

## INTRODUCTION

### **From Classroom to Community: Research and Practice in a Black Studies Graduate Course**

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In the spring/summer of 2008, Terry Kershaw, editor of the *International Journal of Africana Studies*, released a special-issue volume entitled *Sustaining Black Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. The guest editor was Marilyn M. Thomas-Houston, who wrote an introduction to the volume, which she titled “Raising an ‘Academic Stepchild’”: Black Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” That volume was significant because it addressed some of the leading questions that are still negatively impacting the field of Black Studies, and it offered insights from some of the best minds who have been in the field since its inception. On a number of critical issues, we heard the voices of James Turner, Ester Terry, Molefi Asante, James Stewart, Carole Boyce Davies, Kevin Gaines, Adul Alkalimat, Stanlie James, Maulana Karenga, Terry Kershaw, and others. They addressed such important questions as the past, present, and future institutionalization of Black Studies; the relationship between Black Studies and critical race studies, diaspora studies, African Studies, and other areas of race-related studies; the new directions of the field’s scholarship; funding alternatives needed to sustain Black Studies; national Black Studies organizations and the role they must play in furthering the institutionalization of the field; intergenerational leadership in the field; and participatory action research, community involvement, and social activism in Black Studies. The volume was not only an essential contribution to the field, but necessary, in that it encouraged those in the field to examine and reexamine Black Studies missions and internal and broader relationships (Thomas-Houston, 2008).

Though each of the issues discussed in that volume helps Black Studies scholars understand how we must contribute to the field and move it forward, there was one area in particular that I believe continues to be a bone of contention: community outreach, engagement, and practice through service. Because of this belief, I set out in the fall of 2009 to examine this important aspect of Black Studies work because it raises larger questions concerning how future Black Studies scholars should be trained. Anyone remotely connected to the field knows that there is much debate over the issue of practice. Although much of the conflicting discourse concerns debates over theoretical and methodological approaches, it is the area of service through practice that is most contested. As a result, I felt it was crucial for me to center my graduate course, which was an introduction to the field, in ideas associated with research, practice, engagement, and empowerment.

*Spirit, Mind, and Body* is a special-issue volume of *Black Diaspora Review* that discusses aspects of the intellectual training in Black Studies that I provided in a graduate course taught at Indiana University. The course was entitled *A500, Introduction to African American and African Diaspora Studies*. Some elements of this course constitute the content of this special issue, which primarily features the works of three graduate students who were enrolled in the class. Maria Eliza Hamilton Abegunde is a Ph.D. student in African American and African Diaspora Studies (AAADS); Wideline Seraphin is an M.A. student in the same department; and Dana Prewitt is a Ph.D. student in sociology, with a Ph.D. minor in AAADS. In the forthcoming pages, their works will demonstrate how they think about theory and methods and their application to Black Studies

research and practice, as well as the relationship of both to the scholarship of engagement and community empowerment as traditionally defined within the field of Black Studies. The scholarly discussions presented in these students' works, as well as the projects they propose, will show how theory in Black Studies is fundamental to research, and how both can function as a form of critical and practical service.

Within this context, then, this special issue of *Spirit, Mind, and Body* reveals how many researchers in Black Studies work as a social agent whose very actions, according to Astin and Sax (1998), can contribute to the development of social and intellectual orientation values that promote an engaged commitment to social responsibility through the development of critical thinking skills, production and application of knowledge, and an appreciation of civic values based in collaboration. As these students' works show, the integration of research, practice, and engagement can lead to higher levels of self-awareness, personal development, academic achievement, sensitivity to diversity, and independence as a learner (Jones et al., 2003). *Spirit, Mind, and Body* highlights certain spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical realities that must be understood if Black communities throughout the world are to realize the maximization of their social, cultural, and human resources.

Taught in the fall of 2009, the *Introduction to African American and African Diaspora Studies* was a gateway course. It examined the cultural, social, economic, political, literary, and other experiences of Blacks in the United States and the African Diaspora, places where Blacks are dispersed in the world. The approach consisted of utilizing interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary frameworks—including Africana Studies, traditional Black Studies, Black World Studies, Africology, and others—to analyze and determine the origins and development of African American and African Diaspora Studies as a discipline and field of research and inquiry through discussions of historical and current issues and trends, as well as through analysis of the ways in which the field has been critiqued. In essence, through historiographical lenses, the course illuminated the inclusive and integrated needs and responsibilities of Black Studies to the academy and to Black peoples throughout the world, especially of Blacks the United States and continental Africa and their relationships with each other and to other Blacks in the African Diaspora. The course enrolled ten students—eight women and two men. Eight of the students were seeking graduate degrees in AAADS. Their academic backgrounds represented such diverse disciplines as African American Studies, history, English, education, sociology, gender studies, and women's studies. One of the students was from Japan; another was Haitian American; one identified himself as Afro-Puerto Rican American; another as Jamaican American; and one other student's background originated in Grenada (West Indies) and Brazil. The remaining three called themselves urban Black Americans.

The A500 course utilized many of the field's standard texts to achieve its pedagogical objectives. For example, students read Jacqueline Bobo's *The Black Studies Reader*; John W. Frazier's *The African Diaspora in the United States and Canada at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century*; Matthew Jacobson's *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States*; Isidore Okpewho's *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*; Nathaniel Norment's *The African American Studies Reader*; Delores P. Aldridge and E. Lincoln James's *Africana Studies: Philosophical Perspectives and Theoretical Paradigms*; Ronald Segal's *The Black Diaspora: Five Centuries of the Black Experience Outside of Africa*; Talmadge Anderson's *Introduction to African American Studies*; and James Stewart's *Flight: In Search of Vision*. These texts introduced students to discussions on how the field has evolved, especially in the relationship of theory to practice and the struggles

of those engaged in Black Studies working to connect their research to Black and African communities and to have it taken seriously by colleagues in traditional fields, as well as by editors of mainstream journals and presses. As a collective, these texts were chosen to familiarize students with approaches and perspectives that have both sustained and contributed to the dismantling of the field. Much of the conversations about these texts concerned theoretical formulations, methodological strengths and weaknesses, and the debate regarding theory versus experience and how each has been positioned and used by Black Studies scholars, on the one hand, to develop philosophical, theoretical, and methodological foundations that intersect theory, practice, and engagement, and on the other hand, to present findings as credible research that critiqued experience and situated it in scholarship in such a way that communities of Black peoples engage as subjects of their experiences (Carillo, 2008; Jones, 2008). Discussion of these issues, in particular, enabled students' understanding about the expectations of Black Studies, the Black community, and the disciplinary demands of the academy, since professors and graduate students at Research I universities are expected to be primarily concerned with scholarship and pedagogy (James, 2008; Norment, 2008).

Among several assignments required of students in the A500 course was the expectation that they would write a research paper that explored contemporary issues encountered by Blacks in the Diaspora (including the United States). In this assignment, students had to conduct research and then connect their research to some form of service that met a particular need in the Black community, thereby intersecting research and activism. The students' work, to a significant degree, was to involve the creation of theories, methods, paradigms, and missions enigmatic of struggles and hardships Blacks are facing in the United States and the African Diaspora. Students had to analyze their issues within the framework of Black Studies approaches, using also interdisciplinary analysis. Like other Black Studies courses taught in units around the country, the research and engagement component of my course was designed to offer budding Black Studies scholars an approach they could utilize in developing ideas into action, which would systematically address empowerment and oppression issues among Black people in the world. Further, my course was structured to include reflection and dialogue about research for and service to the community. At times, these ideas were to function as texts, since a critical analysis of them was expected to enhance class discussions and contribute to the students' construction of theories and methodologies concerned with forward movement and notions of progress in communities where Black peoples are struggling—economically, politically, and socially—throughout the world. Ultimately, my goal was to encourage students in this course to work as collaborators in creating projects or models that empowered communities and helped them to develop new critical skills and create new knowledge from real-life situations derived from interactions with people of all kinds and from many different communities.

In this volume, Maria Hamilton Abegunde, Wideline Seraphin, and Dana Prewitt have written papers that relate to the mission of Black Studies, a field that from its inception was concerned with the empowerment of Black people. As a collective, their work contributes to present efforts to reconnect Black Studies to its roots by helping promote the general idea of academic excellence and social responsibility. The works of Abegunde, Seraphin, and Prewitt are in keeping with the belief held by Nathaniel Norment (2001) of Temple University's Department of African American Studies: "There is a need for African American Studies to fulfill its mission to liberate African American people and to commit itself to the communities' needs." Within this context, there is a strong belief among some traditional Black Studies scholars that African American Studies once again must become committed to addressing the

consciousness, realities, and urgencies of African Americans and African Diaspora peoples (Norment, 2001).

In completing the course's paper requirement, it was not by design or intent that these students' research would focus on practices that address the spiritual, emotional, and mental health of Black communities; however, it was not surprising that, in a course designed to allow students to challenge theoretical and praxis paradigms, each student would create a plan grounded in her/his deepest interests and concerns. Nor was it surprising that their work would connect older and more contemporary African Diasporic practices and knowledge. Without prior agreement, Abegunde, Seraphin, and Prewitt addressed the need for a holistic approach to empowering Black people throughout the world, whether they exist at the margins or at the center of their own communities (Abegunde, 2011). Consequently, what has emerged are research papers, with practical implications, that offer us three different recommendations of empowerment, challenging Black communities to rethink how we define *diaspora* and *community* in our daily lives. Together, however, these papers challenge Black communities to "each one pull one"; to look over our shoulders, not to see who is chasing us, but whom we are leaving behind—and help if help is desired and available; and to recommit to the hard task of creating, maintaining, and passing on viable, sustainable communities that can be living models of wholeness for future generations. What is suggested in the following pages is hard work and potentially transformative, but it is not impossible.

In "Sankofa in Action: Creating a Plan That Works: Healing the Causes of Violence to Stop the Violence," Maria Eliza Hamilton Abegunde provides a thought-provoking piece of scholarship. Her work examines the experience of a community struggling to heal itself in the aftermath of a brutal murder by four African-American teenage boys of a sixteen-year-old African-American male. She capably argues that Derrion Albert's murder is a symptom of a larger problem in Black communities. She roots this violence in U.S. history by explaining how it ties to a legacy of slavery. She argues that unresolved issues emanating from slavery have produced systemic undercurrents in Black communities and have diminished Blacks' ability and capacity to transcend poverty, educational gaps, limited power, and shrinking financial opportunities. Through scholarly and activist approaches, Abegunde successfully argues that until the United States deals with the wound of slavery, there will never be any real resolution to problems, and that all responses to offenses, problems, and hardships by Black people will simply be an indication of what we think will work instead of what we know and have proven to work.

Wideline Seraphin's "Tapping into Cultural Resources: A Case for Haitian Resiliency and Viability Outside of Haiti and in the American Classroom" studies the educational experiences of Haitian children, offering an in-depth examination of the roles culture and history play in reaching educational achievement. In this work, Seraphin asks two very important questions that address how Haiti's cultural resources of resilience and sustained viability can be utilized to combat Haitian stigmatization and misrepresentation and to validate and document the successes of Haitian students in American public education. While arguing that there needs to be continual assessment of the conditions that have contributed to the poor academic achievement of Haitian and Haitian-Americans students, Seraphin introduces ideas that she believes are useful in creating a multicultural model that incorporates Haiti's cultural and intellectual resources into academic spaces to help educators better understand how to assist students from this community improve their chances of success. The multicultural model she proposes should be useful in

diminishing the effects of Haitian stigmatization in U.S. public schools by legitimizing the Haitian experience in American classrooms.

In the final article, “Service for Invisible Servers: Academy and Community-based Collaborations to Address and Alleviate Problems Faced by Street-level Prostitutes,” Dana Prewitt addresses an age-old issue: prostitution. Her study ponders several questions, including whether prostitution has value and offers something useful to African-American communities. In analyzing this issue, Prewitt does not view prostitution necessarily as a system of victimization, but as an established form of agency, in which some women are empowered by the choices they are making. These choices impact women’s health and legal rights within the criminal justice system and, according to Prewitt, require African Americans as a people to work together to establish services that will help prostitutes improve their lives. Prewitt’s work suggests a practical approach to collaborating with prostitutes by encouraging courses and community partnerships that create service-learning projects that can provide research and data to this community of people to help them understand how to locate the services they need.

Although much scholarly debate and pedagogical research concerning Black Studies has documented the value of connecting research to practice, it is important to ascertain whether students in this field today support similar viewpoints. Responding to questions about this assignment, some students in the class, along with the three authors featured in this special issue, offered useful insights. For example, Abegunde indicated that an assignment of this type allowed her to approach issues relevant to her and the Black community from her own paradigm and practices. The work, she explained, “invited me to trust my own knowing and belief system.” Wideline Seraphin added that she “got a deeper understanding of the root of [her] experience as a Haitian-American growing up.” She recalled that this type of research “helped me find the voice of my heritage and its cultural resources, as well as produce a much needed counter narrative used to describe my people and Black immigrants overall.” And Dana Prewitt explained that “having to grapple and think through the implications of race and gender oppression in order to come up with tangible solutions was most challenging and in many ways intimidating. . . . However, I appreciated that through the process, I had to take steps back from the paper to take the role of the other.” In this course, engagement and practice were not presented to students as ideas meant to be a threat to “pure” research. Contrarily, they were perspectives integrated into students’ training to help them better understand alternative approaches that enhanced the notion of “scholarship.” What is research and scholarship if engagement and practice are not intersected and if practice remains disconnected and disregarded in the humanities (Carnegie Foundation, 2010)?

In addition, students indicated what concerns a class requirement of this sort created for them. One student shared this insight: “The concern I always have in sharing my work is that it is based [on] non-European, non-Christian, and very luminal spaces. . . . [The] biggest surprise [concerned] having to revise the steps to take into account the possible emotional needs of communities, especially their inability to see the historical contexts as the point of entry into healing. . . . It is so easy, as scholars, to intellectualize and rationalize. We sometimes forget that we were called to our work because of our own inabilities and refusal to integrate, conceptualize, rationalize, and accept.” In this special issue, these students’ words reveal their thinking of Black Studies as transformative, in that they realize they must not lose themselves in research, for it alone cannot achieve the objective of producing and creating knowledge that will interact progressively with the rest of the world. There has to be a new understanding of experiences and traditions, as well as of engagements, that lead to new theories, methods, and practices that can

be activated in different geographical spaces to create something distinctly different from what was established initially, even if traces of the old remain to reach across temporal boundaries to inform, sustain, and change the present.

In thinking about the broader experience involved in being trained as Black Studies scholars and practitioners, participants in this course offered insights as to whether this approach to teaching and learning is an effective pedagogical model for helping us understand how to connect research to engagement, scholarship to practice, and creative ideas to strategies designed to help improve life in Black communities. One student commented: "I would highly recommend this approach to teaching and learning when possible, and especially in Black Studies. How else are emerging and established scholars going to really understand the ways in which theory and practice are indelibly linked." Another said, "Investing myself in solutions meant that I had to be more than interested in a topic; I had to care about it." Another student offered an intellectual position that is sure to provoke dialogue about the purpose of Black Studies, writing: "I believe as scholars invested in uplifting African-descended people around the world, we do not have the luxury of producing scholarship or research for the sake of scholarship or research. There needs to be a sense of urgency, and that urgency needs to be made evident by the production of research that lays out tangible goals and practical models for achieving those goals." In each of the students' comments, there was some resistance to being categorized only as a researcher performing the expectations of relevant traditional disciplines. And if this course requirement, as well as the students' responses to it, are an indication, there is some sense that, in the future, these and other students trained in atypical fields will refuse to be governed only by the conventional distinctions that exist in the humanities between "pure research" and "practice"-oriented studies.

Among the many issues that were discussed in class regarding this assignment, the question concerning the relevance and usefulness of this kind of training garnered the most attention. Students graduating with PhDs in any form of Black Studies are saddled with the fear of having their ideas, research, and emphasis on practice rejected by traditional departments and academic programs looking to hire young scholars who have studied Black experiences. Also, questions about publishers' interest in this type of research and scholarship weighed heavily on the minds of students in this course as they tried to process both the necessity of the field and the value of its missions. In spite of the uneasiness that some students showed, I continued to argue and train for a different outcome, a way of thinking that would reconnect research, scholarship, and practice. No one has sounded the alarm louder than Sylvia Wynter. In "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being," Wynter argues that when Black Studies attempted to function like traditional disciplines, especially displaying disciplinary and professional behaviors that it had negatively critiqued in the 1970s and 1980s, something different happened in the way scholars in the field began to operate. There evolved a need to operate solely by the standards of the academy to get people tenured and promoted and to enable them to acquire prizes such as endowed chairs, thereby forcing some to accept mindsets and frameworks that delinked the activism and scholarship that had become the trademark of Black Studies. The result has been the loss of a generation of young scholars whose professionalization has included research only, with no service to the community. In the wake of this development, it has become nearly impossible to resocialize young Black Studies scholars to develop organic links between theory and practice; yet, students entering graduate school to train as Black Studies scholars need the intellectual space and capacity to create and maintain passion for activism and engagement (Wynter, 2008).

The required research and practical assignment inspired excitement and generated intellectual energy, but anxiety and insecurity arose concerning whether the training being offered in my course, as well as similar kinds of emphases in Black Studies, would prevent students as faculty from experiencing long-term success in the academy. To be sure, there are risks, as many scholars indicate that they believe this kind of emphasis and mission is antiquated and inconsistent with directions in higher education. Critics argue that students trained in Black Studies are not prepared as serious theorists, researchers, and scholars. There is also the belief that Black Studies programs do not adequately prepare students to enter competitive job markets. Students' questions also indicated concerns about being viewed primarily as teachers and service providers, not as intellectuals who are promotable and worthy of tenure (Thomas-Houston, 2008).

Students' questions about being trained both as researcher-scholars and activist-practitioners raised larger issues concerning the impact of the intellectual divides regarding research, scholarship, and practice and the future capacity of Black Studies programs and departments to continue this aspect of the field's mission. According to Davies, the academy, in its present incarnation, recently has developed and continues to develop faculty members who take advantage of the space opened by Africana research to undertake research projects in related disciplinary areas. But some advocates of Black Studies argue that these are primarily faculty members who have no knowledge of the political, social, and intellectual interests of Africana Studies as a field. Neither do they, as some Black Studies theorists suggest, understand, know, care about, or respond to the field's history. Some of these faculty members, Davies argues, have come from other locations and class positions and have found ready-made structures useful in aiding them in dismantling, while not realizing or caring about the nature of the struggles that went into the creation of, Black Studies programs (Davies, 2008; Noguera, 2003).

Students in the course shared many thoughts related to the above issue. They recognize they would be competing for jobs with certain students who have had graduate training involving some aspects of African American and African Diaspora experiences—a situation that many continue to correlate and sometimes confuse with training as Black Studies scholars (Edwards, 2003). According to some leading Black Studies scholars, the academy continues to produce faculty who are largely unaware of the 1960s movements to create Black Studies (Gomez, 2003). The result has been a proliferation of young idealistic but uninformed scholars-researchers who work on “Black” subjects but have no commitment to the larger field. Because of the growth and development of Black Studies, it has been possible for “top flight” applicants to join the pool for an Africana studies position, but while many have mastered the subject of their research, there continues to be no other larger knowledge of the field, its communities, connections, scholars, and scholarship in Africana Studies (Davies, 2002; Aldridge and Young, 2000).

For these and other reasons, I designed the *Introduction to African American and African Diaspora Studies* graduate course to include space to address issues of professionalization, as well as to focus sharply on theories, methods, and knowledge production through practical engagement (Jones, 2008; Scott, 2008). The three articles included in this special issue reveal ideas related to the empowerment components of Black Studies and its mission in the educational arena (Davies, 2003). Early advocates of the discipline expected Black Studies academic units to have a presence in its respective local Black community. In fact, in the 1980s, the National Council of Black Studies, an intellectual wing of the field, adopted and promoted the general idea of academic excellence and social responsibility (Kilson, 1973). However, concerning its social responsibility imperative, advocates of Black Studies claim that for the past

decades, those involved with the field have been remiss in this mission (Karenga, 1988, 2003). Despite its current academic stature, the discipline of Black Studies is believed to be experiencing a troubling paradox in its current development. Most pronounced is the belief that the discipline is failing to address its empowerment mission systematically (Kershaw, 1999, 2002). Today, advocates of Black Studies suggest that the disconnection of scholarship and research from community is the result of a disjuncture between theory and practice (Norment, 2001, 2007). Due to teaching, research demands, and publishing expectations, along with the general idea that this approach—and sometimes the field—is no longer needed, many Black Studies departments no longer link theory and practice (Marable, 1992, 2000).

The works presented here by Abegunde, Seraphin, and Prewitt resonate with Abdul Alkalimat and Ronald Bailey (1986), who continue to argue that the Black Studies objective is not merely to understand the world, but also to make it better. These students' ideas and proposed solutions to problems reveal what Nathan Hare found: "Black Studies courses have to be tied to the people, and . . . while theory is useful for its own purpose and as a means to application, it is not enough" (Hare, 1969). According to Jones et al. (2003), the call for greater attention to the "empowerment" mission of Africana Studies should not be interpreted as a de-emphasis and/or neglect of scholarship. Leading scholars in the field are aware of the professional currency of scholarly publications in the publish-or-perish environment of academia, particularly at the major research universities (Hall, 1999). Yet, it is a consensus among those whose research gives agency to the field and voice to the people that Black Studies academic units must maintain a useful balance between academic excellence and social responsibility. Black Studies programs should be more than an entrance to the ivy-covered walls of prestigious universities and colleges: in keeping with the field's initial objectives and focus, Black Studies has to return to its original mission and establish greater attention to the empowerment of people of African descent (Jones, 2003).

This is what the works of Abegunde, Seraphin, and Prewitt show us. The commitment to Black communities is what makes Black Studies relevant as a field and distinct from other disciplines (Akoma and Johnson, 2010). According to Davies, the sustainability of Black Studies in the twenty-first century involves a reconnection of the field's organic link between activism and intellectual work (Davies, 2008). This is an issue that especially has to be readdressed and even made attractive for young scholars. Such an emphasis does not mean sacrificing intellectual work, but it does mean establishing a historical analysis of the ways in which research, engagement, and activism have coexisted and can still be an affirmative response to overt oppression. The intersection of research, theory, and practice demonstrated in *Spirit, Mind, and Body* reminds us how important it is to intellectualize the concerns of Black people, not only in scholarship, but in practice, as we work with communities to help establish visions that address old and evolving intellectual and community issues that build, rather than dismantle, Black Studies (Henry, 2008; Whatley, 2008).

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