

Black Studies, Black Professors, and the Struggles of Perception

Nell Irvin Painter

After more than a quarter-century in academe, including a couple of stints as the director of a program in African-American Studies and countless conversations with colleagues around the country, I have reached some conclusions regarding black faculty members and Black Studies. First, Black Studies: the time is right for a reassessment of the field. Last year, several prominent departments and programs in African-American/Afro-American/Black Studies celebrated their 30th anniversaries – including Cornell University, Harvard University, the University of California at Berkeley, and my own Princeton University. (The pioneer department at San Francisco State University was founded three years earlier than those others.) Second, black faculty members: our numbers remain small, although not inconsequential. Third, both Black Studies and black faculty members, often seen in countless academic minds as kindred phenomena, still face familiar frustrations. For the widespread American assumption that black people are not intellectual affects everyone in higher education who is black or who does Black Studies.

What has changed? Certainly, there is good news. Black Studies has experienced extraordinary intellectual growth over the span of a generation. Recent bibliographies amount to hundreds of pages, and scholars in the field produce interdisciplinary work of stunning sophistication. Research centers (for example, the Carter G. Woodson Center at the University of Virginia, the W. E. B. Du Bois Center at Harvard, and the Schomburg Center at the New York Public Library) have fostered much new research, and scholarly and trade publishers compete to bring out books in what they see as a hot field. A handful of departments (for example, at Cornell, Harvard, Temple, and Yale) offer graduate degrees, usually in collaboration with other departments. And traditional departments like history, English, and sociology support doctorates in Black Studies and employ its specialists.

In essence, what began as a way of keeping peace on newly desegregated campuses (appeasing black students and their allies who were demonstrating to demand curricular reform) has grown into a wide-ranging interdisciplinary field that encompasses the histories and cultures of people of the African diaspora, in particular, and the meaning of race and difference, in general. Today's field is very different from what it was in its infancy. When I was a graduate student in history in the 1970s, those of us interested in Black Studies undertook the most basic kind of work on prominent figures like Frederick Douglass and Du Bois and events like Reconstruction and the black migration to Kansas in the late nineteenth century. Today, my dissertation advisees regularly take on interdisciplinary topics that we could not have imagined back then. My current advisees, for instance, are investigating the interplay of race, disease, and citizenship; the evolution of Kwanzaa; marriage, race, and class; and twentieth-century black men as makers of history and symbolic figures in American culture.

More good news: the academy has changed over time and brought us the saving grace of allies who are cognizant of the value of Black Studies and black faculty members, and who are willing to say so out loud. They realize that knowledge regarding peoples of African descent and of race enriches their own fields and that a more diverse faculty strengthens intellectual exchange. Scholars from a variety of backgrounds now engage the Black Studies field and, at a major institution like Rutgers University at New Brunswick, black women specializing in Black Women's Studies chair the departments of English and history.

The numbers of black faculty members have grown as well. According to US Department of Education figures, 568,719 full-time faculty members were employed in colleges and universities as of the fall of 1997; 4.9 percent of them were black. Also in 1997, 5.8 percent of the 421,094 part-time faculty members were black. Of the entire professorate (989,813), 5.1 percent were black. The "Statistical Abstract of the United States" for 1999 says that 5.8 percent of the 919,000 college and university professors in 1998 were black, up from 4.4 percent in 1983.

The temptation to stop with the good news appeals to many people, but we cannot discount the bad news. On the quotidian level, even departments and institutions generally hospitable to Black Studies often test the stamina of individual black faculty members. The times, too, present challenges. I have to reluctantly acknowledge that the late 1990s were a meaner time than we old-timers ever expected to see again. It wasn't just the television news, featuring black men being dragged to death and rampant, sometimes fatal, cases of racial profiling. Academic culture in the 1990s also regressed, as if to remain in sync with atrocities outside academe. The degree of degeneration came home to me personally last year when a student journalist at Princeton asked me whether I had a PhD.

In 1998 and 1999, before I stepped down as director of Princeton's program in African-American Studies, it sometimes seemed to me as though the great eraser in the sky had wiped out thirty years of progress, that we had been remanded to a version of 1969. Same dumb 1960s assumptions, same dumb 1960s questions. Even though our courses enroll masses of non-black students, even though prominent Black Studies departments have had non-black leadership, and even though non-black faculty members are commonplace in Black Studies departments all around the country, the presumption still holds that Black Studies serves only black students and employs only black faculty members. From time to time administrators still intimate their belief that the main purpose of Black Studies is to forestall student dissent. And it seems that people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds can still harbor attitudes detrimental to the health of Black Studies. While non-black people may be more likely to ignore the field's development, a black skin does not automatically make its owner an advocate of either Black Studies or black faculty members. Black and non-black people can throw obstacles in the way.

Continuing stereotypes and prejudices about Black Studies and black people (including about people who teach in higher education) perpetuate the relationship between the two. In predominantly white institutions, students and administrators – of all backgrounds – commonly equate black faculty members and Black Studies. In historically black institutions, in which the plurality of the faculty is likely to be of African descent, the link between physical appearance and field of study does not present such a cause for confusion. However, where black people are few, we are likely to be housed in Black Studies departments or programs.

Complicated reasons account for the continuing conflation of Black Studies and black faculty members, some of which are well founded. Many black academics entered our profession with an intellectual mission: to correct erroneous and pernicious notions about African Americans. Our scholarship is often a scholarship of struggle, concentrating on our own, stigmatized group. Meanwhile, despite some changes, most teaching about American history and culture still ignores racial themes. As a result, Black Studies offers the most hospitable setting for the pursuit of racial issues.

Further, Americans, for the most part, place a high value on physical authenticity when it comes to Black Studies (and, of course, to racial/ethnic studies generally); to many – black, white, and other – it just feels right to have a black professor teach Black Studies. Finally, the silent, even unconscious assumption still prevails that Black Studies and black faculty members suit each other perfectly, because the field is simple and the people are not so smart. “Now, to white people your colored person is always a stranger,” Patricia Hill Collins, a professor of African-American Studies at the University of Cincinnati, quotes a black woman as observing, “Not only that, we are supposed to be dumb strangers, so we can't tell them anything.”

In light of American intellectual history, the first of those three phenomena makes sense; the other two manifest conventional assumptions. Together, they lead to false, even harmful conclusions: that Black Studies is the only place where black faculty members teach, and the only people considered eligible to teach Black Studies are themselves black.

Both conclusions are wrong. That it still needs to be said that black faculty members with appropriate training can teach anything is sad. Anyone with appropriate training can teach Black Studies. But in the context of American race relations, the conclusions are understandable and merit investigation by anyone interested in the health of Black Studies or the survival of black faculty members.

Black Studies and black faculty members are different, but related. The relationship lies in the conviction I mentioned above – that black people and intellectual activity do not go together. The reluctance to accept that blackness and intelligence are not mutually exclusive affects black faculty members, whatever their field, and it affects faculty members in Black Studies, whatever their personal racial identity.

Over the years, I have listened to colleagues around the country describe their experiences and their circumstances. One by one, they have offered their confidences. Taken together, a multitude of anecdotes reveals the existence of phenomena – *phenomena*, not just chance occurrences. The first belies the existence of color-coded allies and enemies. Evidence from across the nation shows that both support and problems for black faculty and Black Studies can come from people of all racial and ethnic identities.

A second phenomenon is harassment. Black faculty members and faculty members of any race in Black Studies are likely to become the subjects of treatment that can only be described as harassment: hate mail, hate speech, constant questioning of qualifications, personal attacks, and an increased level of everyday undergraduate complaint about teaching styles, grades, reading assignments, and on and on. Sometimes, the news media become involved. After I denied, in the *New York Times*, that there had been intellectual consensus among academics in the 1960s about which scholars and issues merited investigation (I saw some of the then-prevailing unanimity as coerced), I received a threatening letter purporting to come from the National Association for the Advancement of White People (which denied having written it). News of the threat appeared in my local newspapers, creating a source of support, but also a distraction. Most often, though, black faculty members endure the harassment, hoping it will eventually go away. It usually does, but not before leaving a faculty member exhausted and anxious. I still will not open any piece of mail without a return address.

Two other, related phenomena are unexpected delay and heightened scrutiny in career advancement, which cannot always be separated. Routine procedures break down and paperwork gets lost, necessitating additional bureaucratic steps, repeated submissions, and the answering of multiple, sometimes demeaning questions. Delay may lead to catastrophe, but usually additional effort solves the problem. A colleague on the west coast told me he felt as though he were subject to repeated PhD qualifying examinations, as he was expected to prove his competence at every turn. Again, things eventually work out, but not before taking their toll. When each new encounter entails a test of one's fitness, pleasant equanimity suffers.

Vague demurrals may discourage the hiring of faculty members, black or non-black, in Black Studies, even when the publication record of the person in question obviously merits respect. Black faculty members who have survived long enough – to have become tenured, to have waged battles in professional associations and home institutions, and to have published work that others may disagree with – gain reputations by virtue of their longevity. They become targets of vague accusations of being “too political,” “hard to get along with,” or “difficult,” as though each individual faculty member had his or her own peculiar problem, unrelated to the environment. While listing scholars in their field, colleagues may simply forget the existence of even senior black faculty members or assume - without reading it – that their scholarship is “not good enough.”

That phenomenon of invisible scholarship involves the absence of one's publications from other people's footnotes and bibliographies. It may continue with a kind of *de facto* shunning within one's department. Senior faculty members with joint appointments in Black Studies and other departments report that colleagues in those other departments have discouraged graduate students from working with them. No explanations need be offered, for an intimation of unsuitability suffices to unnerve graduate students.

The graduate students of a prominent colleague on the east coast, who studies black people, worried him in a different way. The visibility of his published scholarship brought him numerous dissertation advisees, but he wondered why none took his work to heart by criticizing it or building upon it. Meanwhile, graduate students in other institutions were studying his work, perhaps disregarding the work of black scholars in their own institutions. My colleague saw his problem as isolated, but I hear of it from all over the country: a variant on the prophet ignored in his own country. The black scholar at a distance gets held up as an intellectual paragon.

My readers from all backgrounds, especially women and feminist faculty members, will recognize such frustrations, for they pervade American higher education and affect many who are not black and who do not teach Black Studies. Nevertheless, the experiences of black and non-black faculty members are not the same, for the effects are cumulative. Being black adds one layer of hassle; doing Black Studies adds another, additional layer of hassle; being a black female adds another, additional layer of hassle, and so on.

I have intentionally repeated myself several times in this essay, both to stress the similarity of experiences over time and across cases and to provide an inkling of what it feels like to encounter the same issues repeatedly. So yes, I am oddly heartened by the knowledge that we have lots of company in frustration beyond the ranks of black faculty members and Black Studies. But the realization that so little has changed also disheartens me. After thirty years, fresh black PhD's face too many of the same old difficulties. I offer three remedies, none of which is original.

First, students, faculty members, and administrators need to inform themselves about the history of black faculty members and Black Studies. As usual, libraries, which contain bound and electronic resources, are the place to start. In 2001, the Ford Foundation (<http://www.fordfound.org.gate.lib.buffalo.edu>) issued the latest in a series of reports on Black Studies. The quarterly *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (<http://www.jbhe.com.gate.lib.buffalo.edu>) bristles with facts, figures, and useful articles, including the numbers and percentages of black faculty members at leading institutions. *Black Issues in Higher Education* (<http://www.blackissues.com>) features interviews and commentary.

Second, to attract and keep black faculty members an institution needs to have a critical mass of black students and faculty members. Black students and faculty members and Black Studies flourish in good company and wither in isolation. Hence, an institution with a strong Black Studies program will find it relatively easy to hire black faculty members and Black Studies faculty members. Barren institutions will need to take heroic measures to get the ball rolling. Enough institutions have succeeded in offering Black Studies and hiring black faculty members to annul these tired – and insulting – old excuses: “Bright young black people can make more money as lawyers and doctors, so they don't go to graduate school” (the “pipeline problem”); “programs in Black Studies ghettoize the field, so it's better not to support a separate program or department.” Those excuses never were adequate, and the passage of thirty years proves it.

While the numbers are not massive, a steady trickle of black graduates receive PhD's every year. They are finding academic jobs, often in places with strong departments or programs in Black Studies. Institutions like Columbia, Duke, the University of Michigan, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have succeeded in racially diversifying their faculties by dint of making doing so a priority. The existence of a Black Studies program or department facilitates the effort.

Third, Black Studies constituencies need to support themselves intellectually by organizing regionally. Princeton hosts the Mid-Atlantic African-American Studies Group (MAAASG), which meets each September and March to discuss topics of interest and to schmooze. Through the organization, graduate students and faculty members advance the field, learn about their colleagues' research, and, just as important, talk to people who share their interests, ideals, and frustrations. Focused on Black Studies, MAAASG attends to the individual needs of black faculty members without closing out non-blacks interested in the field.

So where are we thirty years later on? Utterly exhausted! A look at faculty demography and college and university curricula shows that much good has occurred. But it seems like every single change has required struggle, and no improvement automatically becomes permanent. I wonder whether that will always be true.

This chapter is a slightly revised version of the original, which appeared in the <http://www.chronicle.com.gate.lib.buffalo.edu>, section: *The Chronicle Review*, B7 (eds.). (Originally published December 15, 2000 in the Chronicle)

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The Battle Continues for Black Academics

January 26, 2001 (Chronicle of Higher Education)

To the Editor:

The enclosed letter came to me in an envelope with no return address. I thought your readers might be interested in seeing a specimen of the sort of mail I referred to in "Black Studies, Black Professors, and the Struggles of Perception" (The Review, December 15).

I don't claim that every lecture I've given in the last quarter century has succeeded. Sometimes they fall short because I'm just starting out on a project and my thoughts aren't yet tidy, or because the sponsors don't like what I have to say. Few of us, even experienced lecturers, can please all the people all of the time.

However, some of my colleagues may be surprised to see how people convey their displeasure when the senior professor is a black woman. Anonymous mail like this belongs in the category of harassment I mentioned in my article.

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Dear Professor Painter:

This is feedback from the provinces and we hope you will take it to heart.

Several of us at Old Dominion University found disingenuous your recent Chronicle of Higher Education opinion piece entitled "Black Studies, Black Professors, and the Struggles of Perception." Our attention focused upon your statement that "the widespread American assumption that black people are not intellectual affects everyone in higher education who is black or who does black studies."

The problem is that your public presentation here at Old Dominion several years ago did nothing to dispel that notion. Indeed, your presentation was laughably inadequate and, by consensus, absolutely the worst of more than 80 presentations that have been given in this institution's President's Lecture Series. It was embarrassingly devoid of content and was badly disorganized. It was a banner ad for the antithesis of what you wish to demonstrate and made you the subject of disparaging jokes for months thereafter.

The blunt truth is that considerable damage was done to your Chronicle thesis and your reputation by your presentation here. Some 300 individuals left the room believing either that you were intellectually a lightweight, or that you simply did not care. Given your past writings, we're inclined to the latter explanation, all the more so because of your other cavalier behaviors during your visit here.

Reputations are made (and kept) by excellent, rigorous work. You fell far short of that standard at this university. All the Chronicle opinion pieces in the world will not alter that reality. The next time you agree to speak, treat the invitation more seriously.

Sincerely,

