InVisible Culture • Issue 31: Black Studies Now and the Counter-Currents of Hazel Carby

On Needing Black Studies

Kathryn A. Mariner¹

¹**University of Rochester**

Published on: Nov 15, 2020

DOI: 10.47761/494a02f6.856719ea

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Featured Image: Protest at RPD, Rochester NY, May 2020, Copyright Erica Jae.

As I was preparing comments for this roundtable toward the end of 2018, I felt a bit like an interloper because I realized I had never—at least in my formal undergraduate and graduate training—taken a proper Black Studies class. Perhaps as a result, I approach Black Studies a bit sideways. Indeed, being relentlessly “thrown against a white background” can certainly make one feel one’s color, and can install a sort of feeling of permanent interloper status, a sense of not really fitting anywhere, disciplinarily or otherwise.¹ I have more like what Katherine McKittrick has referred to as a “clandestine degree in Black Studies,” which has involved a lot of self-study (both by myself and of myself).² As an undergraduate, I was an Anthropology major, with a minor in Spanish and Portuguese, and the bulk of my coursework was actually comprised of Latin American Studies classes. And while I took various courses on “race” in both undergrad and graduate school, where my research focus shifted from Latin America to the United States, none of these courses were about Blackness specifically—they had titles like “The Anthropology of Race,” “Mixed Race in the New Millennium,” “Interracial America,” and “Theories of Race and Ethnicity.” Though Critical Race Studies and Black Studies are not the same discipline, they share “a

close relationship” and many overlapping concerns.³ At my current institution, I teach a single course on Blackness, but am often interpellated into African American Studies in various ways. This, however, is fine with me—it is an occasion to which I am delighted, and frankly grateful, to rise. You see, I need Black Studies—or Africana Studies, or African American Studies, which are not necessarily interchangeable, but are all vital to me—for three really important reasons, all of which reflect a particularly situated intersection of disciplinary training, expertise, and personal experience.

The first reason I need Black Studies is for my work, which encompasses research, teaching, and service. As both an ethnographer and teacher of race, kinship, and social inequality in the postindustrial urban United States, an understanding of the historical structures, power dynamics, and cultural production that shape contemporary Black life is essential. My first book examined transracial adoption in Chicago, which entailed the movement of predominantly Black children from the south and west sides of the city (as well as from Haiti, Liberia, and Uganda) to predominantly white families residing in the suburbs and sometimes out of state.⁴ While doing this work, I could not understand the raced and classed production of the adoptive family without understanding how the segregation of Black communities has compounded the socio-economic effects of discrimination across generations. I could not understand the relationship between kinship and race in the United States without understanding the sexual politics and property relations of slavery and hypodescent, which continue to shape how Americans conceptualize heritage, racial identity, embodiment, and Black motherhood.⁵ I could not understand how adoption works without looking at it as a kind of transaction with specific conditions of possibility rooted in long legacies of dispossession and separation. In my current work on race and space in Rochester, New York, I need the analytical tools provided by frameworks like Black geographies and diasporic space to make sense of what I am finding on the ground in a postindustrial urban context where deep histories of racism continue to shape both social and built environments.⁶ With its long tradition of reorienting the location of expertise and privileging marginalized voices, Black Studies challenges me to build a project that is truly community engaged. I simply need Black Studies to understand a place like Rochester, and my place in it, as well as the place of the university within both the city and my ethnography, a need I will explain further in a moment.

The second reason I need Black Studies is to help me grapple with the problematic origins of the other disciplines in which I work. Hazel Carby has argued that Ethnic Studies and related (un/inter)disciplines “threaten to transform the structure and

organization of traditional fields of knowledge.”⁷ As I learn more about local patterns of racial segregation in my current research, I appreciate more and more the critical insights that Black Studies has to offer both geography and anthropology. Black Studies provides the necessary tools to grapple with the colonial origins of techniques like contemporary cartography.⁸ Referencing geography’s disciplinary roots in racism, imperialism, and colonialism, Audrey Kobayashi and Linda Peake contend:

So racialized is the development of American society that virtually no social analysis can take place without a recognition of this reality. Similarly, no geography is complete, no understanding of place or landscape is comprehensive, without recognizing that American geography, both as discipline and as the spatial expression of American life, is racialized.⁹

Katherine McKittrick points specifically to what she sees as “the impossibility of Blackness within the discipline of geography.”¹⁰ In a recent workshop I attended on “Black Spatial Humanities,” the instructor, historian Kim Gallon, argued that because of Black Studies’ long tradition of recovering the humanity of Black peoples, the Black Spatial Humanities make both digital humanities and spatial humanities more *humane*. This is especially true within the contemporary corporatization of the university, a process that Carby has argued leads to its “dehumanization.”¹¹ My home discipline, anthropology, is specifically concerned with the study of humanity, but unfortunately is not immune to legacies of dehumanization.

Anthropology has been deployed as an instrument of colonial expansion and violence, and anthropologists played an important role in the development of European and American race science in the nineteenth century. The discipline has addressed these problematic origins reflexively, but ethnography, if carried out uncritically, remains a powerful mode of marking spaces of otherness and “objects” of study. Anthropologists, particularly of Africa and the sites of its diaspora, need Black Studies to avoid reproducing this original violence, to help anthropology realize its power as “the art of being human.”¹² Arising out of social movements that often mobilized critiques of traditional academic disciplines, Black Studies and other ethnic studies frameworks provide essential tools for historicizing the production of knowledge, for thinking interdisciplinarily (and sometimes beyond the framework of discipline altogether), and for theorizing power within the context of political struggle.¹³ We don’t just study race, but also how racial dynamics infuse the very practices of knowledge production. The critical tools of Black Studies enhance anthropology’s (and adjacent disciplines’)

engagement with Black subjectivity, and contribute to a critical awareness of the racialized power dynamics that undergird anthropological data collection and knowledge production. Anthropologists themselves have critiqued anthropology as a “white public space,” characterized by “racially divided academic labor, a white-centered canon, and white-reinforced interpretations of meaning.”¹⁴ This “white public space,” they argue, consists of “a hegemonic, daily, unreflexive praxis that marginalizes faculty and students of color.”¹⁵ Therefore, Black Studies also helps me make sense of what it means to be a Black anthropologist, an “internal other” within the “white public space” of anthropology. This Hurstonian experience of Blackness against whiteness brings me to reason #3 for my own need for Black Studies.

Thirdly, I need Black Studies because it helps me theorize, interrogate, and understand my social location and labor as a Black woman in the neoliberal academy at a predominantly white institution, an experience that sociologist Nirmal Puwar, drawing on anthropologist Mary Douglas, has theorized as “matter out of place.”¹⁶ In my current institution’s College (which houses all undergraduate and graduate programs in the arts, sciences, and engineering, and excludes the professional schools of medicine and dentistry, business, education, and nursing), there is but a single tenured Black woman on the faculty. Aside from that one tenured colleague, myself (currently untenured), and one other untenured colleague, every other tenured or tenure-track Black woman in the College has either left for another institution or been denied tenure. If I am granted tenure, I will be only the second Black woman in the history of the College to complete the promotion from new assistant professor to associate professor with tenure.¹⁷ Black Studies challenges me to be undisciplined in the surfacing of certain uncomfortable truths, even from a position of relative vulnerability. Describing the position and treatment of Black women academics, Katherine McKittrick draws attention to “the unqualified, undisciplined, wild Black woman that is produced within the discipline of geography, and other disciplines as well. Geography isn’t the only discipline that disciplines us.”¹⁸ The poet Nayyirah Waheed commands, “The thing you are most / afraid to write. / Write that,” and political scientist Valeria Chapman reminds us to “recognize the ability to marshal discomfort as [our] superpower.”¹⁹ Black Studies inspires and requires a refusal to be disciplined. Black Studies inspires and requires a kind of fearlessness, and provides a map for making one’s way in an unjust world. I write these words reluctantly, without the “freedom papers” of tenure, and I can only do so because of the strong voices that have come before me and stand beside me.²⁰

So although I don't always *feel* like a scholar of Black Studies proper (yet), for these three reasons, I *need* Black Studies as a scholar. Now, lest it seem like these comments are all about *me*, I'll conclude with the argument that my university—and by extension the University, capital U—needs Black Studies for the same reasons that I do: for its work, for its fraught history and contemporary context, and for equity and social justice in a racist—and often, specifically antiblack—world.

First, the university needs Black Studies to fulfill its mission of knowledge production. Because of its interdisciplinary breadth, Black Studies has critical insights to offer students and other members of the university community, particularly in this contemporary moment of Black Lives Matter, campus protests (including multiple lists of demands presented to the university President and a student-occupied Faculty Senate meeting at my own institution, all occurring in the years since my arrival), and enduring racial inequality and skewed life chances. It is striking to me how much these words of Hazel Carby's continue to resonate more than two decades after they were written:

The fundamental contradictions of a society structured by racial inequality since its founding moment have been shaped in the 1990s by an administration in Washington that is not only unsympathetic toward any demands for civil rights, but blatantly antagonistic to such demands.²¹

In 2020, we need Black Studies desperately, and as bell hooks insists, "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy."²² In addition, Black Studies is "core to the university's mission regarding academic freedom," in a sociopolitical context in which Black faculty continue to be disciplined (and placed on The Professor Watchlist) for their writings about race.²³ The university's mission of knowledge production does not end at the bounds of the Ivory Tower. This mission is intimately linked to its broader responsibility to society beyond its walls (or fences, or gates, or drawbridges, or moats, as the case may be), to the vital necessity that the university "be of use."²⁴

This brings me to the second reason the university needs Black Studies. My university in particular—though it shares many of these qualities with other institutions—needs Black Studies to help it contend with a history of fraught university-community relations in a city that is 40% Black; is tied with Birmingham, Alabama for 8th most racially segregated city in the country; was recently awarded the dubious distinction of 14th worst city in the United States for African-Americans; and which sits within a two-

hour drive of over 30 county jails, state prisons, and federal detention facilities, which disproportionately house people of color.²⁵ Right now, this university needs Black Studies urgently to help it understand the implications of having a sworn force of partially armed “peace” officers in an American cultural context in which policing is always already racialized.²⁶ In short, the university needs Black Studies in order to exist ethically in this geographic, political, and socioeconomic context. I repeat, *the university needs Black Studies in order to exist ethically in this geographic, political, and socioeconomic context*. Hazel Carby was deeply attuned to this ethical imperative when she wrote on multiculturalism in the 1990s. Black Studies in the university, she argued, cannot be a substitute for “sustained social or political relationships with black people in a society that retains many of its historical practices of apartheid in housing and schooling.”²⁷ She noted a troubling disconnect between debates about curriculum and “utter disregard for the material conditions of most black people.”²⁸ Indeed, as Michelle Fine and Ruber Rodriguez-Barreras note, “social justice is not a cognitive problem.”²⁹ Black Studies in the university must translate to Black Studies *beyond* the university. Indeed, Black Studies gives us crucial tools for breaking down the persistent binary between university and wider community—this has important implications for shifting on-campus conversations from “diversity” to equity, and for extending these conversations beyond the university.

Third, in addressing what Carby and others have referred to as the “fragile presence of black peoples in universities,” Black Studies has the power not just to diversify students, staff, and faculty, but much more importantly, to create an antiracist university (this is perhaps an oxymoron, given the history of American universities, but I’m choosing optimism in this moment).³⁰ So often, universities seek Black scholars and students under the banner of “diversity.” As McKittrick insists, “We know why they want us there and it’s not for liberation.”³¹ Likewise, Squire, Williams, and Tuitt point to “today’s contradictions in diversity work, often shaped by neoliberal logics and actions that simultaneously dehumanize and provide moderated space for Black people to engage in the educational enterprise.”³² They describe contemporary higher education as operating under a system of plantation politics, which is structured by “the ways that the epistemological vestiges of slavery persist in the policies, programs, and other institutional (il)logics.”³³ They argue that one of the ways that the neoliberal and predominantly white university preserves white power while at the same time giving Black people limited educational access, is through the “creation of ‘diversity’ task forces and panels to quell unrest.”³⁴ Twenty years ago, Carby asked: “Is the

emphasis on cultural diversity making invisible the politics of race in this increasingly segregated nation, and is the language of cultural diversity a convenient substitute for the political action needed to desegregate?"³⁵ These questions continue to haunt politics within and beyond the university.

In the absence of hiring and retaining permanent Black women faculty, the university often invites Black women scholars from elsewhere to speak. Angela Davis came to the University of Rochester on March 5, 2019, about one month after Hazel Carby's visit. In her public address, she cautioned:

So when we hear the watchwords "diversity" and "inclusion" over and over and over again, we should be able to question what is NOT being acknowledged in this promotion of diversity. How has diversity managed to evacuate justice and transformation from our frameworks of understanding racism and patriarchy?... Are we better off by simply assimilating people of color, women, LGBTQ people into institutions that continue to function exactly as they did when these people were marginalized?... Shouldn't diversity and inclusion always be accompanied by justice and transformation?³⁶

It is *crucial* that we not confuse diversity with justice or even antiracism. Black Studies provides one of the critical lenses we need to understand the difference. This is related to the first reason I listed that the university needs Black Studies—to do its work. Davis continued:

The university can encourage engaged citizenry by ensuring that its students have learned how to adopt a stance of productive criticism. One way to do this is to support interdisciplinarity of knowledge. Gender, Sexuality and Feminist studies for example, Ethnic Studies, Africana Studies, Middle East Studies, Cultural Studies, Critical University Studies, Critical Prison Studies—but these are the units on campuses all over the country that are most precarious, that are less likely to receive support.³⁷

Squire, Williams, and Tuitt caution, "continual calls for more money, new student centers, and more faculty of color may continue to be patchwork answers that do little to address systemic racism on college campuses."³⁸ These, along with diversity office(r)s, often simply create an illusion that the 'problem' of diversity has already been solved.³⁹ In Sara Ahmed's clever articulation: "being appointed to transform an institution does not necessarily mean the institution is willing to be transformed."⁴⁰

Diversity, she insists, is “the labor of creating shiny spaces...of institutional polishing.”⁴¹

Black Studies inspires us to think bigger and better. In strategizing how to battle “plantation politics” in the future of higher education, Squire, Williams, and Tuitt offer:

Our first urging is for scholars of race and racism in higher education to reclaim their ability to think divergently and creatively about the future of higher education—that is, to allow oneself to engage in creative storytelling that imagines a world that is free of the oppression that currently exists.⁴²

Instead of diversity roundtables and cabinets and committees, and university presidents who are also “Chief Diversity Officers,” and diversity websites, and Deans of Diversity, and annual diversity conferences—all in lieu of actual measurable diversity, much less equity—why not a Center for Critical University-Community Partnerships (a dream of mine), or an Institute of Transformational Justice (a dream of my colleague, Kristin Doughty), seeded with the requisite funding and support to actually do the serious work of imagining and then crafting more equitable futures in collaboration with non-university stakeholders? Why not an Undercommons?⁴³ Why not a radical reorientation of antiquated power hierarchies and static notions of expertise and the physical locations of knowledge production? Why not a university without debt? Why not a university without police? Why not a university with a rotating collective of students, faculty, and staff in place of a Board of Trustees? Why not a professoriate without precarity and exploitation? Why not a university whose relationship to the surrounding community is symbiotic rather than parasitic? It is our responsibility “to restore life to a corrupt and dying academy.”⁴⁴ The battle continues. Black Studies *here*, and Black Studies *now*, offer crucial theoretical-methodological frameworks for thinking through how institutions—*our* institutions—maintain hierarchy and exclusivity, and importantly, what kinds of emancipatory futures are possible.

Footnotes

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7. Hazel V. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America*, (London: Verso, 1999), 117. [↵](#)
8. Audrey Kobayashi and Linda Peake, "Racism out of Place: Thoughts on Whiteness and an Antiracist Geography in the New Millennium," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 2 (2000): 392-403, doi: 10.1111/0004-5608.00202. [↵](#)
9. Kobayashi and Peake, "Racism out of Place," 392. [↵](#)
10. McKittrick, "Footnotes," 24:37. [↵](#)
11. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 119. [↵](#)
12. Michael Wesch, *The Art of Being Human* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017). [↵](#)
13. Ruth Wilson Gilmore refers to these as "oppositional studies programmes." Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Public Enemies and Private Intellectuals: Apartheid USA," *Race & Class* 35, no. 1 (1993): 71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030639689303500107>. [↵](#)

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15. Brodtkin, Morgen, and Hutchinson, "Anthropology," 554. [↵](#)
16. Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 10. [↵](#)
17. Valeria Chapman, "Rebounding on the Tenure Track: Carving Out a Place of Your Own in the Academy," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 52, no. 1 (2019): 52-56. [↵](#)
18. McKittrick, "Footnotes," 24:58. [↵](#)
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27. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 249. [↵](#)
28. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 253. [↵](#)
29. Fine and Rodriguez-Barreras, "To Be," 177. [↵](#)
30. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 169; see also Finley, Gray, and Martin, "Affirming," 4; Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivory: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013). [↵](#)
31. McKittrick, "Footnotes," 1:10:02. [↵](#)
32. Squire, Williams, and Tuitt, "Plantation Politics," 11. [↵](#)
33. Squire, Williams, and Tuitt, "Plantation Politics," 6. [↵](#)
34. Squire, Williams, and Tuitt, "Plantation Politics," 10. [↵](#)
35. Carby, *Cultures in Babylon*, 250. [↵](#)
36. Angela Davis, "The University's Role in Creating Engaged Citizens," University of Rochester Public Address. March 5, 2019. [↵](#)
37. Davis, "The University's Role." [↵](#)
38. Squire, Williams, and Tuitt, "Plantation Politics," 16. [↵](#)
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41. Ahmed, *Living*, 94-97. [↵](#)
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