

# The State of Graduate Studies in Africana/Black Studies: Interview with Stephanie Evans

by

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*First, I would like to thank you for agreeing to make this contribution to this special edition. As one of the most recent scholars to investigate the state of graduate studies, and specifically the state of the Ph.D. in Black Studies, your contribution is extremely important. What is your perception of graduate studies within Black Studies today?*

Graduate training in Black Studies is definitely growing. Between 2005 and 2009, there was a noted increase in program graduations, enrollment, and doctoral programs. In these years, at least 23 Black Studies doctoral degrees were earned and at least 34 more graduate students are enrolled than in 2005. Most importantly, in addition to the seven existing programs (Temple, Massachusetts-Amherst, Berkeley, Yale, Harvard, Michigan State, Northwestern), there were three new doctoral programs developed since 2005 (Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Indiana). We are indeed at a crucial moment. Though at the time of my 2009 survey, no doctoral programs existed in the South, there are still marked developments that show now more than ever graduate program chairs, faculty, and students must operate within a knowledgeable context of this growth.

In 2007, I visited Temple University as the keynote speaker for the 19th Annual African American Graduate Student AYA Spring Conference. I spoke about my experience connecting Africana Studies to community engagement, particularly through the practice of community service-learning. After my talk, Dr. Nathaniel Norment, who I had met at the previous year's ASALH conference, firmly but affectionately reminded me that though "community service" was essential to linking universities to local interests, Africana Studies was more about *community building*. In addition to community building between academic and local community agencies through service-learning, community-based research, and internships, Africana Studies scholars must actively begin to community build at a national level between doctoral-granting departments.

Without everyone participating in this conversation, we will continue to be defined from the outside. The recent work by Fabio Rojas (2007) provides an excellent example. In *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline*, Rojas has produced a work for which all Africana Studies scholars should be grateful — especially because it demonstrates the chasm in philosophical framework, theoretical grounding, and methodological approaches separating traditional disciplines from the academic approach of Africana Studies. Rojas provides a useful description of Black Studies as an "inter-discipline" (Rojas 2007, pp. 21, 167–69), and he simultaneously demonstrates why a singular disciplinary approach fails to adequately capture Africana Studies endeavors. I reviewed the book in *Higher Education Review* and noted its invaluable contribution despite the inherent limitation of disciplinary analysis.<sup>1</sup>

With the budget shifts, there will certainly be shrinking campus resources, so now is a time when departments must think strategically about maximizing resources. Tapping into the network of graduate programs is a way to create space for growth even in the midst of an economic downturn. More than a material imperative, graduate chairs, faculty, and students must continue to consider points of divergence and points of intersection regarding curriculum (content) and graduation requirements (structure) in doctoral programs.

The nation's focus on race in the wake of President Barack Obama's election is evident, especially obvious given the enthusiastic dialogue about the diminishing significance of race. Production of critical race-centered research is absolutely needed. Graduate studies is relevant today, as it ever was, and thankfully more universities are recognizing this by instituting their own doctoral programs.

*What role does the Proseminar (introductory graduate level) course within Black Studies play in surveying the intellectual terrain for our discipline on the graduate level?*

The proseminar, in addition to the comprehensive exam, plays a vital role in a student's understanding of the underlying approach, direction, and values of the program. Regardless of the content of the proseminar, faculty would do well to pay attention to foundational texts that highlight different schools of thought in program development.

There are now at least 30 anthologies of Black Studies beginning in 1969 with Bayard Rustin's collection and 1971 with John Blassingame's *New Perspectives on Black Studies* to the 2007 *Contemporary Africana Thought and Action: A Guide to Africana Studies* edited by Clenora Hudson-Weems.<sup>2</sup> Scholars at all levels can use these texts as a basis for future discussion and though there will surely be no unified approach to graduate curriculum and comprehensive exam preparation, this list of anthologies provides a vital foundation to identifying the scope of an Africana Studies canon.

Though new critical publications abound, reading early publications of the 1970s-1990s is essential; this list of anthologies allows students to identify a long list of central contributors over time rather than five or six contemporary popular scholars. Studying anthologies of Africana Studies provides a rich mosaic of dialogue, discussion, and debate about the formation of theories, methodologies and applications not found by reading one or two major scholars in isolation. Undoubtedly, there are now extensive bibliographies of crucial Africana Studies publications; one example from Professor Ernie Allen includes over 500 entries. Yet reading a short list of anthologies allows an in-depth comparative analysis where graduate students can make their own judgments about areas of convergence and divergence, validity, and utility from various essential authors. This concept of comparative voices of founders of Africana Studies is an ideal place to start in a proseminar course.

*What proposed changes would you suggest for Proseminar courses within Black Studies?*

Each program administration must decide for itself what the core of the proseminar training will be. What is imperative regardless of the focus or approach of each program, as outlined above, is that a portion of the proseminar course (or better yet a course in the graduation requirements) cover the development and various approaches to Black Studies. This will eliminate students being subjected to only one approach and assuming it is the only valid way to 'do' Black Studies.

Beyond curriculum, it is imperative that departmental and faculty make their specific academic expectations known upfront. As I wrote in the 2005 *GRIOT* article, many questions can be addressed in advance to assist the graduate students in a successful progression through each program requirement. Samples should be made available so students can more readily assess their own ability to meet individual course and overall graduation requirements in a timely manner. If the faculty do not provide clear and accessible examples of acceptable and unacceptable production, it will be difficult for students to succeed. The proseminar, like the comprehensive exam, reflects a core programmatic component about which clarity must be explicitly defined.

*How does the institutional treatment/perception of Black Studies impact the future of graduate studies?*

Each institution type will be very different and will most likely impact at least some portion of the faculty or offerings in a Black Studies department. There are internal factors such as whether the university is an HBCU, liberal arts, private, or state school. There are also external factors such as region that will largely influence the development of graduate studies. For example, there is a lack of Black Studies in the South and a prevalence of Ethnic Studies in the West.

When choosing a program, students should assess the institutional impact on departmental formation. How the department is situated within the institutional agenda is as vital a question as how a department is situated in respect to other Black Studies departments around the country. Undergraduate or Master's level students looking for a Ph.D. program, like any other discipline, must consider 'fit', which encompasses academic, intellectual, interpersonal, philosophical, geographic, economic, and many other variables that determine where students will most likely be happy with the training they receive. When in doubt, visit the department to find out the inner-workings and to more intimately discern the status and role of the department on the campus.

Now that there are 10 Ph.D. programs and the national scene has demonstrated the ongoing need for race research, Black Studies departments, at all degree-granting levels, might see an increased climate of viability on their respective campuses. However, variables may have a negative impact on growth or institutional support. A backlash to race-at-center-stage via media attention on the First Family in addition to declining material resources may create a more hostile environment on campuses where disgruntled conservatives control resources. Nationally, the scene is clear, Black Studies at the graduate level is expanding; yet, resistance to that expansion will surely be present with the economic and cultural conditions present.

*As a graduate of Ph.D. program within Black Studies, what direction do you think graduate studies within the discipline needs to go in order to advance Black Studies?*

I think the current growth is imperative. What we see when looking at the 10 programs is a range of approaches. Some focus on the Diaspora or on Black Americans (the content-based approach of University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Berkeley, or Harvard), while other programs focus more on an Afrocentric perspective (structural-based Temple or Wisconsin). I don't think that one is necessarily better than the other. Rather, I think it is imperative that scholars recognize the potential contributions of each and train their students with an appreciation of both structural- and content- focused approaches.

While a graduate student, I had some contact with other graduate students at conferences, but the contact was minimal. It is imperative that all graduate directors make their graduate students aware of opportunities to collaborate with other students while enrolled in coursework or in the writing phase. My understanding of the various meanings of a doctoral degree in Black Studies was enriched with contact with others from various schools. It showed me the strengths and limitations of my own program, but also the strengths and limitations of other approaches.

*Do you have any last thoughts and/or comments on the current state and future prospects of graduate education in Black Studies?*

I believe this present publication continues the discussion between current graduate students and alumni of Ph.D. programs who are now faculty. This dialogue is essential and the guest editor, Karanja Keita Carroll and those included here make a significant contribution. Professor Carroll's quest to connect Black Studies program alumni who are now faculty with the current and future generations of graduate students will also be a great service to all involved. Those interested in vibrancy, viability, sustainability, and rigor of Black Studies doctoral training will come out of their comfort zones to acknowledge the contributions and valid arguments of many various approaches.

By documenting anthologies beginning in 1969, I have focused on chronicling complex dialogues from the past; this new collection will surely build on this past so that present scholars of all levels will benefit and contribute to future critical development.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Evans, Stephanie. (2009). *Disciplinary Perspectives on Black Studies*. Book Review: *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* by Fabio Rojas, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press. In *Higher Education Review*, vol. 41, no. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Anthology list located at:  
<http://www.professorevans.com/Evans%20BST%20Anthologies%20HORZ.jpg>.

<sup>3</sup> Bibliographic study guide with listing of complete table of contents and subject guide of over 30 edited volumes in Black Studies, 1969-2009 available online at:  
<http://www.professorevans.com/Evans-BSTGradStudentResources.pdf>.