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The Double Bind of Legitimacy: Teaching African-American Studies in the Deep South while neither African nor American

Cécile Coquet-Mokoko

African-American Studies is probably the most politically charged field of study in US academia—because its birth resulted from a five-month strike of the students of San Francisco State University in the 1967-1968 academic year; but also because its very institutionalization questions the possibility and limits of inclusiveness in American higher education. Fabio Rojas defines the discipline as a “counter center” precisely for this reason: it is a space within mainstream institutions that owes its existence to a social movement (Rojas 21, 220-225). As such, it needs to combine its initial commitment to community service and activism for social justice with institutional credibility and an interdisciplinary course offering. This concern for survival, in academic environments where departments and programs must compete for funding and institutional support, often translates into a form of “de-radicalization,” which the famous sociologist St Clair Drake equated with de-politicization.¹

The White philanthropic foundations which financed the birth and survival of the first African-American studies programs and departments did have political objectives for them, which Noliwe Rooks listed comprehensively, based on the findings of a commission which the Institute for Services to Education had published on request of the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1974, five years after their inception:

The commission found that the first and foremost goal of the programs was to provide an understanding of the life, history, and culture of African-Americans, with the hope of providing proof of the contributions, and therefore *worth*, of Black people to *civilization*. The second goal was to include the development of the “tools of inquiry,” and research about the “*Black experience* was, within this context, seen as the goal of Black Studies.” The third most common justification for the program was for the purpose of *social change*, in that the programs sought to provide the tools and

knowledge that would allow students to “*compete favorably in the greater American and International society.*” The fourth common objective was to *promote a Pan-African focus* among people of “African heritage wherever they are found,” and the fifth most cited reason for having Black Studies was to deal with the pervasive nature of *racism in American society.* (116, italics mine)

Forty years later, “Black Studies” has gained momentum thanks to the uniqueness of Temple University’s Afrocentric school of thought, led by Molefi Asante, and accrued legitimacy thanks to the visibility of such eminent scholars as Henry Louis Gates, Jr, Kwame Anthony Appiah, or Cornel West. Still, it remains a contested discipline, as may be seen every time one of these scholars is suspected of “improper” activism or unwillingly finds himself the cause of a controversy over the persistence of racism in America. In the span of forty years, the transnational implications of “Black” in the names of the programs have been made apparent as many morphed into, or were institutionalized as, “Africana Studies,” “African Diaspora Studies,” or “African-American Studies,” to make more or less room for the study of Caribbean, African, or other African-descended cultures that informed or are presently transforming African-American culture. Although these changes reflect a will, or a strategic necessity, to account for multiple perspectives on the “Black experience” in America, it often remains problematic for these institutionalized counter-centers to include non-U.S. approaches to African-American intellectual life, whether these are conveyed by African, European, Latin American, or Australian scholars. The latter typically find themselves teaching African-American courses in History or English departments, which seems a paradoxical strategy for “an intellectual discipline to deconstruct the injustices rooted in a disrespect for cultural differences” (Joyce 9). Likewise, while American scholars abound in conferences held by European-based research organizations like EAAS (European Association for American Studies, founded in 1954) or CAAR (Collegium for Afro-American Research, founded in 1992), where they naturally feel at home, reciprocity is not always found in conferences organized by the National Council for Black Studies.

Black studies programs were created primarily to appease the legitimate discontent of American students who knew that fighting institutional racism implied building an activist community within US academia, to teach the coming generations of African-Americans how to deconstruct practices of discrimination, as well as make themselves heard in the media whenever leadership was needed for the broader community. These US-centered goals are still recognizable in the mission statements of African-American Studies Departments. They remain perfectly legitimate, given the continued urgency of having media-savvy African-American leaders combining activism and scientific rigor like their 19th- and 20th-century forebears.

But the implication is that anyone whose assigned racial identity does not justify a vested interest in promoting social justice and economic integration for African-Americans is irrelevant or even suspicious. In US academia, any scholar who is not visibly African-descended is usually expected to provide a justification for their choice to embrace African-American Studies; their personal legitimacy is constantly gauged by other African American Studies scholars. In Europe, conversely, the scholarly posture implies a profession of “objectivity” purporting to dissociate reason from passion and discourages as un-scientific any personal identification with the subject under study. While teaching at the University of Alabama, I had to negotiate between these two academic cultures during my tenure. This paper will be restricted to my teaching experience, because I understand the instructor’s legitimacy as dependent on his or her ability to build a safe space for dialogue with and between the students, eventually creating a dynamics for the group to learn from its components. This position is rooted in the writings of Paulo Freire, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks.⁴

I will first present my academic background and an overview of the University of Alabama, then offer an ethnographic analysis of my teaching experience in multi-racial and multi-cultural classrooms. Building on the responses of various categories of students to my teaching, I hope to demonstrate the relevance of opening African-American Studies to a wider student body, and possibly a wider pool of instructors, if its professoriate is to contribute in maintaining an intellectual tradition where “knowledge exists to serve the social welfare of Black people and, by extension, humanity as a whole,” by facilitating interracial dialog and reconciliation (Marable 5).

In France, African-American Studies was born in the 1970s, thanks to Michel and Geneviève Fabre, who developed a lifelong passion for African-American contemporary literature (particularly Richard Wright) while writing their doctoral dissertations in Paris during the student upheavals of May 1968.⁵ For these European pioneers and the scholars they inspired in the following 30 years in the universities of Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle and Paris VII-Denis Diderot, the “worth” of African-American literature was self-evident. The experiences of American slaves and their descendants, universalized through literature, were a powerful embodiment of the critique essential to any interrogation of civilizations and a vital tool to deconstruct and fight racism in America and elsewhere.

Having chosen to major in African-American Studies from my teenage years after reading Faulkner’s imitation of an African-American folk sermon in *The Sound and the Fury*, I met with a frustrating beginning when I attempted to offer a translation of the passages in Ebonics into French West Indian Créole. The language was just

gaining legitimacy on the scene of French literary prizes, with Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco*. But my supervisor belittled it as "petit-nègre"—pidgin, unfit for French readers. Working on a dissertation on call-and-response in African-American oratory under the guidance of the Fabres in the 1990s, I have always considered my choice as a personal vocation, which empowered me with the means of my own liberation, leading me to build my family with an African partner and raise our children with a strong Africana focus. In 2008, after fifteen years of teaching African-American Studies in France, I decided to move with my family to the Deep South, to further test my understanding of what it means to be black in America, engage a dialogue with students directly concerned with the historical and sociological dimensions of the material, and see for myself the depth of the change so euphorically celebrated in Europe.

Having always attended racially mixed, international conferences of African-American Studies, I hardly suspected how large diversity issues loomed within US academia. To me, any African-American Studies scholar was necessarily committed to furthering Africana peoples' struggles for empowerment, by studying African-Americans' deconstruction of racism and sexism and African-American civil rights movements. It was also self-evident that subordination processes should be studied from the perspectives of African-American thinkers, as models of agency. An African-American Studies instructor presumably addressed African-Americans, but also others, and strived for racial equality and appreciation of Africana cultures, in the US and worldwide, regardless of their race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, or appearance. I assumed that shared ethical positions trumped phenotypical differences in such a field. I had found this position unproblematic when attending seminars at Harvard's DuBois Institute in 1993-1994; yet I felt my understanding of Blackness in America lacked teaching experience in the South.

Few institutions could offer better insight into the present implications of race in teaching African-American Studies than the University of Alabama, the state's flagship university, a predominantly white institution with a distinctly Southern identity. I was given the opportunity to serve its students as a visiting faculty member, for three semesters, from January 2009 to May 2010. The Obama presidency, hailed by many as the dawn of a post-racial era for America, was just beginning.⁶ I expected to participate in a coalition-building effort across the Deep South's proverbial racial divide.

UA was founded in 1831 on the grounds of a former plantation in Tuscaloosa, then the state capital. Parts of its campus were burned to the ground by Union troops in the last weeks of the Civil War, and it remains famous

in the history of the Civil Rights Movement for Governor Wallace’s stand in the entrance to Fowler Auditorium: on June 11, 1963, he physically obstructed the enrollment of two African-American students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, pledging “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” while facing the Deputy US Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach.

In fall 2010, UA had an enrollment of 30,322 students, including 24,884 undergraduates, 68% of whom were citizens or residents of Alabama and 30% of other states, the remaining 2% being foreign (such as exchange students.) 96.8% of the entire student body were US citizens or permanent residents; only 3.2% were nonresident aliens, representing 76 foreign countries.⁷ With an African-American student population of 12.4% (undergraduates, graduates and professionals all together,) UA is exactly aligned with the 2010 census, which counts a total of 12.6% of the national population identifying as Black or African-American; but it is an unequivocally white institution in both its history and student body, as whites comprise 81% of its student body—compared with 63.7% of the population nationwide and a nearly 50-50 demographic balance between blacks and whites on the scale of Tuscaloosa city itself, as the census figures show.⁸

Over my three semesters at UA, I had a total enrollment of 331 students. The courses were cross-listed as American Studies, Social Work, or English Literature courses, which is typical of African-American Studies as an inter-discipline (see Rojas chapter 6; Davidson and Davidson 283-84). The students I served hailed mostly from Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, in proportions similar to those of the overall undergraduate population, but with a higher representation of international students in each section. The racial makeup of my classes was as follows in Spring 2009:

Race and Ethnicity in America (sophomore level)

Enrollment: 27

50% Euro-American⁹

30% African-American

20% non-Euro-American, including 2 Native American females,¹⁰ 3 Japanese (2 females, 1 male,) 1 (White) British female

Aspirations and Representations of the Black Bourgeoisie
(junior and senior level)

Enrollment: 17

70% African-American

33% Euro-American including 3 females, one of them with Black Dutch ancestry,¹¹ and 2 males

In the summer of 2009, African-American Studies, until then a program within the American Studies Department, became a major in the newly-created Department of Gender and Race Studies (formerly Women's Studies). As an immigrant instructor holding a temporary appointment, I was not privy to the political motives behind the administrators' decision to expand the program into a department at this juncture. I knew some of the Women's Studies professors had objected to the merger of the two disciplines, but eventually complied with the decision of the chair, who had headed for several years both the African-American Studies program and the Women's Studies Department, situated in two distinct buildings. This further institutionalization of African-American studies at UA did not result from any particular student protest but was more probably correlated to UA's diversity policy, and quite possibly to the election context. Until then, the faculty who had taught core African-American Studies courses had done so occasionally, for they belonged to other departments, like most of the African-American Studies professoriate at national level (see Rojas chapter 6). I was all the more grateful to be entrusted with a full teaching load of African-American Studies courses as this represented for me a unique chance to participate in an activist tradition at a potentially historic phase in the evolution of racial relations in the USA, on a history-fraught campus.

The new department's motto was, "Cultivating Scholars, Crossing Borders, Creating Change." "Tradition" being a central concept among UA's Euro-American students, while their African-American peers rather referred to their "heritage," I was eager to see how our department aimed at transforming racial relations. I was given a unique opportunity to assess it, being in charge of the introductory courses to African-American Studies and African-American Literature. This time, the racial makeup of my sections is presented from the vantage point of the African-American majority in each section:

Fall 2009

Social Inequalities in America (junior level)

Enrollment: 15

75% African-American

25% non-African-American, including 2 Latinos (1 male and 1 female,) 1 Euro-American male, 1 (White) German female

Introduction to African-American Literature (sophomore level)

Enrollment: 27

85% African-American

18% non-African-American, including 3 Euro-Americans (2 females and 1 male,) 1 Jamaican (Black) female, and 1 (White) French female

Introduction to African-American Studies (sophomore level)—2 sections

Enrollment: 54 + 17 = 71

90% African-American

10% non-African-American, including 4 Euro-Americans (3 females and 1 male,) 2 Japanese females and 1 Korean female

Spring 2010

Black Nationalisms (senior level)

Enrollment: 26

92% African-American

8% Euro-American (2 males)

Introduction to African-American Literature (sophomore level)—2 sections, capped at 30

Enrollment: 31 + 32 = 63

90% African-American

10% Euro-American (4 males, 2 females)

Introduction to African-American Studies (sophomore level)—1 section, capped at 100

Enrollment: 85

90% African-American

10% non-African-American, including 6 Euro-Americans (4 males and 2 females,) 1 Latina, 1 Japanese female and 1 Yemeni female

To assess my students' perceptions of African-American Studies, I asked them, at midterm and at the end of each term, to explain what they had found most significant about the course, and analyze what it had taught them about US society and the African-American experience today. The following is a qualitative analysis of the comments that best represent the atmosphere of class debates and provide the most insight into the students' perception of the usefulness of African-American Studies classes, based on the students' self-identification.

Most of the **Euro-American students** had enrolled with no specific expectations. They had usually assumed it would be an "easy class" where they could "have fun" while learning about Black culture within American culture. Such responses were given mostly by freshmen, usually males, who were unsure about their future majors and were learning how to navigate the campus. This finding corroborates Joyce's analysis that "the White American student who thinks that he or she is politically correct... walks into a class on African-American literature and thinks that his or her mere presence means that he or she knows Black people and that he or she can easily understand the subjects discussed" (Joyce 7). Although I was not always successful in helping these students

challenge their assumptions, come to terms with their uneasiness, and realize the continued urgency of the material we studied, I certainly encountered less antagonism from them at first than if I had been immediately identified as either a Northerner or an African-descended person.

The most perceptive analyses of “Introduction to African-American Studies” overwhelmingly came from female sophomores or juniors, with a deeply-rooted interest in history or gender studies. One of them wrote about finally understanding what she labeled “black rage,” a feeling of being unacknowledged by the larger society, which she had witnessed before among African-American peers but could not relate to, as a self-described young woman of “poor white” Alabamian descent. As a psychology and gender studies major, she found it crucial to deconstruct the legacy of slavery in its implications on both black and white Southerners to promote a deeper understanding between the races, beginning with relations on campus.

This comment was frequently echoed by other Euro-American students in papers and class discussions, when the participants knew one another well enough for the minority non-African-American students to voice their feelings in ways they knew not to be offensive to their peers. This mirrored the expressions of frustration of the African-American students who had signed up for the course over the two semesters: when surveyed by a senior student for his final project about the relevance of teaching African-American Studies to a wider student population, he found 70% sharing the opinion that “Introduction to African-American Studies” should be listed as a core course, for “it really is American history.” This legitimate concern echoes Bayard Rustin’s contention that the study of Black people should not be marginalized, but belong in every college syllabus (Rustin 3-7; Levine 11, 249).

While participating in the growth of the Department, I also painfully shared this feeling that African-American Studies was considered as minor due to its non-traditional identity, as opposed to “white” departments where “serious” subjects were explored and taught and which were only supposed to come to us for elective courses enhancing their diverse image. African-American Studies at UA had not been born in anger and protest, but it still bore the birthmark of a segregated mindset, as was evidenced by the contempt of staff members of other departments who dealt with me when I needed assistance with opening a classroom for my students, or with giving a Euro-American student an override to enroll in an African-American Literature class (the officer asked the student what she expected to learn in such a course). The African-American students signing up were obviously doing their best to escape the label of the “angry black person” on a daily basis; they expected us to help them prove that there

was more to blackness than constant rage, and as they found in class some relief from this constant battle, they logically expressed the wish that “Introduction to African-American Studies” be a requirement for all.

Reflecting a similar concern about better communication between the two cultures within the same generation, a Euro-American female junior emphasized the need for more students to be helped deconstruct widespread stereotypes about “the dysfunctional black family,” hip hop culture, and Ebonics. She referred to the caricatures of African-Americans popularized by media outlets like BET, which portrayed “all Black males as thugs and irresponsible fathers” and females as “ghetto,” dressed in flashy, scant garments, “loud, incapable of restraint.” Her essay reflected the numerous class debates when female African-American students brought up the racism in strangers’ or classmates’ lauding them for being “so articulate” or “pretty for a black girl,” and had to prove their point with male Euro-American students who deemed “exaggerated” and “oversensitive” their responses to what they persisted in seeing as compliments.¹²

The same student made a point, in her final oral presentation, of critiquing the “video vixens” as participating in the gendered representations of “pathological blackness”—the assumption, since the Moynihan report of 1965, that African-American families lack the structure of Euro-American families and are disproportionately dysfunctional.¹³ This led the class, across the color line, into an introspective debate on how their own attitudes as consumers of hip hop videos could be construed as reinforcing patterns of misrepresentation and possible alienation, both in gender relations within the community and in the larger society, as well as providing ready-made excuses for job discrimination. In several instances, the presence of Euro-American classmates actually led the African-American majority of the class to reflect on how images of, and discourses on, their culture and presumed social backgrounds could go beyond the seemingly harmless purpose of entertainment and affect their ability to communicate about themselves as individuals, thus leading them to see their role in the identification process as less passive than they expected.

The attitudes of Euro-Americans in class were also instructive insofar as they implicitly behaved as guests, listening silently to passionate conversations about the better representation of African-Americans. The reversal of the familiar balance of powers in the classroom was perceived by nearly all as a beneficial experience, although African-American students tended to define it as offering them relief from the stress felt as “the only black student in a sea of white faces,” which they said dominated the rest of their classes. Euro-American students, on the other

hand, overwhelmingly defined the experience as “interesting,” admittedly a much less enthusiastic term. When, in groups with a 75% African-American enrollment or over, the lively conversation in the classroom was interrupted by a student curious to know “what the white people in the room think about this,” the embarrassment was palpable and the students who responded disclaimed to represent their community, which suggests that they had become aware of the ways in which racial expectations could modify self-perception.

Finally, the most far-reaching point raised by Euro-American students was their confronting the deceptively unifying vacuum behind the notion of “whiteness,” to which they had never been introduced before. Alabama, being traditionally a state with scant migrant population from Europe (the local exception being the families of German engineers expatriated to the nearby Mercedes-Benz plant, whose children were too young for college,) or from Latin America, its citizens have had few opportunities of defining others otherwise than along racial and sectional lines: most people are either black or white, Southerners or “Yankees.” These are the distinctions that matter and define interpersonal contacts on a daily basis. Immigrants, being presumed to be Latin@s, are viewed with overall suspicion, but their presence is not significant enough for their identity to have a clear place in the local racial landscape.

When asked to reflect on the ways their race and ethnicity had shaped their perceptions of American identity, Euro-American students were typically at a loss to answer. Being recognized as white seemed so inextricably tied to normalcy that many answered, “I’m a white Southerner. There is nothing to say about that,” as if white Alabamians did not have to routinely disprove a host of stereotypes about their identity. It was as if only visibly non-white individuals could be studied as culturally specific. It was clearly difficult for both male and female students to come to terms with the cultural indistinctiveness of Whiteness in the US—in stark contrast with the conflation of the notions of “race” and “heritage” in the answers of their African-American peers—and also with a form of shame associated with representations of Alabamians as “poor white trash” or racist “crackers.”

In this respect, the passionate class debates about Old South Week as a time-hallowed, sacred tradition seemed to reflect the need for Euro-American students to discuss the legacy of slavery with more serenity, without feeling compelled to defend one side or the other—as if the national conversation, eschewed by the military occupation of former Confederate states from 1865 to 1877, could find a form of closure in an attempt at honest dialog within African-American Studies classes.¹⁴ But the ratio of African-Americans to Euro-Americans within the

classroom was certainly essential in reaching the tipping point when individuals would allow themselves to speak, in their words, “out of the box,” instead of feeling obliged to represent their respective communities. In this respect, the “Ethnic and Racial Relations” course, given while African-American Studies was still hosted by the Department of American Studies, tends to demonstrate that the adequate ratio for candid conversations is easier to find when the course is not perceived as primarily belonging to a “white” department.

Conversely, **Latin@ students** evinced feelings of historical and cultural closeness when discussing the African-American experience, past and present. In the 85-student class, one Mexican-American student did an oral presentation on the struggle for desegregation at Washington State University, in which her parents had participated, explaining how Latin@ students had drawn inspiration from their Black peers in southern universities. During another class debate on colorism within the African-American community, she had insisted on the painful privilege her being blue-eyed with straight blond hair entailed for her, as it often estranged her from other Latin@ students on campus who assumed she was not fluent in Spanish. I knew from personal conversations with this student how meaningful it was for her to honor this legacy and express her qualms about racial identification and self-perception. But it was difficult for most of the class to consider the similarities between their experiences and hers. Questions from the floor aimed at establishing a difference between the degrees of suffering inflicted by segregation on Hispanic American and African-American students of that period. Some students’ attitudes and non-verbal cues clearly expressed indifference to the struggle she was depicting and analyzing. Significantly, she found an echo among the female students who were light-skinned enough to be mistaken for Latinas—one of them explained someone had put a sticker of Dora the Explorer on the door of her room. She lived in the dorm reserved for international students, where one floor also housed African-American students (for reasons unknown to the students). A Latino student had fewer issues finding benevolent attention in the class on “Social Inequalities,” when he connected his research on single-headed families’ strategies for education with his experience as the younger child of a single mother, educated by his sister while their mother worked round the clock.

Overall, it was often challenging for Latin@ students to stand on an equal footing with African-American majorities in the classroom. In debates without any Latin@ presence, anti-immigrant sentiment was sometimes freely voiced by African-American and Euro-American students (“You know, I’m from Texas, and there are so many of them back home!” “We need to keep jobs for Americans, particularly African-Americans, instead of

letting immigrants take them. We don't need immigrants here!") Although all the Latin@ students I taught had been born and raised in the US, it seems safe to posit that they were cognizant of this feeling and came to class without expecting too much empathy from fellow minority students who, they assumed, were already too busy fighting their own battles for recognition.

The perception of the significance of African-American Studies among **international students** also demonstrates the importance of the dialogue. Japanese students especially were keen on writing about their shock on seeing the racial division of labor on campus ("here, it is only black people serving the others, and it starts from the airport") and hearing racial epithets loosely used by Euro-American students of either gender in casual conversations. They had not realized, until witnessing class debates in African-American Studies courses, how much of a taboo it was to discuss racial relations in Alabama. This led them to reflect on their own self-perceptions and their historical relations with the Korean minority in Japan: "Here, people do not really talk about race, but it is everywhere. They sit separately at the cafeteria. They use the word 'nigger' all the time. In Japan also, we have prejudices towards the Koreans, and even if my best friend is a Korean born in Japan, from parents born in Japan, he will never be Japanese. I will return to my country feeling secretly proud to be pure Japanese." This candid conclusion on ethnic privilege was far from critical deconstruction. But it showed how effectively African-American Studies offers a model of analysis for racial relations in other societies by encouraging foreign students to experience a different vantage point on familiar racial configurations.

Finally, a majority of **African-American students** admitted signing up for "Introduction to African-American Studies" with vague expectations of being taught, on the mode of victimization, about a heritage they thought they knew everything about: "I expected an elderly lady with dreadlocks to come and tell me about how much we had suffered at the hands of white people. When you entered the classroom, my mind closed completely and I decided not to give this course a chance," a female sophomore wrote in her essay. In front of an understandable reaction of suspicion, there was no other choice than to start each first class session with an explanation for my presence in their class, as a scholar and as a person. Legitimacy was only gained when the students could trust the instructor as someone "real," in their own terms, which tends to indicate how particularly important the interpersonal dimension and the manifestation of care may be whenever the instructor's looks do not match expectations (see Davidson and Davidson 290-93).

One of the most consistent findings was the students' expression of surprise and anger on discovering how little they knew about African-American history, particularly the Middle Passage, slavery, and the ambiguity of the Founding Fathers or Thomas Jefferson regarding the immorality of holding slaves. Many felt it was abnormal to have to go to college to be taught such basic facts of American history, stressing the importance of countering the assumption "that all slaves were stupid and ignorant and content with their lot," as well as discovering that "our ancestors built the wealth of this nation, too."

Learning from a foreign instructor about slave uprisings, the exploitation of the Congolese by the Belgian King Leopold, or the writings of Frantz Fanon, added insult to injury, as many daringly vented in their essays: "It makes me angry that I wasn't taught all these things about our Founding Fathers, slave resistance, and the oppression suffered by Africans, until I was in college. And to have it taught by a French lady at that! No offence meant, but this should have been taught in high school." However, having pride in their ancestors instilled by a non-African-American instructor was an unexpected, if not formerly unthinkable, experience, which made them also reflect on what the concepts of whiteness and blackness actually meant from one person to the next: "When I was in high school, I was the only black student in the class and whenever slavery came up, the (white) teacher always carefully skirted the question. She avoided looking at me, as if I was going to jump in the air and kill somebody. I think we need to discuss this history honestly." As Paul Gilroy insists in *Darker than Blue* (2011), it seems essential for African-American Studies instructors to expand the way they teach and perform blackness, so that students may gain awareness of the diversity of racial experiences, which made empowerment and public recognition possible for earlier generations of African-Americans.

Yet the most evident finding provided by African-American students' behavior in class was their pressing need to use this space to create wider forums for community discussions. Even in large classrooms with an attendance of 85 enrollees, students quickly manifested an urge to discuss in oral presentations, leading to class discussions, the political issues they usually debated in safe circles: loss of community solidarity, lack of sexual education in families and schools, colorism and the difficulty to "go natural" (i.e., for a woman to leave her hair natural, un-permed), classism and mutual oppression within the community, sexual politics and policing, or discrimination in the workplace. Beyond the need to vent pent-up frustration, these debates ultimately allowed students to build networks among themselves, to solve some of the pressing problems they fought in isolation.

By the end of each semester, questions on whether it was appropriate to express anger about discrimination in the presence of the (“white”) instructor for fear of possible retaliation had vanished to such a point that in one class debate, a student from another group who had attended the session passionately blurted out, “This is not a conversation for white people anyway. White people have nothing to do in this conversation.” At times, intra-racial dialog was felt to be so urgent that students needed to appropriate the space entirely.

After three semesters of teaching African-American Studies while neither American nor phenotypically black, what conclusions could be drawn on the attitudes towards African-American Studies of students living in a persistently polarized context?

First, African-American Studies classrooms provide students with a unique safe space, not necessarily akin to a comfort zone, where they can deconstruct personal experience for, and with, others, taking racial and cultural difference into account to eventually reach a common ground of analysis of the personal as inherently political. My experience tends to confirm, as Joyce says, that

[d]espite a history of marginalization within the academy, the interdisciplinary nature of Black Studies prepares students more fully, perhaps, than any other discipline to meet the multifaceted challenges of living in a multicultural world in which cultural differences are increasingly pronounced outside the academy while they are, at the same time, intellectually minimized inside the academy. (Joyce 9)

Then, beyond this space for candid conversation, students could also create bonds across racial lines, strengthened in their resolution to become, as James Baldwin called for, “the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others in order to end the racial nightmare and achieve our country,” (Baldwin, 141) all while not disrupting too much the racial balance on a history-fraught campus. It is not surprising, but still significant, that in a generation often deemed more individualistic than earlier ones, the first priority should be to establish solid connections as a racial community, before opening up to students from other backgrounds. But should this achievement be considered as an end in itself?

In a context where Affirmative Action programs are jeopardized but campuses are becoming increasingly multicultural, African-American Studies is still put to task to demonstrate its expediency and legitimacy. Some see a threat in the rising presence of non-US black students, who are lumped together with African-American students for the sake of diversity politics, to allow administrators to reach their statistical goals and escape any suspicions

of race-based discrimination in student and faculty recruitment.¹⁵ Rooks even suggested that admissions officers at elite colleges design “a special category of affirmative action for Blacks whose ancestry included enslavement in the United States” (158). Similar concerns are voiced in papers given at annual conferences of the National Council for Black Studies, where the authority of African-American scholars practically silences any expression of cultural difference, leading to a US-centeredness that may ultimately prove harmful in the future. While it is urgent to fight for increased African-American presence on campuses and in the professoriate, I find it deeply disturbing to be repeatedly confronted with the assumption that, because students feel more comfortable with instructors who “look like them,” no one but African-Americans should teach and be taught African-American Studies (Joyce 3-4).

In the wake of the murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, when Americans so clearly need to face their ongoing history of denial, disempowerment of, and brutality towards black people, it seems particularly relevant to have African-American Studies scholars of all origins critique the implications of post-racialism or “post-blackness” and teach cultural competence to those urging African-Americans to “move beyond race.” Diversity is not about diluting the commitment to African-American empowerment, but about precluding the easy disqualification of African-American Studies as what Paul Gilroy labels a “beleaguered held [whose] traditional, vindicationist habits are clearly insufficient” (1-2).

African-American Studies has little to gain by remaining confined to the narrow identity politics and ethnic statistics that empower groups only by rescinding them into ever more closely-defined subgroups. Why not reflect on what makes African-American Studies compelling in Europe or Asia, and recover the pan-African ideal, instead of pitting African-American students (a.k.a. “the descendants”) against other students who may also find interest and nurture in this rich intellectual tradition? I concur with the black British scholar Mark Christian when he writes,

Rightly or wrongly, we are a Pan-African experience. This holds true from Wilmot Blyden’s day up to Marcus Garvey’s; it traversed the 1960s too. Why was Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* so important for the likes of Bobby Seale, Fred Hampton, H. Rap Brown, and Kwame Ture in the 1960s? ... I suggest it was because it spoke to a Pan-African struggle for humanity and freedom from Eurocentric oppression. This is something we should not forget as we consider Black Studies in the twenty-first century and beyond. (163)

African-American Studies is not just legitimate but essential, precisely because it is a unique space for Americans and foreigners, blacks and non-blacks to build on the consistent model provided by African-American thinkers to push the boundaries of their understandings of race, from their respective positions within the power

structure, and find the courage to understand how white privilege—and the privileges of heteronormativity, age, able-bodiedness or citizenship—impede us from understanding the predicament of Othered human beings. Our field still has the crucial mission of transmitting its practical knowledge of race in America, and of the mechanisms of oppression used by all societies as they resort to differences to rationalize hierarchies. If, because of the thorny struggle around affirmative action policies in the USA, African-American Studies is reduced to a niche “for us by us,” leaving non-African Americans out of its scope, it is at risk of losing sight of its universal mission of enlightening consciences—regardless of the bodies coloring them—about the truths and fallacies of race, power, fear, and love.

Notes

1. “The black studies movement was being institutionalized in the sense that it had moved from the conflict phase into adjustment to the existing educational system, with some of its values being accepted by that system. One of these was the concept that an ideal university community would be multi-ethnic, with ethnicity permitted some institutional expression, and with black studies being one of its sanctioned norms. A trade-off was involved. Black studies became depoliticized and deradicalized.” (St Clair Drake, “What Happened to Black Studies?” *New York University Education Quarterly* 10 (3), pp. 9-17).

2. On Afrocentric theory, see Molefi K. Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, Chicago: African-American Images, [1980] 2003; Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 2nd edition, Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1993; Ama Mazama, *L'impératif afrocentrique*, Paris: éditions Ménaibuc, 2003. On the “Harvard effect,” which led to a revival of Black Studies as Afro/African-American Studies in the 1990s, see Rojas, pp. 117-127 and footnotes 3 and 4, p. 237; Robert Harris, Darlene Clark Hine and Nellie McKay, *Three Essays: Black Studies in the United States*, New York: Ford Foundation, 1990. For an overview of the rift between Professors Molefi Kete Asante, Ella Forbes and Joyce Ann Joyce at the African-American Studies Department at Temple, see Bakari Kitwana, “Uncivil War”, *The Village Voice*, July 3, 2001, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-07-03/news/uncivil-war/> retrieved August 22, 2014.

3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, London, New Delhi and Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 30th anniversary edition, [1968] 2000; Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Berkeley: Crossing Press, [1984] 2007; bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994 and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

4. See particularly Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, London, New Delhi and Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 30th anniversary edition, [1968] 2000; Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Berkeley: Crossing Press, [1984] 2007; bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994 and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

5. See Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris and Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry, *Transatlantica 2009: Homage to Michel Fabre*, online Journal of American Studies, <http://transatlantica.revues.org/4232>.

6. I am referring here to then-Senator Barack Obama’s keynote address at the July 27, 2004 Democratic National Convention, <http://obamaspeeches.com/002-Keynote-Address-at-the-2004-Democratic-National-Convention-Obama-Speech.htm> as well as his equally-famous “Race Speech” of March 18, 2008 <http://www>.

politico.com/news/stories/0308/9100.html The concept of post-racialism is largely due to historian David Hollinger's essay, *Post-Ethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, (New York: Basic Books, 1995), in which he advocated cosmopolitanism and choosing, instead of being ascribed, one's ethnic identity, as a way to heal America's racial divisions. Critics of the political implications of post-racialism expressed their views early after the first election of President Obama. See for instance Shelby Steele, "Obama's Post-Racial Promise", *The Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 2008 <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/opinionla/la-oe-steele5-2008nov05-story.html#page=1>. For a critique of the germane concept of post-Blackness, coined in the 1990s and theorized by the cultural critic Touré in his essay *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to be Black Now*, New York: Free Press, 2011, where he pleaded for the right of young African-Americans to define their identities on their own terms, see Randall Kennedy, "The Fallacies of Post-Blackness", *The Root*, August 11, 2011 http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2011/08/whos_afraid_of_postblackness_tours_postblackness_theory.html.

7. <http://oira.ua.edu/d/content/glance/2010-glance-total-enrollment>.

8. In 2010, "T-town," as it is nicknamed by residents and students, was home to 90,468 inhabitants according to Census bureau estimates. Its racial makeup was 53.8% white, 41.5% black or African-American, 3% Hispanic or Latino of any race, 1.8% Asian, 1.1% from two or more races (a testimony to the reluctance of the population to identify as multiracial, though most African-Americans, as in the rest of the country, have traceable Native American and Euro-American ancestry,) and 0.16% Native American (as a consequence of the harshness of the Indian Removal policy in the 1830s, which left only a small Muscogee community surviving on a reservation northeast of Mobile, closer to the Gulf of Mexico.) <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/01/0177256.html>.

9. I use the term, "Euro-American" rather than "white" to distinguish between students (or faculty like myself) who do not necessarily consider racial identification as defining them as adequately as national identity, and Americans having predominantly European ancestry, whether they feel a connection to their European origins or not. I describe as "white" or "black" students from European countries or the West Indies, to account for the way they were identified by the rest of the group, prior to any self-presentation. The Jamaican student objected to being considered as "black in the American sense of the term," as she was "proud to be a Jamaican and nothing but Jamaican," insisting that Jamaican-ness trumped race and brought a feeling of unity among Jamaicans which could not be found in Alabama.

10. Both students felt the need to clarify their ancestry for the group in the course of the semester, because neither could be phenotypically identified as Native American, but each had kept deep ties with this part of her culture.

11. As in the case of the Native-American students mentioned above, this student knew that the rest of the group identified her as white. Later in the semester, she explained to the class that her Alabamian mother was refused entrance at restaurants where her Irish-American fiancé took her, "because of her tan and braided hair."

12. In facilitating such discussions, I could not but conclude, like Joyce Ann Joyce, that "slavery and racism have done the White American far more psychological damage than society addresses" (2).

13. See Daniel P. Moynihan's *The Case for National Action: The Negro Family*, as analyzed by Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry in *De l'esclave au Président: Discours sur les familles noires aux Etats-Unis* (110-124, 169).

14. The tradition of Old South Week is not specific to UA, but is or was also honored in other Alabama universities such as UA's rival Auburn (until 1992) and several Southern campuses in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Taking place in April, just before the end of the Spring term, it consisted in students of the Kappa Alpha fraternity donning Confederate officer uniforms and picking up their girlfriends dressed as Southern Belles on Sorority Row, to parade on campus together, often flying Confederate flags at the backs of their trucks. This tradition was interrupted after Spring 2009 when the (historically and predominantly) African-American sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) sued the UA chapter of Kappa Alpha for pausing for fifteen minutes in their trucks in front of their house (the only black house on Sorority Row) and yelling racial epithets at the members of the

sorority, who were celebrating their 35th anniversary. The incident and lawsuit immediately hit the headlines of UA's official newspaper, *The Crimson White*. One year later, its ripple effects at UA and at the University of Georgia were reported in university newspapers. See Amanda Peterson, "KA Cancels 2010 Old South Parade," Katherine Kington, "Kappa Alpha's 'Old South Week' bans Confederate Uniforms," and Adina Solomon, *redandblack.com* (April 28, 2010).

I was on campus during this last "traditional" parade. Although I did not witness it, my African-American students who belonged to AKA spoke extensively of fraternity boys being drunk on that day and having routinely thrown cotton balls, toilet paper, or dirty laundry on the lawn of their house in the past during such parades. The debate I am mentioning took place on the initiative of an African-American female student at the end of a session of the "Race and Ethnicity" course. During the discussion, one Euro-American male student, whose father belonged to the North Carolina chapter of Kappa Alpha and who had defended Old South Week as a "tradition" meant to honor the memories of the founders of the fraternity who were Civil War veterans, left the classroom slamming the door.

15. "To be sure, the subtext for the concerns about ethnic diversity within and among black people is the shift in affirmative action efforts away from a desire to promote racial justice specifically for African Americans, and toward the amorphous benefits of 'racial diversity' on campus" (Rooks 169).

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