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Challenging the future of Black Studies: scholars debate and discover 'profound generation gap' at conference - Faculty Club

Kendra Hamilton (NEW YORK)

While hundreds of Black scholars from across the nation were making plans to converge on New York City last month for what promised to be one of the landmark conferences of the year--"The State of Black Studies: Methodology, Pedagogy and Research,"--the New York Times was announcing yet another crisis for the discipline: the "fearful" implications of the rising numbers of Latinos in the nation's census.

The newspaper's analysis drew nothing but scorn from scholars attending the three-day conference co-sponsored by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and Princeton University.

"We need to look critically at what's happening here," noted Dr. James Turner, professor of African and African American politics and social policy at Cornell University, at the opening plenary. "We need to ask, why is the demographic shift being proposed to us in precise terms of opposition to African Americans? And is that data accurate or is it political?"

His assessment was echoed by fellow panelist Dr. Maulana Karenga, chair of Black Studies at California State University-Long Beach and one of the founding fathers of "Afrocentricity."

"What is this madness, to argue that Latinos are a challenge to us? They are a potential coalition for us," Karenga said.

"Black studies has always included Blacks of the diaspora and on the continent, and some of them were Latino, some of them were Native American, some of them were Afro-Asians. We've already done (the work in this area); it's the European that's not reading," Karenga said, drawing raucous laughter and sustained applause from the standing-room-only crowd.

Spirited exchanges such as this one seemed to point to an inescapable conclusion: Black studies, born from the ferment of the Black power, Black consciousness and Black arts movements of the late '60s and early '70s, has been a resounding success. It's led to a brilliant efflorescence of knowledge about African Americans and the African Diaspora, conferees said. But even more importantly--and the point was made repeatedly throughout the conference--Black studies has established methodologies and pedagogies that have been critical to the establishment and success of a host of "sister" studies: feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, ethnic studies including Latino studies, even "Whiteness" studies.

As Dr. William Strickland, associate professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, noted, "The (White) system did not disseminate that knowledge. (Black studies) created that revolution in knowledge."

But while conferees challenged the notion that Black studies had become "old-fashioned" or even "irrelevant," they were also quite clear that the opportunities created by success also masked significant dangers.

For Dr. Carole Boyce Davies, professor of English and director of African-New World Studies at Florida International University, the most significant occurrence in Black studies in the last year has been "the realization that we are back in the middle of hard-core, old-style racism, from the comments of Trent Lott, to the president's statement in support of the University of Michigan White students, to, ... going further back, the issues with Cornel West."

All of these are related to what many at the conference pointed to as the most serious internal danger to the discipline: the growing disconnect between disciplinary practice in the academy and the people whom Black studies was founded to defend and protect.

"We seem at this point to have lost our initiative and to have lost our ground," Turner said. "On the one hand, we have great measures of success. You can walk into Barnes & Noble, and there is an African American section. Oxford Press, NYU Press, all of them are publishing African American titles. Now, that may not sound like very much to those who are sitting here who have been born within the last 30 years, but I remember when you couldn't get a Black book published; when a Black author couldn't get a book contract.

"So that is success, but at the same time we have done it at great sacrifice," Turner added. "We have jettisoned our position of being conscientious intellectual activists for career mobility in academia."

But while panelists appeared to be able to agree, more or less, on the challenges faced by the discipline, formulating a response to those challenges was a much more controversial area.

Some panelists, for example, raised temperatures in the audience by implying that younger scholars bore the brunt of the blame.

Karenga noted that younger scholars are not supporting the activities of organizations founded to combat the exclusion of African American scholars from traditional disciplinary associations, for example, the National Council of Black Studies (NCBS) and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH).

Turner agreed, noting that younger scholars have "individualized their careers to the point of their maximum weakness. They each come into their offices, shut their doors and have very little to do the community they should be serving. They're trying to negotiate the disciplinary and institutional requirements on their own. They're more susceptible than to being duped or intimidated to go in another direction. That is not the model that the Black studies movement intended to project."

Davies attempted to inject a cautionary note. "One thing is that questions of disciplinarity often carry with them a great deal of bullying. We know sometimes that when certain Black discourses are posed in the academy, they carry with them a very particular kind of imperializing gesture that silences a range of other kind of voices," she said.

But the damage had been done. "I feel like I'm in a time warp," said one younger female scholar in the audience who asked that her name be withheld.

In the days that followed, younger scholars noted in informal conversations that, while they agreed with much that had been raised in the opening plenary, they felt quite alienated by some of the rhetoric that had been deployed. And at least one panelist on the closing plenary, Dr. Tiffany Patterson, associate professor of history at Binghamton University, directly engaged the "old fogeyism" of some senior scholars at the conference.

As Patterson called for a stronger representation of feminist and queer voices in the Black studies paradigm, Patterson drew shouts of laughter and cheers when she said, "And just in case any of you were wondering: Homosexuality exists. Get over it. It is not a White plot!"

Dr. Howard Dodson, director of the Schomburg Center and the guiding spirit behind the conference, noted that many of the exchanges pointed to a "profound generation gap" between the founding generation of Black studies scholars and the up-and-coming cohorts.

"I don't think I was aware of how really alienated the young folk are from the mainstream tradition of the discipline until this conference, and some of the older folk who were there were concerned--I won't say disillusioned, but concerned--that they hadn't been able to forge a common consciousness and common sense of purpose with the young people who were there," Dodson said.

Dodson stressed, however, that "The State of Black Studies" represented not the conclusion but the beginning of a dialogue. The leaders of NCBS and ASALH have both expressed interest in co-sponsoring the next conference, he noted.

Dodson told Black Issues: "The major challenge that the conference put before us is this: How do we find common language and a common framework in which to both transfer or communicate the tradition while simultaneously opening ourselves to the exploration of the new challenges that have emerged in the last decade. I don't claim to know the answer, but the call to the seniors is to learn how to grasp what's going on with some of the youth and to learn from the younger folk. And the call to the young folk, who are pressed or challenged by comments made by older practitioners, is not to get defensive.

"It has to happen in a respectful dialogical fashion, but there was tremendous intellectual vibrancy and soul searching going on (that weekend). I felt that we were beginning to broach some really critical issues," Dodson said.

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