

Controversial Blackness: The Historical Development & Future Trajectory of African American Studies

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The election of Barack Obama as president of the United States has prompted some observers to assert that the nation has overcome its history of white supremacy and moved into a “post-racial” era, making continued attention to race and racism passé and unnecessary. Radio and television host Tavis Smiley posed this provocation to his guests in a 2009 radio special on the fortieth anniversary of African American studies in American colleges and universities. He asked, is African American studies still necessary in the age of Obama? Eddie Glaude, Elizabeth Alexander, Greg Carr, and Tricia Rose – chairs of African American studies departments at, respectively, Princeton University, Yale University, Howard University, and Brown University¹ – each articulated important themes in the intellectual tradition of African American studies. Thus, their discussion is a useful lens through which to explore key themes in the historical development and future trajectory of the field.

Eddie Glaude and Greg Carr captured two truths about the history of African American studies. Glaude noted its origin in black student activism of the 1960s. The upsurge of campus activism in 1968 and 1969 was a critical component of the broader black freedom struggle. In contrast to the media-driven notion that Black Power was merely a slogan lacking concrete application, black college students successfully turned the concept into a genuine social movement. On some campuses,

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the students emphasized the black college graduate's responsibility to serve black communities. They saw black studies as a means of generating leaders for, and sharing intellectual resources with, neighboring black communities. Even more, they envisioned black studies as a means of training black students to one day return to, and help enact the self-determination of, their communities. But the black student movement also aimed to affect campus politics. On most campuses, the push for curricular transformation – alongside the fights for open admissions, affirmative action, black cultural centers, and black faculty, coaches, and advisers – was part of an intentional effort to redefine the terms of integration: away from assimilation into a Eurocentric institution and toward the restructuring of that institution and its mission. Students won many victories and launched major changes in campus culture, opportunity structures, and intellectual production, notwithstanding continued resistance and challenges.

Greg Carr offers a more critical interpretation of this history. African American studies, he notes, was “a concession” that began as “crisis management.”² Today, it bears remembering that in 1969, the majority of white academics and administrators doubted the scholarly gravitas of African American studies and viewed black studies as a means to appease student discontent. African American studies began its modern career in a context of insurgency and turmoil, and its advocates continually had to fight for resources and support. Carr argues that the real history of African American studies, as a serious, respected endeavor, lies in historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and other black-controlled spaces, such as Atlanta's Institute of the Black World, an activist think tank of the 1970s. Indeed, HBCUs employed the schol-

ars who wrote pioneering studies of black life, namely, giants such as intellectual leader W.E.B. Du Bois, political scientist Ralph Bunche, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, and philosopher and educator Alain Locke. This intellectual tradition is at the heart of the black studies project. Moreover, Carter G. Woodson's Association for the Study of African American Life and History, founded in 1915, exemplifies the long history and autonomy of Africana intellectual life.

Still, this genealogy is contradictory and complex. A tidal wave of protest swept through HBCUs in the 1960s and 1970s. The outcry was inspired by a range of student grievances, most notably, criticism of white financial and administrative control, excessive regulation of student life, excessive discipline, inferior facilities and faculty, and outmoded or Eurocentric curricula. “Without question, the Black Power-Black Consciousness movement has been felt in the South,” wrote political scientist and activist Charles Hamilton, formerly a professor at Tuskegee Institute (now University); its biggest manifestation was the quest for a “Black University,”³ he said. Hamilton first articulated the concept of a black university in a 1967 speech on “The Place of the Black College in the Human Rights Struggle.” He called on black colleges to reject the white middle-class character imposed on them by white funders and to redefine their missions to provide greater aid and assistance to black communities. Later published in the *Negro Digest*, Hamilton's article spawned a yearly tradition of devoting an entire issue of the *Negro Digest* (later the *Black World*) to the idea of a black university.

According to Hamilton, the mission of the black university was to develop a distinctive black ethos; to prepare students

to help solve problems in poor black communities; and to offer a new curriculum, one that was relevant to contemporary needs but that also required a course in ancient African civilizations. "I am talking modernization," Hamilton asserted. "I propose a black college that would *deliberately* strive to inculcate a sense of racial *pride* and *anger* and *concern* in its students." The ideas in his essay illustrate the emerging view that the black intelligentsia was a relatively untapped and potentially radical leadership resource for the black liberation movement. "We need," Hamilton declared, "militant leadership which the church is not providing, unions are not providing and liberal groups are not providing. . . . I propose a black college that would be a felt, dominant force in the community in which it exists. A college which would use its accumulated intellectual knowledge and economic resources to bring about desired changes in race relations in the community." It would dispense with "irrelevant PhDs," he wrote, and "recruit freedom fighters and graduate freedom fighters."⁴

Given that schools such as Howard and the Atlanta University Center had been home to pioneers in black scholarship, what provoked the charge of Eurocentrism? Darwin T. Turner, dean of the graduate school at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, argued that the academic turn away from blackness emerged from the optimism spawned by early legal decisions supporting desegregation, the defeat of Fascism, and postwar affluence. Political repression, too, most likely was a factor. "The tendency for black educators to neglect materials related to Afro-American heritage intensified, I believe, during the early 1950s," Turner wrote. The many "indications of opening doors persuaded many blacks to discourage any education

which emphasized the existence of Afro-Americans as a body separate from the rest of America." As a result, "studies of Afro-American history, literature, sociology, economics, and politics were stuffed into the traditional surveys, which were already so overcrowded that important materials must be omitted." He felt that "integrated surveys" were necessary but insufficient "to provide Afro-Americans with the necessary understanding of their culture."⁵

Indeed, in 1968, several members of Howard's board of trustees "were shocked that courses in Black history, jazz and literature were not presently offered. 'We had many of these things in the 1930s' commented one member."⁶ Students there had taken over a building to press for a department of African American studies. They pressured Howard to identify itself as a black university and adopt an explicit mission of serving local black communities.

Black nationalist thought and action in this period were also directed toward transforming black education on white campuses. Much of the impetus to develop black studies came from exposure to the freedom schools of the Southern (and Northern) civil rights movement. Activists had come to view the entire nation's educational system as a contested and profoundly significant space: a means of racial domination, on the one hand, or a path to black empowerment on the other. Thus, as Greg Carr suggests, administrators may have viewed the introduction of black studies courses as "crisis management," but for students, the turn toward black studies reflected a genuine development in their approach to advancing the cause of black liberation.

Strikingly, this huge achievement of the black power movement immediately faced a crisis. With the students gone, who would design and develop this new,

and quite extensive, national black studies infrastructure? In 1970, less than 1 percent of those with a Ph.D. in the United States were black, and most of these scholars were over age fifty-five.⁷ In a further dilemma, quite a few traditionally trained specialists in African American subjects initially opposed the creation of African American studies as an autonomous unit, or were reluctant to risk their careers on an untested experiment. Many young black scholars probably questioned whether black studies would even last and may have viewed launching a career in the field as too risky. On this reluctance from black scholars, sociologist St. Clair Drake observed, “[T]hey want the security and prestige of being in a traditional department. Black Studies might be a fad, and they’d be left out in the cold.”⁸ At times, non-academics filled faculty positions; on occasion, immigrant scholars with little connection to the students’ political vision filled positions, generating new tensions and many local debates over the field’s responsibility and mission.

A view quickly took root among many elite academics that creating African American studies programs was smarter than creating departments: the former, by being formally affiliated with other departments, stood a better chance of attracting top scholars. Yet for all the scorn/neglect/resistance heaped on them, departments have defied the recurring predictions of their demise. Most student-founders preferred departmental status, owing to the department’s greater status and independence or, as the students would have put it, its autonomy and control. The more recent development of doctoral programs in African American studies has relied on departmental structures, even inducing Yale to convert its program – once held up as the national exemplar – to a department. Today, African American studies attracts

leading scholars, trains graduate students, and produces influential research, even though faculty still face occasions when they must explain or defend its existence.

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The black studies movement has been marked by intense debates over its academic character. During and after the years of its emergence, black studies was criticized, internally and externally, on two interrelated grounds: that it lacked curricular coherence and that, by not having a single methodology, it failed to meet the definition of a discipline. As a result, many educators in the early black studies movement pursued a two-pronged quest for a standardized curriculum, on the one hand, and an original, authoritative methodology on the other. At the same time, many scholars in the black studies movement questioned whether either of these pursuits was desirable or even attainable. In other words, while some scholars have insisted that African American studies must devise its own unique research methodology, others contend that as a multidiscipline, or interdisciplinary discipline, its strength lies in incorporating multiple, diverse methodologies. In a similar vein, while some have argued for a standardized curriculum, others argue that higher education is better served by dynamism and innovation. I argue that the discipline’s ultimate acceptance in academe (to the extent that it has gained acceptance) has come from the production of influential scholarship and research and the development of new conceptual approaches that have influenced other disciplines. Pioneering scholarship and influential intellectual innovations, rather than standardized pedagogy or methodology, have been the route to influence in American intellectual life.

A tension between authority and freedom animates these debates. As late as

2000, an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reinforced the idea that multiple perspectives and methodologies had retarded the progress of African American studies. The author of an essay on the state of the field criticized the diverse character of African American studies courses at different universities: “The Ohio State class is chronological with a literary bent,” she wrote. “Duke’s take: cultural studies. The Penn course filters everything through a W.E.B. Du Bois lens, and N.Y.U. combines pan-Africanism with urban studies.” Of course, this sampling reflects the range one would find in the departments of history, sociology, or English at these same universities. But the author stresses disarray. “There’s a reason 30 years after the discipline developed that people still wonder whether the black-studies curriculum represents a coherent subject or a smorgasbord,” she concludes. In this view, the discipline’s strengths – “eclectic, expansive, experimental curricula” – are also its weaknesses.⁹

James B. Stewart, a former president of the National Council of Black Studies, shares this anxiety about disarray. In his view, “We do everything – the diaspora, sex, history, language, economics, race.” Yet he seems oblivious to the fact that each of these areas has been vital terrain for research innovation. “We don’t have a paradigm,” he laments. “That is why we don’t make progress.” If achieving this unified paradigm is the measure of progress, then Stewart, judging forty years of African American studies, sees none. Longtime black studies educator Abdul Alkalimat echoes Stewart’s view that “standardization means the discipline exists.”¹⁰ Arthur Lewin, a professor of black and Hispanic studies at Baruch College, agrees that black studies lacks “a coherently stated rationale,” a consequence, in his view, of having

“burst full-blown upon the academic scene a generation ago.” He envisions a “grand theory” that would unify the views of black nationalists and “inclusionists” as well as benefit from the insights of Afrocentrism while moving beyond its ethnocentrism.¹¹

Scholars and teachers influenced by Afrocentricity have been among the most consistent advocates of the need to create a distinctive methodology. For Temple University scholar Molefi Asante, Afrocentricity “is the only way you can approach African American Studies” because it puts ancient African knowledge systems at the center of analysis.¹² For Greg Carr of Howard University, the challenge is to draw on “deep Africana thought,” the traditions of “classical and medieval Africa,” for guidance in enacting positive social change for African descendants. A key mission of African American studies, he believes, should be to reconnect “narratives of African identity to the contemporary era.” His department taps “into the long genealogy of Africana experiences” in order to assess how to improve the world. Carr distinguishes this mission from the mission of African American studies on other campuses. “We’re not trying to explain blackness for white people” or looking at “our contributions to American society.” Rather, the approach at Howard is “an extension of the long arc of Africana intellectual work.”¹³ The inclination to look for insights in the precolonial African past, rejecting European modernity and thereby hoping to escape or resolve the legacies of colonialism and enslavement, is fundamental to the approach that leading architects of Afrocentricity have taken. Indeed, for Ron Karenga, author of an early black studies textbook and the founder of Kwanzaa, “the fundamental point of departure for African American Studies

or Black Studies is an ongoing dialogue with African culture. That is, continuously asking it questions and seeking from it answers to the fundamental questions of humankind.”¹⁴

Whether proponents of Afrocentricity or a different approach, most scholars in African American studies reject the effort to impose a single methodology, seeing it as unrealistic and stifling. Rhett Jones, cofounder and longtime chair of the department of Africana studies at Brown University, was an early critic of the “one size fits all” approach to the discipline. “In its early years, Black studies wasted considerable human, intellectual, and material resources in battles over finding the master plan for the study of Black people,” he argues. Similarly, he feels that “much energy was also wasted on responding to the charge by America’s Eurocentric, racist disciplines that Black Studies had no methodology of its own. Neither did the Eurocentrists. And they still don’t.” He points out, “Historians are no more agreed on methodology or theory than are anthropologists ... sociologists or philosophers.”¹⁵ In contrast to those who see pluralism in black studies as a weakness, Jones believes that this element was crucial to the development and staying power of the field. Pluralism was “a credit to black studies,” he observes, as “its founders realized there could be no master plan as to how the discipline should serve black Americans.”¹⁶ Historian Francille Rusan Wilson similarly resists the effort to impose a single approach. “There’s not one way to be black or to study black people,” she asserts. “The discipline is quite alive,” in her view, “and the differences indicate that.”¹⁷ Political scientist Floyd Hayes concurs, stating, “One must ask whether there should be conformity to a model curriculum and a single theoretical or ideological orientation in African Amer-

ican Studies.” Moreover, Hayes believes it is important to cultivate “a more flexible and innovative atmosphere” so that “African American Studies can continue to grow and develop.”¹⁸

Scholars have endeavored to move beyond the notion that African American studies was merely “additive knowledge” by emphasizing that it constitutes a profound critique of the major disciplines and seeks to transform intellectual life generally in the Western academy. For Eddie Glaude, African American studies is about “pushing the boundaries of knowledge production” and influencing fields of study across the university. African American studies at its best, in Glaude’s view, is “challenging the ways we know the world.” Elizabeth Alexander shares this emphasis on humanistic transformation and regards African American studies as an essential component of “being fully educated.” Tricia Rose’s approach to the question of the field’s focus is in many respects exemplary of dominant trends. She expresses agreement with Greg Carr that an important African intellectual tradition preceded European colonial contact, but in her view, scholars must confront the transformations wrought by processes of enslavement and colonialism. “We are in the west, in the so-called New World,” she contends, and should “examine the circumstances we are in, examine the hybridities that have emerged from it.”¹⁹

The early black studies movement coincided with major anticolonial struggles in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau; struggles against white settler regimes in southern Africa; and a widening African solidarity movement among black American radicals. According to (pioneering scholar of the African diaspora) St. Clair Drake, “[T]he country was deeply mired in the Vietnam War

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but many black youth were much more interested in how the war against Portugal was going in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau than in the war in Vietnam.” In his view, it was critical to understand that the “*modern Black Studies movement emerged within this international context.*”²⁰ Still, a global consciousness in black studies was not simply a product of postwar solidarity struggles. It has shaped black historical writing ever since its origins in the nineteenth century. Black historiography has been both invested in rewriting the Western distortion of African peoples and societies and keenly interested in erecting a powerful counter-discourse to the statelessness, dispersal, subjugation, and dehumanization of Africans in diaspora. W.E.B. Du Bois is most famously associated with this effort, but its practitioners are numerous.²¹

Although the black studies movement is thought of as resolutely U.S.-based, many of its early scholars tried to persuade universities and funders to connect formally the study of continental Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. There was widespread agreement that the typical American curriculum had “ignored the African heritage of African Americans, characterizing them as having begun their existence in North America as a *tabula rasa* – blank slates to be imprinted with Euro-American Culture.” This was a difficult battle in part because African studies had been programmatically established after World War II as a result of Cold War pressures to develop knowledge about an area of the world that the United States viewed as part of Soviet strategic designs. These programs, in the words of scholar Robert L. Harris, “had no real link to Black people in the New World.” African studies “became wedded to a modernization theory that measured African societies by Western standards. African history, culture and poli-

tics were explored more within the context of the colonial powers than with any attention to African cultural continuities in the Western hemisphere.” Black American intellectuals had long resisted this “compartmentalization of knowledge about Black people.”²²

Administrators initially sought to limit the scope of African American studies to the United States, but early efforts to include Africa as well as the diaspora in black studies departments and professional organizations ultimately bore fruit. After four decades, it has become increasingly common to encounter departments of African and African American studies or departments of Africana studies, which explicitly take Africa, the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America as their subject. Campuses as diverse as the University of Illinois, Dartmouth College, the University of Minnesota, Duke University, Harvard University, Pennsylvania State University, the University of Kansas, Stanford University, the University of Texas, and Arizona State University join together African and African American studies. Of course, the limitations of budgets and faculty size may interfere with fully realizing the promise of interdisciplinary, truly global coverage. But the crucial point is that the black studies movement ultimately achieved a degree of success in undoing the colonialist compartmentalization of research and knowledge that had insisted on severing African studies from African American studies.

At various junctures in its forty-year history, African American studies has been steeped in a discourse of crisis. In the 1970s, many of the discipline’s units were marked by declining course enrollments, budget cuts, part-time faculty, and continued questioning of their legitimacy and scholarly rigor. The rise of

black women's studies in the 1980s provided an extremely significant counterweight to these trends and proved critical to re-visioning the field. An outpouring of scholarship and literature by and about black women helped revitalize African American studies – and raise its stature. In many respects, this development is ironic, given the patriarchal character of the early black studies movement. Male scholars dominated leadership of the field and often resisted research and pedagogy on gender and sexuality, casting these topics as beyond the boundaries of black studies. But as historian Darlene Clark Hine noted in 1990, after summarizing a body of pioneering black feminist scholarship, “[T]he study of black women is the current frontier in black studies.”²³ In more recent years, the rise of black queer studies has further pushed African American studies to confront the homophobic and hetero-normative assumptions that shaped early pedagogy and scholarship in the field. According to Tricia Rose, on the discipline's fortieth anniversary, “[G]ender, class and sexuality are more and more a part of the field.”²⁴ The study of intraracial divisions – along various axes – has assumed a prominent place in African American studies.

Yet in this era of escalating income inequality, mass incarceration, permanent unemployment, and global economic restructuring, many African American studies programs and/or scholars maintain a commitment to using scholarship and the resources of the academy to address the multiple crises facing black communities. Social conditions are dire for large segments of the African American population, as the middle class shrinks, HIV/AIDS incidence soars, jobs disappear, and the number of families living in poverty increases. The left-wing, or progressive, tradition in black studies

has been most visible in curricula that seek to join and engage traditions of social resistance and critique. Individuals such as sociologist and radio host Michael Eric Dyson and scholar and civil rights activist Cornel West make such interventions to a mass media audience, but more typical are the less well-known black studies scholars and teachers who are activists in their local communities on issues ranging from immigration to health care, employment, education, and housing. Black studies, along with other interdisciplinary fields, has created leaders in producing scholarship and engaging in critical social analysis on issues ranging from the rise of neoliberalism to the development of the United States as a mass prison society with all its attendant social, economic, cultural, and political implications.²⁵

Returning to Tavis Smiley's question: what is the role of African American studies in the age of Obama? Princeton's Eddie Glaude argues that African American studies teaches “the skills to understand race and racism,” which in many respects is more urgent than ever as we face a post-racial discourse that refuses to acknowledge racism and racists. As Elizabeth Alexander puts it, the goal is not to be post-racial, but *post-racist*. Tricia Rose believes the independent mission of African American studies remains essential because “most academic knowledge in the west has not been race neutral.” The disciplines came “into formation inside ideological moments when white supremacy was profoundly dominant,” and this formation is relatively recent.²⁶ But has the mission of African American studies changed in other ways?

One change, commented on by many longtime professors in the field, concerns a shift in the composition of students taking black studies courses, from almost ex-

clusively black in the early days to multiracial in later years. Rhett Jones cites student diversity as the most striking difference from 1969: "In the early years our classes were almost entirely black. Now we know we will find a rainbow of Latino, Asian American, white and black students in our Afro-American Studies courses."²⁷ According to Elizabeth Alexander, 30 percent of students at Yale are of color. "What we do," in African American studies, she insists, "is for all of our students."²⁸ This shift is widely celebrated as a sign of the broad appeal of African American studies and the fact that a diverse group of students appreciates its centrality to a well-rounded liberal arts education. Yet this development also illustrates the shift away from the original Black Nationalist intent by some advocates of black studies – that is, to halt "the mis-education of the Negro" and instill black collegians with a strong racial consciousness. As the black liberation movement waned, the ambitious visions of the more radical Afro-American studies programs also waned, or were crushed, depending on the campus. And as employment prospects soured in the 1970s, black students pursued an agenda in higher education more closely tied to acquiring job skills and professional mobility. According to a business major at George Washington University at the time, "Black students are taking accounting instead of black history as a matter of survival. They're asking 'what can you do with Black Studies?'"²⁹

In more recent years, black students have faced a series of obstacles in their efforts to attend college. Forty years ago, student activists asserted a right to education and not only won open admissions and affirmative action but also increased financial aid. Many of these reforms have been repealed outright or dramatically weakened. The early black studies move-

ment was a vibrant development in both urban, working-class public institutions and elite research universities. This dual presence survives, but as the incorporation of African American studies by elite institutions coincides with the defunding of public institutions and the sharp rise in economic inequality in the United States, a widening chasm has formed between these locations, and distanced them from their shared histories. These developments have led some community-based black studies programs or veterans to question the contemporary direction of the field. The rise to public prominence of black studies scholars at Ivy League institutions likely fuels this feeling of estrangement. Olive Harvey College, a working-class public institution based on the South Side of Chicago, has been hosting an annual African American Studies Conference since 1977. On its thirteenth anniversary, conference convener Armstead Allen expressed concern that the new wave of black studies proponents had strayed too far from the founding mission. "From its inception, black studies has sought tangible, not just theoretical, connections to the everyday concerns of the African-American community," he said, contending that the field had moved in less relevant academic directions.³⁰

The relationship between African American studies and Latina/o, Asian American, and other ethnic studies is increasingly broached in this era of rapidly changing demographics and new racial discourses and configurations. On the one hand, African American studies is respected as a pioneer and looked to as a model of interdisciplinarity as well as institutional resourcefulness and longevity. As Rhett Jones rightly notes, "Ideas about multiculturalism, pluralism, and diversity are now central elements in higher education because of

black studies' many successes. Cynics and conservatives predicted that Africana studies would be a fad, but it has instead proved to be a strong and enduring part of higher education, shaping scholarship, teaching, and service." In addition, "African American studies serves as the model for ethnic studies, women's studies, Native-American studies, Latino studies and Asian-American studies."³¹ This modeling happened quickly on many campuses in California, where, in the late 1960s, radicalized Asian American and Mexican American students demanded curricular inclusion and recognition, and in New York City, where Puerto Rican students protested alongside African Americans in the 1969 uprisings that swept the City University of New York.

But the push for Latino/a, Asian American, and comparative ethnic studies came later in other parts of the country. In some instances, budgetary pressures and the seeming logic of the white/non-white divide have induced administrators to collapse heretofore independent black studies programs into umbrella ethnic studies units, introducing new anxieties into a discipline whose resources and stature, to the extent that it has them, have come relatively recently. In any event, African American studies will face many challenges and dilemmas as it adapts to a new intellectual/political/demographic landscape. For example,

Muslims in the United States have been targets of many forms of racial profiling in the years since the attacks of September 11, 2001, politicizing a new Muslim generation that has begun to assert itself on college campuses. These students are demanding a voice and place among ethnic studies and student-of-color organizations. Will African American studies approach this development as an opportunity to cultivate solidarity and sharpen and update its analysis of racism in the United States? Or will it ignore such concerns in favor of an exclusive focus on the culture, struggles, and dilemmas of African Americans?

Arguably the most exciting development for African American studies in the twenty-first century is the expansion of doctoral programs. The opportunity to train young scholars can only add to the growth, rigor, and institutional stature of the field. But ensuring the success of this development will necessitate further investments in order to enable departments to provide the additional mentoring and teaching graduate education requires. After forty years, it is now clear that African American studies has been one of a series of new departures in the academy that have dramatically altered the narrow, Western-oriented curriculum and culture of the American university. Perhaps a fuller appreciation of what has been accomplished can inspire hope in the possibilities that lie ahead.

ENDNOTES

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- 22 Robert L. Harris, "The Intellectual and Institutional Development of Africana Studies," in *Black Studies in the United States: Three Essays*, ed. Robert Hine, Robert L. Harris, Jr., and Nellie McKay (New York: Ford Foundation, 1990; repr., *Inclusive Scholarship*, 2009), 95–94.
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- 26 "40th Anniversary of African American Studies in Academia," *The Tavis Smiley Show*.
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