning journalist Eugene Robinson**, also Afro-American, echoes this same message more emphatically in his 2010 book titled, Disintegration: the Splintering of Black America. Citing some of the very same measures of progress, and bolstered even further by the actual election of Barack Obama. **He** writes:

**Ever wonder why** black elected officials spend so much time talking about purely **symbolic** “issues,” like an official apology for slavery? Or why they never miss the chance to denounce a racist outburst from a rehab-bound celebrity? It’s because **symbolism, history and old-fashioned racism** are about the only things they can be sure their African American constituents still have **in common**.

Robinson concludes that because of what he terms the disintegration of Black America, there are now really **four, largely separate black Americas**:

- a Mainstream middle-class majority with a full ownership stake in American society
- a large, Abandoned minority with less hope of escaping poverty and dysfunction than at any time since Reconstruction's crushing end
- a small Transcendent elite with such enormous wealth, power, and influence that even white folks have to genuflect
- two newly Emergent groups -**individuals of mixed-race heritage** and **communities of recent black immigrants** – that make us wonder what “black” is even supposed to mean

Robinson's ultimate conclusions, however, **show a greater awareness and sense of urgency than Johnson's** regarding a lingering, shared racial identity that the majority of African Americans must address. He writes:

As long as the Abandoned remain buried in both society's and their own dysfunction, with diminishing hope of ever being able to escape, the rest of us cannot feel that we have truly escaped, either. We cannot begin to un-hyphenate ourselves.

In the wake of the on-going Trayvon Martin case, it is also worth noting Robinson's further, **almost prophetic** observation, that :

There are times and places where we all still come back together – on the increasingly rare occasions when we feel lumped together, defined, and threatened solely on the basis of skin color, usually involving some high-profile instance of bald-faced discrimination or injustice,...

But given the hesitancy of the broader American public to respond to the **enormity** of the unjust handling of this affair, one wonders if Robinson still thinks such cases are **so rare**. And given the fact that Trayvon Martin was enroute to his father's home in an **exclusive, gated community**, I wonder if Charles Johnson remains convinced that the only remaining serious problems can be explained by **class, and not race**.

### **So what does all this have to do with the future of African American Studies?**

To begin with, what is missing in Professor Johnson's analysis is a deep understanding of the relevant history, sociology, and political science involved in the narrative he is referring to. This weakness is a demonstration of what is **so valuable** in the **interdisciplinary approach** African American Studies brings, which requires those already versed in the arts, literature and philosophy to understand the Black

experience in all of its dimensions. Eugene Robinson shows a much sounder grasp of the **interaction between** the different spheres of the Afro-American experience, but reveals an insufficient appreciation of the fact that the present “disintegration” he finds **so novel is a predictable** continuation of our earlier history, not some startling **new** departure. The American Black community was always an **artificial construct imposed and named** by a slave society, not created **voluntarily**; and its **days of any sense of unity were numbered** once the **legally** sanctioned segregation was removed in the late twentieth century. The election of President Barack Obama **likewise** must be viewed in **its full historical perspective** to gauge its significance. For example, my own elation over the election results was immediately tempered when I learned that John McCain surpassed Barack Obama **by 12 points** in the **white** vote, despite the normally decisive winning combination of a **bad economy**, **two** unpopular wars, and an **inept opponent** who had chosen a running mate who was almost universally considered unqualified to be “**just a heart beat away**” from the Presidency, under what would have been an honorable, but elderly President with a known heart condition. All this suggests to me that President Obama was **only elected out of desperation**, by a society looking for emergency assistance to put it back on track, after a **self-inflicted train wreck**. If I am **right**, this would not be the **first** time Black people have been employed in our history to do the **heavy lifting, only to be denied** any credit!

I submit that continuing African American Studies is more vital than ever in this new era of a **still deeply rooted, but more subtle racism**. It is no longer polite to talk

about it; but it can never be overcome if we do not continue to keep the study and discussion alive. I want to close by further illustrating this point by citing one more writer, one who is not Afro-American, the journalist Naomi Schaefer Riley, whose op ed some of you may have read in the May 7<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. It was entitled “**The Most Persuasive Case for Eliminating Black Studies? Just Read the Dissertations.**” Referring to the titles of three recent dissertations from respected Black Studies Programs, she asserts:

What a collection of left-wing victimization claptrap. The best that can be said of these topics is that they’re so irrelevant no one will ever look at them.

The first title she lists is: “‘So I Could Be Easeful’: Black Women’s Authoritative Knowledge on Childbirth.” Riley follows this title with the derisive remark, “How could we overlook the nonwhite experience in ‘natural birth literature,’ whatever the heck that is?” The other two titles she mocks in a similar fashion are: “Race for Profit: Black Housing and the Urban Crisis of the 1970s;” and “A History of Black Republicanism.” I have not seen a better example than this author’s outrage at still having to read about such issues. In her own words: “the entirety of black studies today seems to rest on the premise that nothing much has changed in this country in the past half century when it comes to race. Shhhh. Don’t tell them about the black president!” Ms. Riley graduated from Harvard University *Magna Cum Laude*, and has written for such leading publications as the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and

the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on earlier occasions; but in this instance she has produced a shoddy piece of journalism that can perhaps be best read as a job application advertising her propaganda talents to the Conservative establishment, in the culture war just now heating up in the new Presidential campaign season. She gives no indication in her opinion piece that **she actually read** the dissertations she critiques beyond their titles. Unfortunately, I have found that her level of indignation and impatience on this subject is all too prevalent in our society; and far too many have yet to learn that you cannot tell a book by its cover, or the character of a person by the color of their skin.

Ms. Toriola, were you one of those children who would sit in the back seat on long family car trips and keep asking: "Are we there yet?" Well, **regarding the ending of African American Studies, the answer is still "no."** We are far from a point where such study is no longer needed; and we hope that, while you are leaving us, you will continue to spread the word in whatever successful career you choose.