

Africology, Black Studies, African American Studies, Africana Studies, or African World Studies? What's so Important about a Given Name?

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Abstract

This article reviews existing literature on nomenclatural debates within the discipline of Africology and African American Studies. It highlights key issues in the debate, such as subject-matter approaches to the definition of the discipline, disciplinary permeability, epistemological perspective or worldview approaches to the definition of the discipline, the centrality of the African American experience, diasporic visions of the discipline, global visions of the discipline, outsiders' versus insiders' perceptions of the scope of the discipline, and disciplinary marketability or viability as a gate-way to both intellectual development and job opportunities. The paper also summarizes the case-study of the Department of Africology and African American Studies at Eastern Michigan University that went through a recent name change from "African American Studies" to "Africology and African American Studies."

Key Terms: Africology, Africana Studies, African American Studies, Black Studies, black power movement, cultural hegemony, diasporic visions, global visions, centrality, subject-area approaches, permeability, marketability, viability, program assessment

Methodology

As a methodology, this paper is based on a critical discussion and synthesis of materials drawn from both secondary and primary research sources. Using materials from both sources, the paper discusses and evaluates documented approaches to the naming of institutional and intellectual studies of peoples and cultures of the African world. “Secondary sources” include existing journal, online and book publications, whereas, “primary sources,” in the context of this paper, refer to information and data collected by this author, such as information and data related to the author’s own experience of steering a recent change in the name of the academic department over which he presides.

Introduction

The debate about what should be the appropriate name for our project—that is, our systematic inquiry into the life and cultures of peoples of the African world—goes back to the time period of the black power movement—a movement that I prefer to describe as a black empowerment movement. The black empowerment movement evolved from the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s. Whereas the central thrust of the antecedent civil rights movement was to persuade and compel the powers-that-be in the United States to put an end to the Jim Crow social system and practice of racial segregation and its discriminatory concomitants and usher in an era of desegregation and equal treatment under the law, the next phase, known as the black power movement, was one that was specifically geared towards empowering people of African descent in the socioeconomic and political arenas. It was the black power movement that sought equal voting rights, economic equity, and a new educational order. As a concept, the black power movement represented African diasporic aspirations for black control of black political matters, black control of its economic life, and black control of its cultural life. Against the backdrop of cultural hegemony, the concept of black power movement represented aspirations for black self-definition, self-respect and cultural pluralism—as opposed to a rigid melting pot vision of America.

Cultural pluralism, which can also be described as multiculturalism, advocates for a social order in which the constituent communities of the nation are allowed to co-exist on their own cultural terms, not on the exclusive terms of the majority culture although cultural diffusion appears inescapable in a multicultural milieu. On the university campuses, the visions of the black power movement were manifested most prominently through the activism of the black students’ movement. One of the first acts of self-definition that occurred on campus was that the Negro Student Union renamed itself as the black student union, a gesture whose significance lies in how it symbolically reflected a liberated sense of self on the part of the emerging youth of the African diaspora.

In the wake of demands for equal treatment under the law and grassroots pressures from the unfolding civil rights protests, in 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States issued its famous Brown decision which declared school segregation as unconstitutional. Although the body politic in general was rather reluctant and slow in implementing the ruling of the Supreme Court—you will recall that busing, which in and of itself was controversial, was deployed to integrate reluctant school systems across the nation—the Brown judgment ultimately led to the opening of doors of previously all-white institutions to people of color—students, faculty and staff. As the newly-arrived students enrolled and experienced existing courses for their degrees, they began to sense an emptiness, a void in those courses on matters related to African diasporic life and cultures. That is to say that it was the perception of these students of color that the traditional disciplines, by and large, did not mirror their understanding of the realities of the communities that they came from. It was also their perception that what they were learning in their coursework tended not to adequately reflect the aspirations of their parent communities for freedom from racial discrimination—as manifested in the extant civil rights movement of the day. This was the backdrop for their consequent advocacy for a new center of knowledge—one that would be inclusive—that is, one that would add to and enrich academia’s corpus-of-knowledge and thus help make academia reflective of the multiracial and multicultural nature of the US society. Second, the students called for a relevant education—that is, content that relates to the needs and aspirations of the community; and third, the students asked for an epistemology that could imbue its students with community consciousness as opposed to “vulgar careerism” (Karenga, 2010, p. 19). It’s important to remember that although this campus movement was led primarily by black students, its goals tended to receive support from other student groups on campus, including students from developing countries and some white students. It was, of course, this movement that led ultimately to the creation of the first black studies department at San Francisco State College in 1968 under the leadership of Nathan Hare.

Naming the New Field

That the first unit of the academy to be vested with an infrastructure and authority to provide and administer a Major in this area of academic inquiry was called Black Studies was reflective of the rationale behind the movement that helped to bring it about—that is, a desire to fill a vacuum about black life and culture in the learning scheme of things. Here is how Professor Molefi Asante (2009) recalls it.

When we started the programs in Black Studies during the late 1960s, we were intent on showing the difference between White Studies and what we called “a Black perspective.” Thus, we used the term Black Studies to represent our ideological and philosophical assertion that White Americans had promoted a White academy and a White knowledge (p. 15).

Issues to Consider

That observation from Asante serves as a transitional moment for capturing other key points and issues that have been raised concerning the naming of the discipline. In her article, "Naming and Defining: a Critical Link," Ama Mazama (2009) contends that a subject-matter approach to the definition of Black Studies is what has led to a proliferation of different names for the discipline. This subject-matter approach has also had a consequence of making the discipline permeable or much more vulnerable to permeation because Black Studies is not the only social scientific or humanities area of the academy that claims Africans and descendants of Africa as their subjects or constituent subjects of inquiry. As Mazama reminds us, "Anthropology does claim African people as its subject, as does ... psychology, literature, women studies, social work, sociology, philosophy, and so on" (p. 68).

Explaining further, she says:

[The] unfinished [naming] process reflects a deeper and equally unsettled issue: that is of self-definition. The prediction is that as long as Black Studies does not find a place where to stand firmly, new names will keep creeping up. Africana Studies is the latest one among them, but if the analysis made here is correct, it cannot and will not be the last one. The reason for this is that the name *Africana Studies* belongs to the same paradigm as all the other terms used or created before, with the exception of one (Africology). Central to that paradigm is a definition of Black Studies by subject matter, in this case, "Africana People." Yet, and this is another major contention of this article, it is precisely this paradigm that is responsible for the confusion that still plagues Black Studies, as reflected in the multiplicity of labels [associated with the discipline]. (p. 67)

The subject matter approach has compounded yet another challenge that faces the discipline, namely, what Mazama calls, "a new comer's dilemma," or two contradictory requirements, that Black Studies has had to deal with: differentiation and conformity. While, "Differentiation implies the identification and demarcation of a discipline's space in the academic world, a process that equates with 'boundary work'" (p. 67), conformity requires Black Studies to follow 'acceptable models or standards of scientific practice' (p. 71).

Boundaries may vary according to type or according to their degrees of permeability, as Mazama explains further:

Impermeable boundaries are in general a concomitant of tightly knit, convergent disciplinary communities and an indicator of the stability and coherence of the intellectual fields they inhabit. Permeable boundaries are associated with loosely knit, divergent academic groups and signal a more fragmented, less stable and comparatively open-ended epistemological structure (p. 67).

Quite logically, Mazama is quick to remind us that “disciplines with permeable boundaries are often encroached upon by other disciplines, which claim parts, if not all, of its intellectual territory” (p. 67). However, as would be expected, the goal of impermeability may prove daunting, given that “the notion of discipline itself is ‘not a neat category’” (p. 67), and is subject to multiple and even contrasting definitions.

What then is a safe path to thread? Mazama answers this question by falling back on Thompson Klein’s vision that in general, disciplinary boundaries “are determined more by method, theory, and conceptual framework than by subject matter” (p. 69). In this context, it’s argued Black Studies faces an unfortunate situation because subject matter has dominated the various ways by which its practitioners have defined the discipline. One result of this situation is Black Studies’ difficulty, here and there, with establishing, protecting and nurturing its own instructional areas of jurisdiction.

Worsening the permeability of the discipline is a tendency on the part of some of its practitioners to use their primary fields of education as their preferred modes of identifying themselves. Thus, as Mazama puts it, “you have Black Studies scholars who ... commonly identify themselves as ‘economist,’ ‘sociologists,’ ‘linguists,’ ‘psychologists,’ and so on” (p. 70). This, along with previously-stated factors, places Black Studies “... under [a] continuous threat of encroachment by other disciplines, while it continues, in many cases and after several decades, to function as an ‘ethnic’ adjunct to what she refers to as “European disciplines” (p. 70). “Fights with other disciplines over the ‘right’ to teach courses even on African people are not unheard of” (p. 70).

Although Mazama has articulated a compelling criticism of the subject-matter approach to disciplinary definitions, I detect a degree of unrealism in her questioning of the imperative of what she labels as conformity to the prevailing standards and structures of the US higher educational system. Given that Black Studies is not an entity or a form of education that’s independent of or exists outside of the prevailing higher educational system of the United States, it’s unrealistic and perhaps counter-productive to expect it not to be aligned with the structures and standards that underlie the normative system of university education in the society that it’s meant to serve. In fact, to not do so, is to play into the hands of cynics and critics of Black Studies who would like to down-grade it as a form of ethnic cheer-leading that lacks academic merit. While delineating its own distinctive epistemic and methodological frameworks, Black Studies ought to function and must function as a part of the university system. In my view, construction, delineation of and adherence to a distinctive philosophical orientation to data within Black Studies need not be seen as being at odds or incompatible with prevailing standards and structures of research and teaching under the prevailing university system of learning. For instance, program-level assessment of student learning has emerged as a required process in higher education. Black Studies cannot exclude itself from it and similar mandates that are creeping up in higher education without risking and courting self-immolation.

Other Viewpoints

One other instructive contribution to this naming debate comes from Maulana Karenga. In his “Names and Notions of Black Studies: Issues of Roots, Range, and Relevance,” Karenga (2009) avers that differences in [adopted] names for the discipline [at various locations] are reflective of diverse conceptions of “the roots, range and relevance of the discipline” (p. 41). By roots, he refers to “the conception of the primary rootedness of the discipline in the African American initiative and experience and the Black Freedom Movement and its emancipator thrust” (p. 41). Range “involves varied positions on the reach and inclusiveness of the discipline in terms of African peoples and its self-conception as a pan-African project” (p. 41). And, relevance stands for “... questions [about] the intellectual value and viability of the African American initiative and experience as a self-standing discipline in the academy, as distinct from a dependent program or one area of emphasis within a regional study of African peoples—that is, Diasporan or Atlantic Studies—and its marketability as an area of competence” (p. 41). Tracing the origins of two prominent names of the discipline, namely Black Studies and *Africana Studies*, Karenga comes down in favor of *Africana Studies*. Here is how he supports that stand:

As early as 1909, W.E. B. Du Bois ...had put forth the term *Africana* as an inclusive category for the study of African peoples. It was used in the title of a proposed encyclopedia dedicated to the discussion of the ‘chief points of the history and conditions of the [Black] race.’ Both its subjects of study and the contributors to the work included the three main groupings of African peoples who [currently] define the similar inclusive range for the discipline’s intellectual initiatives, research, study, and teaching: the ‘Negro American, African and West Indian.’ These, of course, translate today as the African American, the Continental African, and the Caribbean African (p. 46).

Karenga also backed his choice of *Africana Studies* with a recap of conceptions of the term developed by James Turner who he credited with the first use of “Africana Studies” to characterize a Black Studies project—in this case, the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University. Karenga notes that “...Turner reaffirms the central focus of Africana as African American Studies with due attention to the other areas in the trilateral relationship of intellectual and cultural commitment among African people of African America, Africa, and the Caribbean” (p. 48).

Karenga also acknowledges the work of Winston Van Horne in initiating and advancing the term, “Africology” as a better choice of name for the discipline and in “presiding over the renaming of his department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the Department of Africology in 1994,” (p. 52), but he does not oppose or reject Africology as a nomenclatural identity for the discipline. In

fact, in this article, Karenga not only reviews the contributions of Molefi Kete Asante to the advancement of the discipline--such as his founding of the first Ph.D. in the field at Temple University and his creation of a distinguishing epistemic framework of *Afrocentricity*—he also recognizes Asante’s embrace of Van Horne’s “Africology” as a most appropriate name for the discipline. Interestingly, he does not state if he disagrees with Asante in that regard.

Asante’s acceptance of Van Horne’s “Africology” represents an evolution in his own thinking on this subject, for through *Afrocentricity* (1980/1988), his own initial name for the discipline was “Afrology,” which he characterizes as “not merely the study of Black people, but an approach, a methodological and functional perspective” (p. 67). In his subsequent work, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (1988), Asante replaces “Afrology” with “Africology,” calling it “... the Afrocentric study of phenomena, events, ideas and personalities related to Africa” (p. 14). Asante’s Africology is pan-Africanist in scope, encompassing Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, and various regions of Asia and the Pacific (p. 15).

Asante (2009) explains his adoption of Africology in his own journal article, “Africology and the Puzzle of Nomenclature:”

It is based on sound intellectual principles and rational grounds. For example, it is broadly the ‘study of Africa.’ There are those who might argue that it is a word with a Greek etymology, but so are many of the words that we use in the English language. Africology is no more ‘foreign to the Academy than ‘Africana’ or ‘Pan-African.’ Although Pan-African might have a Latin etymology in part, it is still considered to be a useful term. To a large degree, a word’s value is determined by the people who participate in operationalizing it. Africology is the best word to describe an Afrocentric study of African phenomena transgenerationally and transcontinentally. While the materials, historical and cultural, out of which our consciousness develops are plentiful, it seems to me that in Africology, we have a definite connection between what we do and who we are as scholars. The production of knowledge by Africologists and the validation of that knowledge by other scholars in the discipline are at the core of our academic identity (p. 14).

No doubt, Asante has forcefully embraced Africology as a correct name for the discipline.

Although there is a relatively rich documentation for Winston Van Horne's significant elevation of the term, Africology, through his relevant works and academic programmatic developments in the 1990s through the first decade of the 21st century (including his department's name change to "Africology" in 1994 and the creation of a doctoral program in Africology at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee in 2010),¹ it is important to recall that the first recorded academic usage of "Africology" occurred in the form of a book publication by E. Uzong (1969) labeled as *Africology. The Union Academic Council Series, African Studies Volume 1*. A concise description of the book portrays it as "[an] introduction to Africology designed for the education of Africans at a time when few textbooks were available. [It is] the study of African cultural and social changes [, including] African peoples, history of hunting and agriculture, religions, law, culture, art [and] languages" (Book Description).

In her "Defining Ourselves: Name Calling in Black Studies," Patricia Reid-Merritt (2009) joins the debate with a thought-provoking insight on why Africology may not be acceptable to some segments of the intellectual community of Black Studies scholars. Posing the question, "Why not Africology" (p. 84) 'as the appropriate name for the discipline' (p. 85), Reid-Merritt suggests that among ...

reasons [that] are many, '... opposition to Asante and other Afrocentric theorists, amid fears that their approach to the study of African people would dominate the discipline, was central to blocking this endeavor. Such noted scholars as Henry Louis Gates, Diane Ravitch, Manning Marable, and others, have been critical of the Afrocentric approach (p. 85).

Instead of Africology or Black Studies, Reid-Merritt prefers the term, Africana Studies. She explains it this way:

We are Africana Culturalists, steeped in the knowledge of our people, appreciative of our unique heritage and the values that we share, forever cognizant of the needs and desires of our community, and willing to use ourselves as instruments of struggle, freedom, and liberation in our chosen fields of professional endeavors. Africana Studies serves as our foundation. For it is the Africana Studies enterprise, as we have come to define and know it, that is fundamentally about the history, culture, and continuation of a people (p. 88).

Be that as it may, in expressing a preference for Africana Studies--as documented in the preceding passages--neither Karenga nor Reid-Merritt addressed certain problematic histories associated with the term, *Africana*. In "Africana Studies: Post Black Studies Vagrancy in Academe," an essay that highlights such problematic histories, Itibari M. Zulu (2012) is critical of the "the now popular" adoption of "Africana Studies" as a name for the discipline. He identifies and discusses three main grounds for rejecting that term as a suitable disciplinary nomenclature. He describes his first ground as follows:

First, it is a word created to describe a list of books or other materials related to Southern Africa ... as early as 1908 ... and as early as 1882 when the blood thirsty and cruel Reverend Duff Macdonald [he ruled with despotic cruelty, flogging and killing in Malawi according to Philip Briggs] of the Church of Scotland Mission [who] wrote 'Africana: Or the Heart of Heathen Africa,' which was published in 1923 (p. 3).

Zulu's second basis for rejecting Africana Studies as a nomenclatural alternative is that "the term has its roots in a racist past, particularly apartheid South Africa, although most definitions of the word are linked to books, documents or the like relating to objects from or connected with Africa..." (p. 3). In articulating his third ground for not accepting Africana Studies as an appropriate name for studies of the African world, Zulu rhetorically asks why "there are no departments of 'Africana Studies' at Temple University, Harvard University, Ohio State University, Northwestern University, the University of California at Berkeley or at other institutions of higher education in the U.S.?" (p. 3). Answering that question, Zulu opines that these aforementioned institutions "realized that the now in-vogue Africana is a vociferous [concept] without prominence" (p. 3).

In Retrospect

As demonstrated in the foregoing discussions, the debate about how to appropriately name what we do has been bubbling within the last 46 years of the establishment of the first Black Studies Department at San Francisco State University in 1968 during which other universities in the United States planned, either by their own volition or through grassroots pressures or a combination of both factors, and instituted their own programs. Such has been the unrelenting nature of this debate that the 2006 edition of the annual conference of the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS) was devoted to it.

In retrospect, it would appear that, given the nature of the times, the first generation of black studies was driven primarily by a desire for a "black" niche in the academy markedly different from what the pioneers and early advocates perceived as a predominantly whitish academy in the United States' higher educational scheme of things.

That is, what mattered most to their creators, it seems, was to first have a chance to put in place a set of courses about the black experience where none really existed. Given the cultural hegemonic resistance to the notion of having a distinct space for Black Studies that tended to confront the first generation of Black Studies (and I don't mean to say that institutional discomfort with or cynicism about Black Studies has evaporated everywhere), it does not appear to me, and the literature on this subject does not demonstrate measurably, that nomenclatural questions were accorded significant attention by the founders of the first generation black studies. However, as more and more black studies departments and programs emerged and they sought to move beyond mere inter-departmental scheduling and offering of undergraduate courses, towards both autonomy and programming for graduate education, new and complex questions arose. One of those complex questions is this. Instead of creating autonomous departments, why not have the traditional disciplines develop courses on the black experience that fall within their subject areas? Such questions often implicitly ignore the fact that by and large, the traditional disciplines were the comfortable homes of scholars who had vehemently questioned the both the historicity of African antiquity or African history and the practical usefulness of African cultural values or the African ways of doing and thinking. After all, from the standpoint of hegemonists, were African cultural values, African ways of doing and thinking not supposed to represent mere pathological phenomena requiring curatives from the real model of humanity—that is, all that flows from the hegemonic Europe-centered orientation to life on earth? Such vehement questioning of the historicity of the African past primarily prompted such corrective and emancipatory actions as the 1926 proclamation of what he then called a “Negro History Week” by Carter G. Woodson—a history week that evolved to become the black history month that we now observe annually in February.

Antagonism within Academia

Black Studies became necessary because the epistemological framework of the traditional disciplines was and remains antagonistic to an emancipatory black studies project, and therefore, cannot provide sustenance and intellectual nourishment for that project. That philosophical perspective matters in the development and delivery of coursework is hardly in dispute. Even while committed to objectivity—that is, an honest documentation and rendering of facts--perspective matters in research—as the product of research is subject to interpretation which tends to be influenced almost subconsciously by the worldview and philosophical orientation of the researcher.

As is well known, across the United States, our discipline goes by a variety of names: Black Studies, Black American Studies, African American Studies, Africana Studies, Pan African Studies, African World Studies, Global African Studies, African Diaspora Studies, and Africology. Even the 13 universities in the United States that currently offer doctorate degrees in Black Studies do not have a common name for those graduate degrees.

What appears to drive these distinctive names is a combination of factors: the composite expertise of their faculty, their faculty's areas of specialization, and the worldviews of the faculty that make up each unit. By worldview, I am referring to the question of whether the constituent faculty in a given setting manifests any or a combination of the following visions of our project:

- a domestic vision of black studies that sees it as focusing exclusively on the affairs of only United States African Americans who descended from the generation of enslaved Africans
- a diasporic vision of black studies that is inclusive of the affairs of all of African descendants in the New World—that is, the Americas: North America, South America and the Caribbean
- a globalistic vision of the black studies—that is, a viewpoint that thinks in terms of an African world—a world encompassing African-origin communities that are scattered across the globe and the continent of Africa itself.

Even though across the United States, there is no common agreement among black studies scholars about unit nomenclatural choices, it would appear that a consensus has emerged around one factor, namely that any black studies project that is conceptually divorced from Africa as a geographical and cultural starting base is a non-starter. As Asante once put it, African descendants in the New World are not like a rootless contraption that's dangling in the air. An overwhelming number of studies of the cultural dispositions of African descendants in the New World, demonstrate that, to various regional degrees, they manifest retentions of African physical and cultural attributes, though not necessarily in their pristine forms. Neither does African culture exist today on the continent of Africa in a pristine form. This is perhaps why scholars painstakingly endeavor to distinguish the attributes of traditional African society from those of contemporary Africa—a contemporary Africa that has been shaped by both traditional Africa in the backdrop and exogenous influences from the West and the East, including exogenous religious, educational, political, economic, judicial and social systems and norms—not unlike the situation in the African Diaspora although diasporan cultural life has admittedly evolved and has been transformed in the context of cultural hegemony. The exogenous influences upon the life and cultures of African diasporic communities and the African continent itself have been made all the more complicated by present-day globalistic forces, such as the internet age and corporate globalization.

Marketability

Explaining his factor of “relevance” in his own contribution to this debate about naming the discipline, Maulana Karenga calls attention to what he correctly posed as “the continuing viability of the discipline as a marketable area of competence, if it is mainly or solely African American” (p. 43). In effect, his is a point that has also been a concern of mine for some time, namely that one of the instructional, research and service realities of departments that identify themselves as “African American Studies” is that they tend to face a perception gap between what the insiders know to be their scope of operation and what outsiders (particularly students, other faculty and administrators) tend to perceive them to be doing even though, in identifiable cases, their curricular maps tend to be broader than the affairs of the community of African descents located within the United States. While I am of the conviction that the particularity of the African American experience in the United States and other regions of the Americas--its triumphs, trials and tribulations--certainly provides pedagogical models for lessons in how the ideology of race shapes the human experience, for lessons in human resilience, for lessons in the ability of the human spirit to overcome and transcend adversity, for lessons in how human societies can forge and manage viable co-existence in the midst of diversity, and for lessons on how non-violent mass protest can expand the democratic space and accord a practical expression to otherwise abstract concepts of freedom and liberty, I am also a proponent of an expansive vision of black studies that conceptualizes it in global terms for historical and practical reasons. My preferred name for this project is Africology, which I define as an African-centered, structured, and critical exploration, analysis and synthesis of the historical evolution and contemporary nature of the global black experience. The global black experience embraces past and current developments and transformations in the life and cultures of African peoples in the Diaspora (that is, diasporic Africans, such as African Americans, Caribbean-Africans, Canadian Africans, European Africans, etc.) and on the Continent (that is, continental Africans). It is a multilayered investigative, analytical and synthetical project that focuses on the African world; the African world consists of the continent of Africa and its diaspora, while the African Diaspora is constituted by the African-origin communities located outside of the African continent (Okafor, 2013, p. 86).

In a recent write-up, James Stewart (2013) calls attention to a set of challenges that he believes has hamstrung attempts to transform Black Studies into a full-scale African World's Studies project. Here is how he puts it:

There are at least four hurdles that must be overcome in order to advance this project. First, there is an ongoing need to confront the intellectual hegemony exercised by the African Studies establishment. Second, greater epistemological and ontological clarity must be achieved regarding macro-level (continental and regional) and micro-level (ethnic and national) cultural and geographical constructs. Even given progress on these first two challenges, the problem remains of how to design an "African World Studies" curriculum that can be delivered effectively within the confines of the structural limitations posed by the credit limits associated with majors, the length of terms/semester, and hours of class contact. .. Finally, given the social responsibility mandate of Africana Studies it is imperative to consider what types of political advocacy are likely to be most effective in supporting African liberation and development and develop strategies to coordinate such advocacy with that focused on Diasporan populations (p. i).

Before I comment on Stewart's concerns, let me state, for now, that I envision Africology as a project that will not limit itself to subjects of inquiry typically located within the humanities and social science areas. For instance, what could be a logical objection to extending Africology to a course sequence that investigates the evolution of science and technology across regions of the African world? Global warming, global trade, global pandemics, terrorism from both private and governments entities, do carry consequences for the lives and fortunes of people located in regions of the African world and, thus, are Africological subjects of inquiry.

Africology and African American Studies at Eastern Michigan University

African American Studies at Eastern Michigan University has had a 39-year-old history, having begun in 1975 as an Afro-American Studies program. In 1990, it was upgraded to a department of African American Studies that offers a bachelor's degree in African American Studies (Woods,² 2012). Led by this author, in 2013, this AAS degree program was re-structured, effective winter, 2013, along with a renaming of the unit as a department of Africology and African American Studies. For now, the department offers a major, a minor and a graduate certificate in African American Studies, along with an undergraduate certificate in African Studies.

The re-structuring and renaming followed a retreat-based process of self-examination whose outcome convinced us that, given the direction of academic affairs in the United States in which graduation rates and student credit hours have become paramount in resource allocation and even re-distribution, we not only needed to revamp our undergraduate degree program in order to broaden its appeal—intellectually and career-wise—and bring more students into our fold, we also found it necessary to change the name of the department from the “Department of African American Studies” to the “Department of Africology and African American Studies.” In doing so, our department at EMU has become the second unit of its kind in the United States to officially associate itself with the term, Africology as a way of identifying and presenting itself to the world. The first sister department to do so, as earlier noted, is the Department of Africology at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee which before 1994 was known as the Department of Afro-American Studies. It currently offers a Ph.D. program in Africology.

The reader may wonder why at Eastern, we choose a name that, on the surface, seems like a dual identity—that is, “Africology and African American Studies.” To an extent, this dual-construct represents a compromise between one group of faculty which favored “Africology” and a second group that would rather retain the status-quo. In any case, take notice that Africology is the prefix in that dual-name construct because it is recognized and serves as the umbrella name--an all-encompassing name under which “African American Studies” is subsumed as a component academic program area. Besides the fact that our undergraduate degree program in African American Studies incorporates an array of courses that focuses on the African continent, including our “Introduction to African Civilization,” we also currently offer a stand-alone undergraduate certificate in African Studies--yet another program-level component aspect of Africology. Furthermore, Africology signals that the department is headed in an expansive direction that incorporates a vision of a future distinct program on Caribbean & South American African Studies, and Canadian African Studies, etc. if resources permit. It’s my conviction that viewing and setting up Africology as an umbrella curricular category lays a conceptual foundation and framework for consolidating, reclaiming or establishing its constituent academic program areas, such as African American Studies, African Studies, Caribbean African Studies, European African Studies, Black Women Studies, etc. Students can major or minor in any of the preceding Africological constituent areas of study, thus potentially solving a practical instructional problem that Stewart identified in a passage that I quoted earlier--on, namely the challenge of designing an “... `African World Studies’ curriculum that can be delivered effectively within the confines of the structural limitations posed by the credit limits associated with majors” (p. i).

Conclusion

Africology, as a nomenclatural alternative, exudes a more inclusive, institutional and aesthetic appeal, and thus, seems much more marketable and much more capable of debunking an erroneous notion that African American Studies exists for the consumption of only black students. Nonetheless, an instructive point that emerged during EMU's afore-mentioned departmental retreat and deliberation on this matter, is that "African American Studies (AAS)" may carry a greater historical resonance with some members of our constituencies or stake holders not only inside the university community but also outside of it. Hence, our decision to keep AAS alive as a constituent but derivative part of the new name of our department.

Notes

¹ Professor Winston Van Horne (1944-2013) joined the ancestors on May 24, 2013. For additional information about his life and contributions to the discipline, visit <http://www4.uwm.edu/letsci/africology/vanhorne.cfm>.

² Professor Ronald C Woods was the founding head of the department of African American Studies at Eastern Michigan University. He continues to serve as a full professor of African American Studies in the now department of Africology and African American Studies.

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