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## II

# “Whither Now and Why”

## Content Mastery and Pedagogy— A Critique and a Challenge

DANA A. WILLIAMS

On April 2, 1960, at Johnson C. Smith University, W. E. B. Du Bois delivered a speech he titled “Whither Now and Why,” in which he questions what the aims and ideals of the Negro will be if he achieves equal American citizenship: “Are we to assume that we will simply adopt the ideals of Americans and become what they are or want to be and that we will have in this process no ideals of our own?” (2001b, 193). The former leads to a disassociation with any memory of Negro history and a severing of any tie to Africa, essentially to racial and cultural suicide (194). Having ideals of our own, however, involves “the possibility of black folk and their cultural patterns existing in America without discrimination; and on terms of equality” (195). In “Bourgeois Fugue: Notes on the Life of the Negro

Intellectual," Houston A. Baker Jr., like Du Bois, anticipates the moment when African Americans will develop a cultural apparatus to measure itself and the world. Having long ago shed the skin of a Western aesthetic valuation and having made significant contributions to African American cultural theory, Baker laments the "self-styled 'raceless' and post soul aesthetic" (2011, 46–47) that consumes the more bourgeois segments of black intellectual life and contends that the best thing that could happen now "would be the birth of a real and caring black bourgeoisie, one [E. Franklin] Frazier would approve and that Howard University [both men's alma mater and mine] would salute as a model for a bold and vigorous African and African diaspora curriculum" (47). Taking Baker's challenge seriously, I began to think very deliberately about the myriad reasons my colleagues and I had yet to build that model. One of the reasons I returned to Howard as a faculty member in 2003—completely unfazed at the too-frequent comments from many of my black peers at Louisiana State University that my choice was a sentimental "career-ending" move—was, in fact, because I too believed that such a model was possible and that it was most likely to emerge as a purposeful intellectual and cultural enterprise at Howard. My belief was not undergirded in mere hope and speculation; there was an indisputable legacy as proof and intermittent contemporary efforts as evidence. For example, under the direction of Eleanor W. Traylor, the humanities division of the College of Arts and Sciences reimaged its "Introduction to Humanities" courses to situate African, Native American, and East Asian narratives and film at the center of the tradition of "great" texts. More than an exercise in textual inclusion, the course revision abandoned the old frame of grappling with questions that inevitably seek to reveal the difference between constructed categories like "evil" and "good" and sought instead to ask new questions that embraced worldviews from "marginal" cultures and adopted Alain Locke's notion of critical relativism.<sup>1</sup> But this achievement, as an institutionalized practice, is more anomalous than it is standard. The reality is that not even Howard has managed to free itself from the disciplinary loyalties and ideological affinities that limit serious engagement with African ways of knowing and being in ways that enliven humanity or even the study of humanities.

Adherence to discipline (and attending methodologies) and to ideologies that tend to inform the traditional Western academy, in short, trouble the waters that might birth the kind of curriculum Baker calls for. Not yet ready to concede defeat, the question I ask myself repeatedly echoes Du Bois’—whither now and why—now that the Western world is turning toward a more global reality, where does Howard, as a thought leader historically and rhetorically committed to meaningful exchange with the diaspora, go from here. No less important, though, are the questions *how do we get there* and *why does going there matter*.

My own disciplinary training is in literature, African American literature in particular. And since I think it important to avoid presumptuously assuming the posture of an academic trained in Africana Studies methodologies, I limit my “close reading” here of the challenge of disciplines and ideologies in large part to literature and humanities fields. In its broadest interpretation, “the humanities” concerns itself foremost with the exploration, analysis, and exchange of ideas that inform the human experience and its condition. It derives from the late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Italian and English Renaissance traditions of “humanists” to describe the intellectual pursuits of those who emphasized the primacy of classical literature (and grammar and rhetoric), history, and philosophy in formal educational systems.<sup>2</sup> As the study of humanities disciplines expanded in time and space, it claimed to inspire a global, cultural dialogue, yet its essential motivation undeniably has been to study the languages, history, and cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world—notably, to the exclusion of the world that predates it.

This exclusion lasts well into the twentieth century until postmodernism begins to question the rigid categories that traditionally defined and shaped humanities disciplines. At Howard, the intervention and redefinition comes a little earlier. Even prior to the aggressive revision that takes place in the early 1990s of the “Introduction to Humanities” course alluded to earlier, a 1968 syllabus of the year-long course notes: “Some of the greatest literature in the world has been written outside of and before the birth of ‘Western Civilization.’” It then offers this common disclaimer: “But just as we cannot study all kinds of art, we cannot

even study all kinds of literature. So we shall concentrate on a few of the books of the Western tradition which have had the greatest influence on your world and which have given men everywhere a little wisdom and a lot of pleasure."<sup>3</sup> Ever aware of and frustrated by the intellectual dodge, though still unrepentant of it fully, the syllabus confesses that "The Shipwrecked Sailor" is an obvious source for Homer's *The Odyssey* and that the earliest iteration of *The Odyssey*'s genre, a traveler's tale, is from Egypt. But the humanities' principal concern is declared in the course title: "Basic Ideas of Western Thought." I like to imagine our progenitors as being coy here—suggesting that Western thought ideas are "basic." I can even find support for this speculation. Following the description of the traveler's tale is this line: "Another kind of tale . . . had to do with a journey down into the region of the dead," referring, of course, to those tales collected in *The Book of Coming Forth by Day and Night*, called *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* by Western scholars. I make the distinction here even with the nomenclature to tease out a nuance that makes my point that Howard humanities scholars were well aware of the ways Western thought oversimplifies the complexity of African culture. The naming of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* presumes a finality in death, while the naming of *The Book of Coming Forth by Day and Night* understands the book not as one of "death" but as religious texts that from the New Kingdom onward were placed in the tomb on the coffin as part of the rituals that helped the dead navigate the journey in the afterlife—the "dead" have a region where they are fully alive in both the past and present moment.<sup>4</sup>

By 1992 faculty in the departments of Classics, English, Philosophy, and what was then Modern and Foreign Languages (now World Languages and Cultures—naming matters) had redesigned the course as two independent offerings with the overt and deliberate intent of decentering the West, the first and second rise of Europe specifically, as the point of departure and reference for the study of the laws of nature and man's relation to his society in ancient civilizations. The center shifted, literally. And it is in large part because of that shift that I was able to claim in an honors humanities seminar I taught during the spring 2012 semester that the class would help students understand and recover worldviews that not only

offer alternate responses to the broad thematic questions that inform the study of the humanities—what is the nature of ultimate reality; what is the nature of man; what is man’s relation to ultimate reality?—but that it would also offer new methodologies for studying the human experience.

The premise that undergirded the course was not mine by design but no less mine in belief—it was John Henrik Clarke’s.<sup>5</sup> In the foreword of the *African World History Project: The Preliminary Challenge*, he writes, “When Europe was born, Africa, particularly Egypt, had had a ten-thousand-year walk in the sun politically and culturally and was now tired from its long journey. . . . The challenge of the Nile Valley created Egypt”; the challenge of Egypt and the Mediterranean islands influenced Rome and Greece, and the challenge of Rome and Greece clearly influenced Europe (2002, x). In short, I haughtily announced to my students at the start of the semester, to link the humanities to the European Renaissance was an error at best and self-defeating at worse since man’s determination to study the laws of nature and to establish civil and religious systems to govern the universe predates European “humanists” by at least ten thousand years. Any study of the humanities characterized by “deep thought” requires all participants—the instructor, the pupil, and the texts alike—to commit to achieving deep understanding and to giving full consideration of the oldest of civilizations and then to understanding how the traditions, thoughts, beliefs, and values of those civilizations have been transformed and reimagined by more “modern” peoples. This is the challenge—to achieve deep understanding and to give full consideration of the oldest of civilizations and to bring knowledge about those civilizations forward, bridges intact, into a contemporary moment. To do this for “early” civilizations is perhaps an unsustainable pursuit for even a single department. But, at least in part, it is what Classics departments claim to do, though they somehow manage to cut off the nose to spite the face consistently and then to hide the head in the antiquities room of the proverbial world museum, masking too often as the Western academy. The nose, in this instance, is classical Africa, with “knowledge” that precedes Greece and Rome serving as the face. Acknowledging the Africanist presence in classical civilizations is then given the least amount of exhibition time or

space possible in the academic space as museum, when it is exhibited at all; or the "noble" scholar as curator relegates it to the room with Asiatic antiquities or, more boldly and perhaps honestly, simply ceases to feign interest in anything other than ancient Mediterranean cultures.<sup>6</sup>

To master content and to build a bridge for a single continent and its civilizations is perhaps unreasonable, still, for a department, though theoretically this is precisely what African Studies departments claim to aim to do, but their subject positioning as a construct of the Western academy makes it similarly impossible. The disciplinary and methodological affinities are too strong and too limited, and the implications are too dangerous. One hope, then, might be a turn to Black Studies, which is the only academic discipline that emerges out of the community and has commitments, at least in theory, beyond the university. But Black Studies has yet to fortify its methodology, though it has made great strides in doing so at Howard especially, in ways that enable the discipline to rise and meet the challenge before us.<sup>7</sup> Indisputably, Howard's Afro-American Studies department is without peer. Unlike other Black Studies departments (and programs) where faculty have degrees in other disciplines with a "certificate" or emphasis in Black Studies, Howard's department has five full-time faculty with PhDs in the field. The only faculty hire in recent years without a degree in African American Studies is one of few African American scholars with a PhD in Egyptology. Courses in *medu necher*, or Egyptian hieroglyphs, are offered each semester—the vision and commitment to building a team of young scholars who will finally enable us to allow black peoples on the continent and throughout the diaspora to be in conversation with ourselves with little regard for the white gaze are real.<sup>8</sup> But until the model that is emerging in Afro-American Studies at Howard takes full form and becomes the standard bearer, and perhaps even after, the only real solution, if we can call it that, is for there to *be* a Negro university, to use Du Bois's language, for only a Negro university can facilitate the work of a team of scholars at the university in all fields to do the work that must be done if we are to access what Wole Soyinka, in the aptly titled collection of essays *Of Africa*, articulates as the dynamic possessions that Africa enjoys and that the rest of the world does not already possess in superabundance—African humanism.

As Africa’s gift to the world, that humanism, in its unadulterated form, involves “ways of perceiving, responding, adapting, or simply *doing* that vary from people to people, including structures of human relationships” (Soyinka 2012, vii), and that reject oppressive hierarchies. These ways of knowing “all constitute potential commodities of exchange,” Soyinka argues, and can be “recognizable as defining the human worth of any people—and could actually contribute to the resolution of the existential dilemma of distant communities, or indeed to global survival, if only they were known about or permitted their proper valuation” (ibid.). This humanism, then, is universal. But how could it be, since it is deeply informed by culture? What lies beneath such a question is the assumption that a universally applicable conceptualization of what it means to be human and in community with others without violence or judgment cannot be informed by blackness. Surely it must be *post* something—post-racial, post-black, post-colonial, post-Africa. That humanism can be informed by culture (a black culture at that) is the very foundation upon which the Negro university that Du Bois imagines must build.

The Negro university, Du Bois tells us in “The Field and Function of the Negro College,” must use the history of the Negro in Africa and America to interpret all of history and to “understand the social development of all mankind in all ages. . . . And this is a different program than a similar function would be in a white university or in a Russian university or in an English university, because it starts from a different point” (2001a, 125). Taking Africa as the starting point, Du Bois makes clear, is not so much an uncritical embrace of cultural nationalism as it is a recovery of the full arc of human history.<sup>9</sup> The real challenge we must now face or concede that we are disinterested in meeting is to be a Negro university with the notion of African humanism as a way of seeing and being in the world decidedly at its core.

I am reminded here, of course, of the “Towards a Black University Conference” that the Howard student association sponsored in 1968, which called for the total rejection of a university-sanctioned (if not mandated) acculturation “into a society which debilitates black people” (quoted in Davis 1969, 46). While the intent was never to make Howard *the* Black

University, a clear goal was to "define the structure and mechanics" of a black university (*ibid.*, 46).<sup>10</sup> So why, nearly fifty years after that historic conference, do we still await Howard's (and its peer institutions') response to a call to develop the mechanics necessary to have blackness inform an understanding of universal experiences and to recognize that no history of the world can be understood without full appreciation of the history of Africa, especially as it relates to the development of mankind through the ages? The tendency as faculty is to obfuscate the challenge of first determining and then articulating and executing this structure and mechanics with a need for administrative cooperation. We must acknowledge the administrative impediments that distract us from the work we have been called to do as the scapegoat impediments can be and often are. To be clear, I do not exempt myself from this critique. When it became clear just how hard it would be to master the content necessary to help my students understand the ways African cultures and traditions have responded to the big questions related to the human condition, I conceded and retreated to the texts that I know best, those of African American literature. Instead of meeting the challenge of developing the "Introduction to Humanities" course that would allow me and my students to access the bounty of African humanism, I decided to focus exclusively on the novels of Toni Morrison and to settle with accessing the mere residue of the rich traditions and culture from which her fiction draws. Unable to walk them through Kemet's "walk in the sun" and the way it influenced the Mediterranean islands and then Rome and Greece and then Europe and then America, I couched the course's "radical" pedagogy in its methodology. The goal shifted from walking them from classical Africa to the Negro arrival in the Americas to a still noble pursuit of establishing a line of inquiry that would cultivate a life-long desire to achieve content mastery and to minimize my and my students' present lack. I used guiding questions or "thinking prompts" (drawn heavily from the 1968 syllabus but retooled to suit my purpose) that constantly reminded students that ideas, concepts, and questions about humankind and its relation to the world that have been fundamental to and recurrent throughout world history have genealogies that exist outside of the history of Western thought. By all accounts, it was

a successful class—it even won the best syllabus award in the humanities that year—but I am painfully aware of the ways it, too, was an intellectual dodge made necessary by my own lack of content mastery. My point here is that we can only demand of the university what we demand of ourselves.

Few would deny that we all participate in the slow death march that leads to cultural suicide, even if we could argue about the ways we do so. Any attentive scholar could similarly argue convincingly that historically black colleges and universities have made their decision—their goal, as a matter of practice, is to continue to strive for full integration into American society and, naively, to adopt its decreasingly relevant ideals. So, the question of where Howard, as a thought leader historically and rhetorically committed to meaningful exchange with the diaspora and as the institution I call home, will go from here is paramount indeed. Will we accept the challenge of content mastery and build a team of scholars committed more to the liberation of African peoples on the continent and all over the world—and, by extension, liberation for all of humanity—than to vulgar careerism and to delusions of disciplinary meaningfulness? There is only one way for those of us who are most at home in academic spaces to get there—and that is through mastery of and deep thought about our respective areas of study in the broadest sense. The final question, then, is why going there matters. And that answer is even simpler—because we are the only people who can free us.

#### NOTES

1. Locke's critical relativism called for an evaluation of world cultural values or ideas about humanity while avoiding the two extremes inherent in such an evaluation—relativism and dogmatism. In its acknowledgment of values as relative to their culture, critical relativism would situate values in the contexts out of which they are birthed and, concurrently, acknowledge with reciprocity and tolerance the diversity of values and cultures that populate the world, all the while subjecting cultural values to objective criticism.
2. Academic disciplines traditionally associated with the humanities include classics, history, languages, literature, linguistics, performing arts, philosophy,

religion, and visual arts. Humanities disciplines privilege the analytical, critical, and speculative in terms of methodology and have their roots in the Western academy as a part of the course of study for the cultivated man—courses of study related to grammar, poetry, rhetoric, and moral philosophy were signs of the educated, the civilized. When education became more broadly accessible among the ancient Greeks, we see the concept of the seven liberal arts emerge (grammar, rhetoric, and logic; arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music). By the fifteenth century, Renaissance humanism begins to privilege literature and history, and ancient Rome and Greece become the pivots on which all humanities study turns.

3. I am grateful to Carrie Cowherd for sharing these syllabi with me as I prepared to teach an honors humanities seminar and as I continue to think about revising humanities course offerings at Howard.
4. I am indebted to Mario Beatty for teasing out this recognition with even more clarity than I asserted in my initial effort.
5. I take some care to note that, for many years, my familiarity with Clarke as a representative thinker was limited to my awareness of his contributions in African American literary studies. I am deeply indebted to Greg Carr for introducing me to Clarke's seminal importance to African American cultural and intellectual history, writ large. I don't imagine I would have ever encountered a non-literary Clarke or the *African World History Project* at all, absent the frequent and meaningful exchanges between me and Carr. My understanding of Africana studies methodologies is significantly informed by these exchanges, by his published writings on the subject, and by his too infrequently published public lectures that easily number more than fifty annually.
6. Ironically, following recommendations made by an internal commission at Howard on academic renewal that it reimagine itself, the Department of Classics at Howard, the only free-standing Classics department at an historically black college or university, proposed to become "Ancient Mediterranean Studies." The board of trustees, however, rejected this proposal, and Classics' fate is, to date, still unclear.
7. I am thinking especially of Carr's work on developing conceptual categories to inform methodology as outlined in *Lessons in Africana Studies* and his "What Black Studies Is Not: Moving from Crisis to Liberation" (2011).
8. *Medu necher* and Coptic languages are offered by Afro-American Studies. Classics continues to offer Greek and Latin, while the Department of World Languages and Cultures offers courses in no fewer than eight African languages annually. In short, the whole history of the world can be engaged carefully, without the liability of nonculturally informed interpreters.

9. The “irony” of cultural nationalism is that it anticipates globalization by at least fifty years. It abandoned fidelity to the nation-state as concept almost at its inception, understanding boundaries as politically and economically driven constructions. Similarly, it seems ironic to suggest a look to Africa to grapple with the challenge of an increasingly more global world. The irony dissipates with the growing awareness that the turn to Africa is not a turn to place but a turn to non-essentializing worldviews that inform place. Soyinka’s attempt to provide *Ifa* as one such model in *Of Africa* is an astute one and should be purposefully considered. It must also be extended to include other non-oppressive traditions that articulate full understandings of humanity.
10. Acklyn Lynch, one of the faculty who helped design the conferences sessions, makes this point to George Davis in an issue of *Negro Digest* dedicated to the discourses the conference raised (1969).

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