Early Black Studies Movements

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The ways the first Afro-Americans—slaves and free blacks—acquired and transmitted their knowledge of their history and culture are very significant. Some picked up the knowledge in a piecemeal fashion, others through a formal educational process, such as the Sabbath schools and true-bands. Often the more literate blacks secretly communicated to their fellow men what they knew of Africa, African heritage, and the ways blacks were being exploited and oppressed in America. Shrewdly, these early black “teachers” and “preachers” gave private lessons in black history and culture unbeknown to whites. Their secret classrooms were the fields, work groups, restricted social gatherings, and black churches. Their textbooks were the Scriptures and “Ethiopianism,” which they acquired from Greek and Roman literature.

Prior to the eighteenth century, the first known and white-approved organized advocacy of what might be termed “black studies” came from the Quaker educators. Though only a minor part of their total “educational” program for
blacks, these Quaker efforts still served to inspire the developing interest in African and Afro-American history and culture. The Hicksite Quakers, having organized the earliest, most permanent, and best developed schools devoted to the education of blacks, endeavored to teach them "to be capable of discharging the duties of equal and total citizenship" (Drake, 1950: 43-44).

A well-defined movement to disseminate information about black history, culture, and contributions appeared as early as 1713, when the Pennsylvania Quakers devised a definite program for educating and training free blacks to serve as missionaries on the African continent (Woodson, 1919: 54). They saw a need for a "special" type of education for such blacks and taught them about the culture, history, and geography of black Africa. This was in line with Quaker educational philosophy of providing the individual with a chance to correct his "narrow individualism" in the light of the experiences of the group. George Fox, a great Quaker teacher of the time, urged an education that included "everything civil and useful." Quaker education passing through this transitory stage—from a "guarded" to a more fearless, broad and expansive curriculum—could easily feel the teaching about Africa was morally right.

In 1741, for example, Bishop Secker, a Quaker "colonizationist," suggested "special" education for blacks who could return to Africa to teach their countrymen about Christianity, including "stories" about Africa and its people (Woodson, 1919: 40). In fact Quakers, despite their alleged interruption of the religious uniformity of the colony, showed such determination and zeal in this new effort that the Virginia colonial legislature enacted a law excluding Quakers from the teaching profession (Drake, 1950: 18-169).

These Quaker colonizationists, who sought to resettle freed slaves in Africa, often urged the teaching of "black history" to the free blacks with the hope that this would cause them to see more clearly their humiliation and would
make them so discontented with America that they could welcome emigration to Africa.

Between 1799 and 1826, knowledgeable blacks were reciting the exploits of Toussaint L'Overture, the black Haitian revolutionary, to fellow blacks. Black refugees from Haiti—settling in Baltimore, Norfolk, Charleston, and New Orleans—often gave firsthand accounts of how particular West Indian blacks had defeated whites—French, Spanish, and English—to right the wrongs against island blacks. These accounts served as examples that both enslaved and free black men later emulated in their many insurrections against oppression. Afro-Americans who could not read learned of Toussaint’s feats from others in their Sabbath schools and by word-of-mouth (Russwurm, 1826). Blacks now had before them the daring deeds of Toussaint and his cohorts, the bold attempt of Gabriel Prosser in 1800, and, later, the far-reaching plans of Denmark Vesey in 1822; and there were the autobiographical “slave narratives” to counter any disparagement of their bravery and willingness to escape from slavery.

In 1806, a French statesman, Gregoire (1967) wrote a book to answer charges made by Thomas Jefferson (1964: 135-143), who questioned the mental capacity of blacks. Gregoire prepared a list of distinguished black men who had reached eminence and distinction in all lines of endeavor throughout history. In dedicating the book to Jefferson, he urged the President to read and familiarize himself with the history and accomplishments of blacks.

During his second term of office, Jefferson (n.d.: 429) responded to M. Gregoire:

My doubts were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own state, when the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable, and those exercising it still less so. I expressed them, therefore, with great hesitation; but whatever be their degree of talent, it is no measure of their rights. . . . I pray you, therefore, to accept my thanks for the many instances you have enabled me to observe of respect-
able intelligence in that race of men, which cannot fail to have effect in hastening the day of their relief.

Outstanding black individuals, such as David Walker (1965: 19) who pointed to the "greatness of Africa" in his 1829 Appeals, the former slave Frederick Douglass, and David Ruggles and Charlotte Forten, both free blacks, in the 1850s, all spoke of the need for black and white understanding of the cultural and historical contributions of black Americans. Even Northern teachers in the Freedmen's schools during Reconstruction (1865-1868) often inserted "black contributions" in their lessons, using "slaves narratives" and tattered copies of James W. C. Pennington's 1841 Text Book as teaching aids. Laura Towne, a New Engander teaching in the Port Royal Freedmen's school in 1865 describes a geography exercise used there which included a unit extolling the "wisest country of all times being Egypt in 'Africa' " (Rose, 1957: 372).

Library societies founded in Philadelphia (1832) and New York (1833) before the Civil War were representative of black Americans' early interest in history and culture (Aptheker, 1963: 138). Their emphasis on Africa and the military role of black Americans in the Revolution and the War of 1812 paralleled typical American interests of the time. Though limited by laws which prohibited the teaching of reading and writing to black slaves and freemen, these societies did supplement their lending libraries with forensic societies, where Afro-Americans' oral history and contributions were popular topics (Porter, 1936: 562-563, 568, 570). In a few black and white educational institutions, teachers and students learned lessons about "blackness" in geography class.

Interest in Afro-American history and culture gained fresh vigor following the Reconstruction Era. "Negro history" became the thread that was to carry all aspects of the past of black Americans. Many historical works by black authors
appeared during this period. The first to attract the attention of scholars was George W. Williams’ two-volume *History of the Negro Race in America* in 1882, followed by E. A. Johnson’s *School History of the Negro Race* in 1893.

The widespread interest aroused by these books led to attempts to form Negro historical societies. The first such movement came in 1873 when a resolution was introduced at the National Equal Rights Convention “to create a national historical and statistical association for the purpose . . . [of gathering] all such facts, historical and statistical, in relation to the Negro race in America, for the reference of all who desire to know the true history” (Wesley, 1952). This effort was preceded only by the German-American historical societies which had been organized as early as 1868. Several other ethnic historical societies were born during this period: the Huguenot Society of America, which also had a religious basis, in 1883; the Holland Society of New York, in 1885—(the Jewish Publication Society of America was publishing historical works that same year)—and the integrated Scotch-Irish Society of America in 1889.

A second attempt to organize a black historical unit came in Philadelphia, in 1892, where a group of blacks incorporated the American Negro Historical Society. Local in scope, it confined its collection about the blacks in Philadelphia. This same year saw the founding of the American Jewish Historical Society.

Two more societies organized in 1897 both noted the need to rectify wrongs committed by historians of that period: the American Irish Historical Society and the American Negro Academy. The latter ceased operation in 1915.

Though black Americans made many efforts to begin their own historical society during this “age of historical societies,” permanent success did not come until September 9, 1916 when the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History was organized in Chicago under the leadership of Edward Bruce, Arthur A. Shomburg, and Dr. Carter G.
Woodson. Earlier Bruce and Shomburg had founded the Negro Society of Historical Research at the turn of the century which published a work by Shomburg calling for the teaching of Negro history in schools and colleges (Shomburg, 1906).

In arguing for first-class citizenship, black leaders as early as 1896 had expressed the hope that “black children be taught something about their African past and the role their people played in the development of this country” (Terrell, 1896). And in 1898, the Cleveland Gazette (a black newspaper) insisted that “Every Afro-American school ought for obvious reasons to compel its students to study Williams’ History of the Negro Race.”

As the lines of racial hatred hardened during the 1890s, collective efforts among Afro-Americans to enhance self-respect and a new self-image in their people increased. While white America passively watched the lynching of black Americans grow to a rate of one every 54 hours (NAACP, 1919), these black advocates sought to use “Negro history” to foster racial pride and solidarity and, at the same time, serve as an antidote to prejudice and discrimination against Afro-Americans.

Some credit for the general interest in the African past and black Americans’ contributions can be assigned to the dominance of Booker T. Washington’s educational philosophy in the 1890s. The study of “Negro history” augmented Washington’s goal of renewing black self-pride and the desire for self-help through vocational rather than classical education. However, greater credit must be reserved for the efforts of Dr. W. E. B. DuBois. DuBois initiated and taught the first formal “black curriculum” at Atlanta University in 1897. Here he taught sociology and inaugurated the first scientific study of the conditions of black people covering all important aspects of black life.

The felt needs for a “black studies” thrust in the early 1900s can be found in the rhetoric of contemporary protest.
Lawrence Reddick's (1937: 17) words can still be heard, loudly and clearly: "Negro History is quite different from the study of the Negro. Frankly, the former differs from the latter in that Negro History has a purpose which is built upon a faith." Obviously, then and now, black studies served to provide compensatory and ideological purposes.

To repeat, at the turn of the century, a black studies "curriculum" was simply a course in "Negro history," designed to give blacks dignity in the face of growing daily insults from white Southern Americans and to provide arguments for equality in the face of increased published assertions of Negro inferiority by white—Northern and Southern—scholars (Newby, 1968: 22). This "black history" sought to focus on black Americans' historical roles (for example by revealing the deeds of Negroes in American wars) and cultural traditions (including study of early black poets, writers, and inventors). The curriculum tried to locate the "basic cause of their [Negro] problems within the realm of segregation" (Bullock, 1967: 203)—which was the common pattern of race relations in this period. It also attempted to reveal any Negro ancestry in prominent figures such as Dumas, Pushkin, and Alexander Hamilton. To paraphrase Myrdal (1964), black studies always served the same purpose as general education: to make [black] students functional participants in this democratic society—except, perhaps, that black studies includes special strategies for meeting and resolving Afro-Americans'—individual and collective—problems in the United States.

Advocates of black studies in the first two decades of the twentieth century concentrated on "sanitizing" their black brothers, whom they accused of displaying shame of their ancestry by not wishing to belong to Negro churches, live in Negro neighborhoods, send their children to Negro schools, or patronize Negro business and professional men. Negro children, these advocates said, "should be taught about the 'glorious deeds' of Negro men and women" before they
learned of the deed of other [white] Americans. They hoped this exposure would stimulate and foster race pride "and furnish an atmosphere of mutual cooperation and helpfulness that will change the winter of our discontent into the glorious summer of racial solidarity, that magic alembic in which most of our racial difficulties will disappear" (Roman, 1911: 30).

This era saw a renewed interest among black intellectuals in African history. Questing for a larger identification, they began to write and encourage "lay" interest in African culture. This gave rise to a renewed pride in American Negro folk culture, especially the "spirituals." Black colleges and high schools soon organized choral groups around these "plantation songs" introduced to a national audience by the famous Fisk Jubilee Singers during Reconstruction. Ironically, a group of Howard University students revolted against singing the melodies to visitors, preferring to sing them only among Negroes (New York Age, 1890).

Black Americans' use of "history" as a tool to rectify wrongs committed by white writers is best understood in the context of the pre-World War I generation, when Americans were probably more historically minded than in any other period. Thus the blacks, in choosing this device, did not differ from white Southerners who were still waving the "bloody shirt" of Reconstruction.

By World War I, a diffusion of knowledge, through pamphlets, newspaper articles, books, and propaganda from black scholars caused a few colleges to initiate a "black studies" curriculum—usually one course such as "Negro Problems," "Race Relations," or "Negro History."

The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History deserve much credit for stimulating this movement. Under the direction of Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the organization sought to collect "sociological and historical documents and promote studies bearing on the Negro." Again, black scholars and teachers joined in the effort, by writing scholarly articles and transposing the black "perspective" into their classrooms
in the Negro colleges. Later, a few white scholars found the association a good medium for publication of their works.

The first report on black studies courses offered in a Northern college was made by Woodson in 1919, when he also reported that no Southern institution of higher learning included a course bearing on Negro life and history. He reported the following black studies offerings:

(1) Ohio State University—Slavery Struggles in the United States
(2) Nebraska University—The Negro Problem Under Slavery and Freedom
(3) Stanford University—Immigration and the Race Problem
(4) University of Oklahoma—Modern Race Problems
(5) University of Missouri—The Negro in America
(6) University of Chicago—The Negro in America
(7) University of Minnesota—The American Negro

Woodson (1919: 278) concluded:

This study of the race problem has in many cases been unproductive of desirable results for the reason that instead of trying to arrive at some understanding as to how the Negro may be improved, the work [in courses] has often degenerated into a discussion of the race as a menace and the justification of preventive measures inaugurated by the whites.

He also reported that a few Negro colleges were offering courses in sociology and history “bearing on the Negro.” Though handicapped by the lack of trained teachers, Tuskegee, Atlanta University, Fisk, Wilberforce, and Howard offered such courses, even at the risk of their becoming expressions of opinions “without data to support them.”

Marcus Garvey and his black nationalist movement of the 1920s gave further impetus to Woodson’s crusade for black studies courses. Public schools, especially high schools, in
New York and Philadelphia, allowed free time for courses in black history. Garvey's emotional speeches on the "grandeur of Africa" and "the racial superiority of blacks" sent interested scholars and teachers back to library shelves in search of materials on Afro-Americans.

Isolated progress in the development of black studies is reported in the Journal of Negro History each year until 1926, when the first celebration of "Negro History Week" was held. Woodson (1929: 238) reported the state departments of education in Delaware, North Carolina, and West Virginia, and city school systems in Baltimore, had appealed to their teachers to cooperate in the celebration of Negro History Week. Available records of that decade (the 1920s) show educational institutions, particularly in the Southern states, lagged in developing or instituting black studies courses. Their most significant participation was in the annual volunteer Negro History Week, with its emphasis on Negro life and culture.

Federal programs during the Depression such as WPA and NRA brought renewed interest in the Negro's past. Writers were put to work researching Negro life. Though preceded by the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, this was the most productive period for writers of black history and literature.

In the mid-thirties, black studies curricula gained a place in many Southern Negro schools, which now began to make provisions for teaching black history and culture in particular courses. Woodson, in his annual report to the association, reported that Delaware had taken the lead by offering Negro history in black junior high schools. Texas, Georgia, and Oklahoma permitted and made provisions for a black history course in senior high schools (J. of Negro History, 1936: 105).

Black educators and leaders seem to have abandoned the advocacy of black studies between 1940 and 1960, though there were always isolated cases of public schools and colleges offering courses in Negro history and literature. The only recognizable organized efforts were those of the
association and of black and white orators during Negro History Week (held annually during the week of Abraham Lincoln's birthday).

With the rise of the contemporary Black Muslim movement and their emphasis on race pride and self-help, we find a rebirth of this advocacy—but with a renewed vigor, now, not only coming from lower-income blacks—as in Garvey's days—but also from middle-class and black intellectuals. Coming at the tail end of the sit-ins and school integration drives of the 1950s, the call for black studies courses was echoed by black nationalists, white liberals, and the black bourgeoisie. The movement spread from the North to the South; from colleges to secondary schools, and finally to the elementary grades.

The chief advocate of black studies today, the Black Students Union, owes its birth and influence to the black studies movement. The group's main platform and cause celebre was founded on the need for "blackness" and black studies on predominantly white-controlled secondary school and college campuses. As on most campuses, the BSU has played a major role in the pleading for the writing and implementation of black studies programs.

Presently, many Northern, Southern and Western colleges and universities have initiated black studies programs and departments. Most of these institutions are awarding majors, minors, and undergraduate degrees in the programs. Yale, Harvard, Brown, Boston University, Duke, San Jose State College, UCLA, UC-Berkeley, and San Francisco State College are just a few institutions offering graduate degrees.

Because of the rapid growth of this movement in California secondary schools, the California State Board of Education, in June 1968, recently authorized the issuance of a two-year college provisional teaching credential. Oakland's Merrit College, a pioneer in black studies, recommended the first recipients of the provisional credential. Beyond these schools, scores have programs in black studies; the discipline long in blossoming may be near a period of steady growth.
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