

Transdisciplinary African American Studies Approaches and Implications: A Collective Interview with James Stewart

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This interview is based on *Introduction to African American Studies: Transdisciplinary Approaches and Implications* authored by Talmadge Anderson and James Stewart published by Imprint Editions/Black Classic Press in Baltimore, Maryland in 2007. Talmadge Anderson is the founder and former editor of *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, and professor emeritus in the Department of Comparative American Cultures and Marketing at Washington State University; and James Stewart is professor of Labor Studies and Industrial Relations and African and African American Studies at Pennsylvania State University, and the former president of the National Council for Black Studies [the following questions were constructed November 24, 2007, and answered November 26, 2007].

IMZ: Thank you for this interview, it is always a special event when we have an opportunity to interview a person like yourself who have contributed to the growth and development of African American Studies since its birth, some forty years ago.

IMZ: In the scope of your text in relationship to its title you mention that the focus is specifically on the history, culture and experience of 'Blacks in the United States of America', hence the global significance of the discipline seem to be lost to geography in light of the historical, cultural and social influence of people of African heritage outside the U.S.A. What is your response to criticism that the text is bound by geography?

JS: *The criticism is partially on target because it is absolutely critical to view the experiences of Blacks in the United States in a global context as I have in many of my other publications. At the same time it is important to apply the most appropriate and useful analytical techniques in analyzing the specific circumstances of each distinctive subset in the large universe of peoples of African descent. That is what the book sets out to do. It will hopefully encourage parallel in-depth treatments of other collectives in the African Diaspora such as Afro-Brazilians and Afro-Canadians, as well as on the African continent. A multi-volume work would be required to treat the rich experiences of all groups adequately. While I would welcome the development of an introductory text that attempts to capture the history and experiences of all major African and African Diasporan societies, I would caution that it is important to maintain a viable balance between coverage and detail so that the treatments of each group are not overly superficial.*

KKC: Within the first two chapters of *Introduction to African American Studies*, the concept of the African worldview is brought up, along with its impact upon accurately understanding the conditions and experiences of African descended peoples. The African worldview is also mentioned in relation to Afrocentricity, as it informs a philosophical perspective within Africana/Black Studies. Can you elaborate on your understanding of the African worldview and its necessity in order to develop an accurate understanding of the lives and experiences of African descended peoples?

JS: *The African worldview consists, in part, of the values and beliefs developed and used by people of African descent to shape inter-personal relationships, relationships with other peoples, and relationships to the environment. This conception is not meant to deny the wide variation in values and beliefs among various African peoples. However, the construction implies that viewed collectively, there are shared elements of values and beliefs that can be distinguished from those developed by groups in other parts of the world. This is the argument advanced by Cheikh Anta Diop and others. The notion of the African world view focuses on the modal expressions of these shared values and beliefs and does not require that every group uniformly subscribe to one belief system or set of practices. One of the primary hurdles facing Africana Studies specialists is to combat the notion that traditional African beliefs are simply historical relics of pre-modern life. This view has produced a voluminous body of writings that distort the experiences of people of African descent. Two of the major successes of Eurocentrism to date have been to create a reverence for the antecedents of contemporary Western thought (Ancient Greece and Rome) and propagation of the notion that these antecedents continue to hold value in addressing contemporary and future challenges confronting humans across the globe.*

Many Africana Studies specialists reject these notions and are actively examining the extent to which traditional and evolved variants of African beliefs and practices can provide alternative strategies for addressing human problems everywhere, but especially among peoples of African descent. The first step in that process is to produce works that enable a more accurate understanding and appreciation of the complexity of our experiences, with a special emphasis on African peoples' historical and contemporary efforts to shape destiny as opposed to simply functioning as passive consumers of Western ideas and products.

KKC: Questions of philosophical perspective within Africana/Black Studies will always be contentious given the varied approaches to the discipline. One of the many good aspects of your text is that you include a discussion of multiple approaches to the discipline. One perspective/approach that you do not discuss is Abdul Alkalimat's 'Paradigm of Unity'. Can you explain the decision/rationale why his perspective/approach was not mentioned, given its impact upon certain schools of thought in the discipline?

JS: *There is no question that the Paradigm of Unity (POU) deserves treatment as an important approach to periodizing the experiences of Blacks in the U.S. and in identifying structural changes in the circumstances of Black people. I have written elsewhere extensively about the strengths and weaknesses of the POU. The decision not to discuss the POU in this text results from the concern that it could not be treated adequately without disrupting the flow of the book. I also know that Abdul Alkalimat and Ronald Bailey are in the process of updating the POU so any discussion of the present formulation would have been outdated and would not do justice to their approach. We do plan to incorporate a discussion of the POU in the next edition.*

KKC: The subject/content area approach has been the most consistent way of introducing students to the content and structure of Africana/Black Studies. Can you explain the value of this approach as exemplified by the organization of knowledge within your contribution in *Introduction to African American Studies*?

JS: *One benefit of the subject/content area approach at the undergraduate level is that it parallels the way in which college curricula are currently structured and is consistent with the department-based academic organizational structure that dominates higher education. Most instructors would not be comfortable using a text that did not use familiar chapter demarcations, such as history, sociology, politics, etc. In introducing each subject area we tried to acquaint readers with the history of the development of the discipline and how interpretations of Black life and culture have been distorted. We then attempted to indicate how progressive scholars have challenged the conventional wisdom and proposed alternative ways of examining the same phenomena using assumptions and techniques emanating from Blacks' own interpretations of experiences. In presenting these alternatives we highlight both the successes and the work that remains to be done, including thinking outside of the boundaries of the subject area as conventionally defined, i.e. embracing a transdisciplinary approach. The intent is to provide a foundation for majors to expand on transdisciplinary approaches in upper division undergraduate and graduate courses.*

IMZ: Your text utilizes a trans-disciplinary approach, however many of our students (scholars) are being instructed via an interdisciplinary approach. What challenges does this present, if any, in your opinion?

JS: *The challenges are many, but must be addressed head on because understanding the distinctions among the various approaches is critical to the design of a viable Ph.D. curricula in Africana Studies, and also for the assessment of credentials in hiring new faculty. Much of what is labeled as "interdisciplinary" is actually "multi-disciplinary." Interdisciplinary means that there is a conscious and systematic effort to blend or integrate theories and methods from one or more traditional discipline in an individual study. Hypothetically, this can be accomplished by a single author or by a team of researchers representing different disciplines. However, there are very few examples of this type of research in any field, much less within Africana Studies. Conversely, multidisciplinary means that there is a conscious effort to examine a particular topic using different disciplinary approaches, either sequentially in the same study, or in parallel as, for example, in an edited volume with contributions from writers associated with different disciplines. One of the shared characteristics of both approaches is that they are reactive with respect to the prevailing boundaries established by traditional disciplines. In contrast, transdisciplinary approaches reject the existing disciplinary boundaries as starting points for the organization of research and instruction and seek to develop new ways of synthesizing various approaches to understanding the world. The development of such approaches is a major challenge.*

In my own work I use W.E.B. Du Bois as a guide in exploring the potential of transdisciplinary approaches. At present, most new faculty hired into Africana Studies units are trained in a traditional discipline and retain primary allegiance to that discipline rather than to a transdisciplinary conception of Africana Studies. The major exception, of course, is the core of graduates of Temple's Ph.D. program, which embodies a transdisciplinary approach although a different terminology is used. Unfortunately, the failure to address the problems created by the perpetuation of the multidisciplinary model will result in future "scholarship" in Africana Studies continuing to be shaped by trends in traditional disciplines that have been less than hospitable to progressive interpretations of the cultures of people of African descent.

KKC: I see that more women are included in the pre-institutionalization phase of Africana/Black Studies in this edition than the first. Do you feel that this change makes your text stronger as compared to the previous version, and other introductory texts within the discipline? And second, how do you think this addition relate to the creation of a more holistic understanding of the Africana experience?

JS: *There is no question that the treatment of the experiences of women is much more thorough in this edition than in the first. In addition to the extensive treatment of the contributions of women during the pre-institutionalization phase of Africana/Black Studies, we have tried to integrate discussions of the distinctive experiences of women throughout the text. Ironically, one of my colleagues who has written extensively about the experiences and contributions of Black women leafed through the book rapidly and thought that the experiences of women had been overlooked because there were not a lot of sections with labels that identified the content specifically as focusing on women. For me, this raises the issue of the most appropriate strategies to pursue in correcting the omission of the experiences and contributions of women that was manifested in the early Africana Studies literature. We took the position that the experiences of men and women should be treated in parallel and fully integrated rather than treating the experiences of women as an "add on." In reading the text, hopefully readers will come away with the impression that women have played a decisive role in continuing the liberation struggles and, that if current trends continue they will be called on to play an even more visible and assertive leadership role in many areas of life including, education, family maintenance, and politics.*

IMZ: In addition to the ongoing debate within African American Studies on whether it is a discipline, a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary field or trans-disciplinary (as your text articulates); there is also a debate in regards to what name to use: African American Studies, Afro-American Studies, Africana Studies, Africology, Black Studies, or all in an interchangeable way. In your opinion how should we resolve this challenge?

JS: *There is no easy resolution to this issue because all of the current appellations have strong support and extensive histories, while each embodies its own unique limitations. Areas of inquiry that are labeled as "Studies" are generally deemed to be less prestigious and coherent than those with names that end in the suffix "ology." At the same time, in my view the unmodified adoption of this convention would give too much power to Eurocentric linguistic conventions, so I would prefer Africology over Africology. Using the logic of post-modernists we could assert that this term embraces all geographical regions and populations even though the primary referent is Africa. However, even this "compromise" will not resolve the issue because "ology" refers to "the study of" and our enterprise encompasses not only study, but also political actions designed to enhance the collective well-being. For me, the optimal solution would involve the recovery of a term or terms from one or more traditional African languages that conveys the full range of the enterprises' activities. Such a term could be appended as a suffix to the prefix "Africana." Even if such a term was found achieving widespread acceptance, it would be problematic because of the extensive vested interests in existing terms.*

KKC: Considering the influx of post-modern theoretical production within certain quarters of Africana/Black Studies, in what ways has this been a positive or negative contribution to the discussion of philosophical approaches/perspectives in the discipline?

JS: *I am not a great fan of post-modern theoretical production, but I welcome the challenges that it has forced other approaches to address as well as the insights it has produced. One of the contributions of post-modernist discourse has been to emphasize the importance of preciseness in the use of terms like "race" and "culture." However, I am fascinated by how easily scholars have been drawn to this neo-Eurocentric framework of analysis without systematically examining the underlying premises and origins of the ideas in the same way that Afrocentric constructs have been rigorously interrogated by critics. Post-modernist formulations should be subjected to scrutiny that makes use of the tools of the sociology and philosophy of knowledge. From the vantage point of the sociology of knowledge, many of the core post-modernist constructs have been advanced by scholars whose project is to create a rupture with the historical cultural and intellectual traditions that produced the Jewish Holocaust.*

This means that it was necessary to deny that history is a determinant of how contemporary life is envisioned and described. The philosophical notion of the limited relevance of history and the claim that historical developments do not condition contemporary life in a significant way are antithetical to the core values that have shaped the development of Africana Studies over the last 40 years, as well as to the work of Black scholars whose work precedes the modern Black Studies movement. The prioritization of linguistic analysis over the systematic examination of strategies to counter experienced oppression is incompatible with the founding values of Africana Studies. I hold similar views about the "Black Atlantic" scholarship. The interests, objectives, and experiences of its proponents should also be interrogated from the vantage point of the sociology and philosophy of knowledge. Are the experiences and interpretations that proponents seek to foreground modal or are they highly particularistic? While Black Atlantic Studies appropriately call for a broadening focus of "diaspora" studies beyond Blacks in the U.S., how can the continent of Africa be left totally out of the discussion? Addressing these and other questions can help to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of "modernist" approaches while also encouraging refinements in the application of post-modernist formulations to the experiences of people of African descent.

IMZ: Unlike other text in the discipline, you included the question of science and technology in your work (hence, I am pleased with that inclusion). Beyond what you mention in the text, what other units of learning should be included in the African American Studies construct (i.e., a multimedia approach)?

JS: *Thank you for your comments about the treatment of science and technology in the text -- we plan to do more in this area in the next version. There is a need for a unit on policy analysis and policy design. The early proponents of Africana Studies advocated for an emphasis on policy-oriented research that could be translated into interventions that would enhance the quality of life of people of African descent. You would be hard pressed to find many courses addressing these topics in Africana studies curricula. This is one reason that some critics question the utility of what we do given an apparent emphasis on the study of history and creative production, to the exclusion of attention to the examination of forces that are creating widespread hardship and misery. Africana Studies specialists' voices were little more than whispers in the wake of the Katrina catastrophe and have been largely silent on issues such as global trade policies, global warming, incarceration policies, health care disparities, etc., although all of these issues threaten the survival of people of African descent.*

There is also a need for a unit that explores community empowerment strategies. Historically, Africana Studies shares some of the values and objectives of some of the helping professions such as Social Work that go beyond scholarly inquiry, per se, although many units have de-emphasized this mission. This sub-disciplinary component needs to be fleshed out more fully and integrated into the curriculum in support of more internship and outreach opportunities.

IMZ: There seems to be a rush to produce introductory text for African American Studies since the publication of *Introduction to Black Studies* in 1982 by Maulana Karenga; and I understand that forthcoming is *African American Studies: An Introduction to the Key Debates* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Jennifer Burton, and Nathaniel Norment, Jr.'s *An Introduction to African American Studies: The Discipline and Its Dimensions*. What do you attribute this growth to? Or is it simply a duplication of content confined to introductory matters, rather than to advanced study and research?

JS: *I view the growing number of introductory texts as a sign of the intellectual maturation of Africana Studies and as an indicator of the extent to which Africana Studies has become a fixed component of undergraduate curricula across the country. As noted by Thomas Kuhn in the Structure of Scientific Revolutions, one of the indicators of the evolution of a field into a discipline is the collection of a body of exemplars or case studies that can be used to train future researchers. The production of introductory Africana Studies texts is the counterpart to this body of exemplars and thus provides concrete evidence of the quasi-disciplinary status of Africana Studies. Some of the texts that you describe are new third generation texts. It would be useful to compare their content and structure with earlier texts and the updated versions of first generation texts such as Maulana Karenga's Introduction to Black Studies. Such a comparison could provide useful insights regarding different approaches within the discipline and the evolutionary path of scholarship. It is also important to make the distinction between authored and edited texts. Edited texts tend to project multidisciplinary approaches while singly or co-authored texts allow the presentation of more transdisciplinary approaches. Many Africana Studies departments and programs have been successful in lobbying for the inclusion of introductory courses within general education curricula. This means that the users of introductory texts are primarily non-majors. This pattern increases the attractiveness of multidisciplinary approaches, which may disadvantage majors and prospective majors. Where this is perceived as a problem one option may be to offer different sections for majors and non-majors that use different primary texts.*

However, I am not aware of any actual implementation of this type of strategy. Overall, the various texts are primarily directed at undergraduates and are primarily focused on introductory matters rather than advanced study and research. Books such as Molefi Asante's and Maulana Karenga's Handbook of Black Studies, Abdul Alkalimat's Paradigms in Black Studies, and Delores Aldridge's and Carlene Young's', Out of the Revolution, The Development of Africana Studies, and Clenora Hudson Weems', Contemporary Africana Theory, Thought, and Action are more useful with respect to advanced study and research.

IMZ: As an instructional source, the questions and exercises you provided for learners (students) suggest critical thinking as a useful skill in understanding the discipline; and likewise, I see the introduction of ideas and concepts that may be unique to African American Studies discourse. For example, the concept of 'institutional decimation' you and Joseph Scott formulated concerning the social control of Black men. In this content, how do you envision a vocabulary or lexicon particular to African American Studies?

JS: *Again borrowing from Thomas Kuhn, the creation of a distinctive observational language is an essential feature of a fully developed discipline. I have always thought that the foundations for sustained effort in this direction were provided by several essays in Joyce Ladner's edited volume, The Death of White Sociology. Unfortunately, very few scholars have taken up the call to develop new linguistic conventions. Consistent with my previous comments about the gravitation toward multidisciplinary approaches, most scholars seem content to receive terminologies developed within traditional disciplines and simply apply them to the study of the experiences of people of African descent without due diligence. Of course there are exceptions, such as Maulana Karenga's use of the constructs of the "holocaust of enslavement" and "Maafa" to describe the systemic patterns of dehumanization and exploitation experienced by people of African descent. This is an area where post-modernist approaches could make a major contribution to the development of Africana Studies but to date I have seen little effort in the direction of constructive concept generation.*

KKC: Departments and programs of Africana/Black Studies approach the teaching of their introductory courses in plethora of ways. Can you explain the advantages of this text, especially in relation to the creation of a consistent discussion on the substance, content and organization of knowledge within the discipline?

JS: *The text is designed to accommodate a variety of approaches and emphases, e.g. history, social science, arts and humanities. We have tried to incorporate a wide variety of material associated with each content area to support unit treatments of various durations and detail. At the same, no text by itself can catalyze consistency in substance, content, and organization. Several initiatives of the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS) will hopefully move us in the right direction. Over the past several years NCBS has been developing a model introductory course design as well as examples of curriculum configurations for undergraduate majors. The development of content-based assessments designed to ascertain the extent to which students at different institutions have had access to comparable material in courses is also underway. Finally, NCBS has also been developing department and program self-study guidelines for internal and external reviews. Once these projects have been completed and implemented Africana Studies will finally have monitoring mechanisms to foster quality control and standardization similar to what exists in many other disciplines.*

KKC: As a key thinker within the discipline of Africana/Black Studies can you discuss your perspective on future research projects that should be developed to fully exhaust the intellectual history of the discipline?

JS: *Fully exhausting the intellectual history of the discipline is a tall order! There is a need for additional research exploring the intellectual precedents of contemporary Africana Studies. Although there has been a lot of interest in Anna Julia Cooper, a systematic examination of how life and writings constitute exemplars for guiding disciplinary development remains to be produced. This work is one element of a broader need to interrogate the historical contributions of women to the discipline's intellectual foundations. In addition to Cooper there is a need to take a closer look at the work of Leila Amos Pendleton and Elizabeth Ross Haynes. Beyond intellectual history, per se, there is also a need to integrate more insights from the work of economic historians and black economists into the corpus of Africana Studies scholarship. In the text we provide an in-depth treatment of the economic issues confronting African Americans that we hope readers will appreciate. The effort to find synergies between economic analyses into Africana Studies has significant potential to enhance our efforts on a number of fronts. As an example, the work of Sir Arthur Lewis on long economic cycles provides a way of linking the economic histories of various African collectives in the Americas. Closer to home, a forthcoming special issue of the Journal of Black Studies explores various opportunities to incorporate useful economic insights and analytical approaches from economics into Africana Studies including understanding the contours of racial identity.*

On this latter topic there is new research using economic concepts that explores how racial identity is produced. Finally, I would hope to see some scholars take up the work of Ivan Van Sertima examining the early presence of Africans in the Americas and the historical development and use of technologies in African societies. Documentation of Van Sertima's claims regarding the early presence of Africans in the Americas could substantially reshape the context of contemporary Diaspora Studies by counter-balancing the emphasis on the dispersal resulting from the Atlantic slave trade, with a theme that emphasizes African agency. Additional research examining the historical development and use of technologies in Africa can provide a framework for assessing and countering contemporary distortions on the impact of technology in African societies that are manifested, for example, in hazardous waste dumping, over fishing, and small arms proliferation.

IMZ: Thank you again for this interview, and should you have any closing remarks, please take this opportunity to air them?

JS: *I want to thank you for the opportunity to discuss some of the issues that are framed by Introduction to African American Studies, Transdisciplinary Approaches and Implications in more detail, and I look forward to feedback from readers. I also want to applaud you for putting together this important special issue. It will undoubtedly serve as a catalyst for additional focused exploration of the issues raised by contributors that will lead to greater clarity and momentum. Keep up the good work!*