

# Black Studies and the Democratization of American Higher Education: An Interview with Charles P. Henry

by

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Charles P. Henry (cphentry@berkeley.edu) is Professor Emeritus of African American Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. In 1994, President Clinton appointed him to the National Council on the Humanities for a six-year term, he is a past president of the National Council for Black Studies, and author/editor of eight books and more than 80 articles and reviews on Black politics, public policy, and human rights. Before joining the University of California at Berkeley in 1981, he taught at Denison University and Howard University. He was chair of the board of directors of Amnesty International U.S.A. from 1986 to 1988 and is a former NEH Post-doctoral Fellow and American Political Science Association Congressional Fellow. In 1994-95 he served as an office director in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor at the U.S. Department of State. Professor Henry was Distinguished Fulbright Chair in

American History and Politics at the University of Bologna, Italy for the Spring semester of 2003. In the fall of 2006, he was one of the first two Fulbright-Tocqueville Distinguished Chairs in France teaching at the University of Tours. He holds the Chancellor's Award for Advancing Institutional Excellence in April 2008, and a doctorate in Political Science from the University of Chicago. His recent publications include *The Obama Phenomenon: Toward a Multiracial Democracy*, co-editor (University of Illinois Press, 2011), *Long Overdue: The Politics of Racial Reparations*, (New York University Press, 2007), and *Foreign Policy and the Black (Inter)national Interest*, editor (State University of New York Press, 2000).

**IMZ:** Thank you for this interview, there are many discussions in Black Studies (African American Studies, African Diaspora Studies, Africana Studies, Africology, Afro-American Studies, Pan African Studies, etc.), and your voice in “*Black Studies and the Democratization of American Higher Education*” is indeed a significant contribution. When I read the title of your book, I asked myself, ‘has Black Studies democratized American higher education’ when the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* has reported on college campus racial incidents on its website that for the last two decades, there were an average of about fifty incidents a year?

Is my hesitation warranted, considering that Black Studies has been in a constant battle since its formal birth, to the recent formation (2014-2017) of the California State University Task Force on the Advancement of Ethnic Studies, sparked by an initiative launched by the Department of Africana Studies at California State University at Long Beach, focused on the status, state, sustainability, development and future of ethnic studies in the California State University system (twenty-three campuses), and around the country?

**CPH:** You are right. Black Studies always seems to be in a crisis—especially if you read “The Chronicle for Higher Education.” However, I would argue that we are now firmly entrenched in the academy but it takes continual vigilance. The first decade or so university officials would ask me how long they thought Black Studies would be necessary. They no longer ask that question. Incidentally, I wanted the title to be “Non-negotiable Demands” but the publisher insisted on using the subtitle.

**IMZ:** Your first chapter of the book was interesting in that it provided an autobiographical and historical contextualization, which reminded me of *In The Vineyard: Working In African American Studies* by Perry A. Hall, which provided a personal reflection with an analysis of the development of Black Studies to recount the political, cultural, and intellectual issues that helped to shape the discipline. However, he didn’t begin with notes on a 1968 house party that featured ‘Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud’ by James Brown, the ‘unofficial anthem’ of the Black Power movement (a great intro to the book). Overall, do you think it is important that those in the beginnings of Black Studies, also tell their stories, and if so why?

**CPH:** I was encouraged by a couple of readers of an early draft chapter to maintain the personal focus. In fact, I decided to write the book when I read one of the more recent books on Black Studies written by a younger scholar. Some of the basic information was in error and I decided that those who were there at the beginning needed to write their history. I have encouraged other scholars of my generation to tell their story or someone else will. I have also told my classes that biography and autobiography or essential elements of a Black Studies education.

**IMZ:** Continuing, perhaps to the surprise of many, in the 1930s, you wrote that academic apartheid allowed Howard University to organize the “... greatest group of Black scholars ever employed on one campus ...” (p.25). Today, is there a place that can perhaps be compared to what they had at Howard University in the 1930, especially in reference to Black Studies?

**CPH:** I can't think of a university today that has the range and excellence of that early group at Howard. Unfortunately no HBCU today has the resources to attract such a cadre of talent.

**IMZ:** In the evolution of Black Studies, you mention the 1968 "Black University" conference at Howard University, and the 1967 "Black Studies in the University" conference at Yale University, with the latter representing the "... center of American higher education" and the former being the center of Black education, similar conferences, but with different expectations and outcomes. Such an assessment is interesting, because today, Yale has an interdisciplinary structure which includes a joint Ph.D. in African American Studies with a participating joint department or program, whereas Howard has a basic undergraduate department of Afro-American Studies, also within an interdisciplinary paradigm, but no graduate unit. It seems that the "Black University" idea fell flat at Howard, with no special resources devoted to African American Studies or Afro-American Studies as it is defined at Howard. Does this situation point to a failure of conviction or perhaps a failure to establish an internal cadre, before declaring a pedagogical position?

**CPH:** As you know, HBCU's have historically had conservative administrations and Howard in particular has walked a tightrope given its dependence on funding by Congress. Those politics combined with the fact that students felt more comfortable culturally at HBCUs meant that the urgency for Black Studies was not as great as at newly integrated HWCUs. I did want to point out, however, that Howard was talking about these issues since the Yale conference is often cited but Howard is overlooked.

**IMZ:** Following the sequence in your book, in chapter three you mention the tricky terrain Black Studies had to walk in regards to structure, location, ideology, and autonomy, a walk process I agree with. However, the example of the Institute of the Black World in the historical matrix of Black Studies seemed to be an exception to the rule in that its structure, ideology and quest for autonomy was outside the political structures of academe. As Maulana Karenga says "recue me if I am wrong," but I don't see the example of the Institute of the Black World as a unit within the academy, grappling with and challenging the epistemological domains of Eurocentric tradition and curricula. Is such an assessment correct, if so, why; and if not, why not?

**CPH:** I think we are in agreement on this point. I mention that IBW had hoped to work with the support of Atlanta University but that proved impossible which then led to its attempt to work with the King Center. The basic point being that it proved impossible to sustain an adequately funded, independent Black Studies research institute outside a university.

**IMZ:** Your review of Black Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, Los Angeles and Santa Barbara seem to highlight the ongoing complexity of the discipline, and the question of an interdisciplinary focus, in contrast to building the contours of a discipline within the structures of higher education in the U.S.

And in this light, you write that the department focus at Berkeley appeared more successful than the research center structures at UCLA and U.C. Santa Barbara because it permitted a few joint appointments, and it was able to attract and help a cadre of respected scholars who were content with a sole appointment in African American Studies, in addition to connecting with others throughout the campus (p.87). However, when we look at the 'Ivy League' schools like Harvard, Yale and Princeton, they have a wholesale lock on selecting faculty from almost any department (Art and Archaeology, Art, Comparative Literature, English, Government, History, Psychology, Religion, Romance Languages, Sociology, etc.) on campus, and surprisingly, for Princeton, it was not until 2015 that Department of African American Studies received academic department status. Do you think such a configuration at the 'Ivy League' is helpful in the overall mission of Black Studies, if so, why; and if not, why not?

**CPH:** I think the Ivy League proves my point, that a viable Black Studies must rest on a department structure. They came late to the game but now seem to be doing well. I think campus politics and the reputation of the individual scholar determine whether joint appointments work or not.,

**IMZ:** Thank you for your chapter on the National Council for Black Studies; a critical history is there, especially around the question of accreditation and links in and to the off campus Black community, two areas of Black Studies that have not been realized by the members of the association (and their friends). How do you think we can overcome these challenges in moving Black Studies forward?

**CPH:** I think it is absolutely crucial that scholars in Black Studies support NCBS. I am sure that NCBS is aware of the need to continually address its links to the Black community, however, I have not been to an NCBS meeting since I retired and cannot address their current efforts.

**IMZ:** In your chapter on *The Black Scholar*, you outline the particulars of its evolution and the personalities and activities involved which worked to blend an activist (Angola and Cuba interest/support, etc.) and scholarly ethos, a process few journals at the time, and even today do not attempt. Such a stance is unique, and to unapologetically state that it is the first journal of Black Studies and research, designed to clear space for academics, activists, artists, and political leaders is/was commendable (I remember buying the early copies of the journal in downtown Oakland, California as a youth, and reading the articles, speeches and interviews from leading icons in the African world community).

In 2012, the journal was re-launched/revitalized with new editors, new boards, and a peer reviewed format so that Black Studies and its sub-fields can have an ongoing legitimate space for scholarly/intellectual inquiry in Black thinking, a position I support and encourage others to support. What are some of your findings/thoughts on the state/status of Black journals at present, and how do you see them in the future, in relationship to Black Studies?

**CPH:** Black Studies journals are a crucial part of the institutionalization of Black Studies. Publishing will continue to be crucial to tenure for the foreseeable future, however, I think we need to explore online publishing and digitize our past and current work. I applaud the efforts of Abdul Alkalimat to move us in that direction.

**IMZ:** As I read your book, I was wondering, how do you define ‘Afrocentrism’, because it did not seem to define or describe what I know about African-centered theory, scholarship or activities?

I ask this in light of my experience at UCLA (1992-2006) wherein some students (now Ph.D. academics via UCLA, Harvard, etc.) were told to disassociate themselves from African-centered theory, scholarship or activities. Thus, the condemnation was so great that students found the Center for African American Studies library (Ralph J. Bunche Library and Media Center) as a safe space to express their thoughts and ideas on Afrocentricity, and the objectives of the Afrocentric paradigm.

**CPH:** I tend to use Asante’s definition of Afrocentrism. It is ironic that students at UCLA have disassociated themselves from the term given Asante’s past history there. Terms like Afrocentricity have picked up a lot of baggage over the years that young scholars are choosing to avoid but it is up to them to describe the methodologies and approaches they are using.

**IMZ:** You mention your belief that Black Studies and other freedom movements have been working on a quasi-semi democratic cultural pluralism (p.242). Can you define or give an example of this form of ‘democratic cultural pluralism’ in relationship to Black Studies?

**CPH:** The last chapter of my book is an example of how some of us have attempted to cope with cultural pluralism in our academic work. It has been a challenge to incorporate perspectives from Asian American Studies and Latino Studies, for example, but I think younger scholars are more comfortable with it.

**IMZ:** Towards the end of your book (p.244), you write that what remains for Black Studies is to ‘work toward a more nuanced and critical multiculturalism that can see beyond a particular time and place but refuse to universalize its perspective’. How can that be implemented in Black Studies, and why is it important?

**CPH:** Black Studies is relatively new and subject to constant attack which makes it difficult to be critical without feeling you are giving ammunition to the enemy. That said, the discipline with not advance without the ability to look at ourselves critically. That criticism needs to be constructive and we must continually support perspectives that might challenge our own.

**IMZ:** General modern American history plays a major role in the articulation in Black Studies, like the Watts uprising of 1966, the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 or the rise of the Black Panther Party in 1966. Today, what ideas or movements do you think influence the way Black Studies is understood and taught in higher education in the U.S.?

**CPH:** Black Lives Matter was just unfolding as I retired so I have not had the opportunity to talk with students about it or see it incorporated into curriculum. Obviously Trump's overt White nationalism offers another teachable moment but also another chance to organize.

**IMZ:** Thank you for this interview. Is there any additional content you would like to add before we conclude, and if so, please share it?

**CPH:** I appreciate your interest in my work and the opportunity to share some additional perspective.

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