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## Stories that Matter: Making and Preserving Black Spaces andPlaces

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# Stories that Matter: Making and Preserving Black Spaces and Places

Kiesha Warren-Gordon & Emily Ruth Rutter

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## INTRODUCTION

Within this paper we consider the possibilities for decentering whiteness as the default norm, including through curricular changes in higher education. Specifically, we take up the following questions: Who is freely able and, conversely, unable to exercise the right to make, remake, and revise? Moreover, whose stories are being told and preserved for future generations? Using an autoethnographic analysis, we address these questions by discussing the complexities of relaunching and attempting to enrich the African American Studies program at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) of higher education.

The narrative reflections presented in this paper were composed by the Director of the African American Studies program who self-identifies as a Black female and the Assistant Director who self-identifies as a cisgender woman of European descent. An autoethnographic approach combines characteristics of ethnography and autobiography, thereby allowing individuals to explore cultural understanding through self-observation as participants in the research.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, such an approach requires the researchers to reflect on and question their experiences in the context of the reality in which they live.<sup>97</sup> For this paper, this approach is especially beneficial insofar as our goal is to explore

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<sup>96</sup> Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez, and Heewon Chang, "Living Autoethnography: Connecting Life and Research," *Journal of Research Practice* 6, no. 1 (2010): 2.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

our lived Black and white experiences of working together to maintain and expand an African American Studies program within an institution of higher education. These distinctions have also informed the attendant struggles we face when striving to dismantle Eurocentric modes of thought. In the conclusion of the essay, we reflect on the importance of documenting and sharing our lived experiences so that they might provide guidance for current and future scholar-teachers working on behalf of systemic change in higher education and beyond.

While this paper was written with publication in a particular journal in mind, we had already been considering writing about our time as a director and an assistant director of African American Studies at a PWI. We imagined that the obstacles and rewards of our distinct but overlapping experiences might be of interest to our colleagues laboring on behalf of African American Studies, both at other institutions of higher education and in other educational and activist settings, especially those with majority white populations. Thus, when we received a special call for papers that addressed issues of power in the context of social change, we felt that our experiences leading the African American Studies program would fit nicely with that theme. Accordingly, we took the following steps to compose this autoethnographic essay: we met to discuss our individual and collective goals; we completed writing our personal narratives alone; we came together to synthesize our experiences as director and assistant director; and, for the purposes of the paper, we attempted to meld our two voices into one, much as we have done in our leadership of an African American Studies program. At each stage, we considered the possible repercussions of sharing our truths. In the end, we concluded that our individual and collective stories may shed needed light on the barriers that women of color face when working to develop African American Studies programs in particular and to decenter whiteness in general. As Audre Lorde avers in her incisive essay “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” “It is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many

silences to be broken.”<sup>98</sup> Here, we try to break the silence in hopes that people who identify as being marginal within the walls of higher education will read this and recognize that they are not alone in finding a place and space to articulate their voices. We also hope allies and accomplices in social justice work will recognize the necessity (not to mention the complexities) of empowering marginalized voices and Afro-centric modes of thought.

## COMING TOGETHER

Before mapping out the context of our own efforts to remake our university into a site where African American Studies is not just included in the curriculum but also valued as a worldview, let us offer a brief overview of the primary objectives of this field of study. As Ibram X. Kendi (formerly Ibram H. Rogers) details, in the late 1960s Black campus activists demanded the adoption of curricula focused on the Black experience, the hiring of professors and administrators who shared their backgrounds and experiences, and ultimately an overhaul of white-centric ideologies and norms. These activists, Kendi argues, “did not succeed in revolutionizing higher education. However, they did succeed in shoving to the center a series of historically marginalized academic ideas, questions, frames, methods, perspectives, subjects, and pursuits.”<sup>99</sup> Kendi concludes that Black campus activists “forced the rewriting of the racial constitution of higher education,”<sup>100</sup> thereby institutionalizing African American Studies as an academic discipline. This push for institutionalizing culminated with the creation of the first doctoral program in Black Studies at Temple University in 1988.<sup>101</sup> This field has been instrumental in reorienting the focus of higher education from an almost exclusively Eurocentric

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<sup>98</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2007), 44.

<sup>99</sup> Ibram X. Kendi (Ibram H. Rogers), *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965–1972* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: A Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016), 442.

curriculum to one which centralizes the undeniable significance of African Diasporic people to our national narratives. In the words of the eminent scholars James Stewart and Talmadge Anderson,

African American Studies emphasizes the study of the effects and implications of racism, inequality, and injustice on the historical and contemporary life chances of Black people. It directly attacks the casual, slight, and often stereotypical treatment of Blacks that negatively affects the social psychology of African American students in educational curricula and textbooks. African American Studies also enhances the education of White students [and non-Black students of color] by neutralizing the omission, distortion, and depreciation of the role and contributions of Black Americans that instill and sustain false notions of White supremacy and European preeminence.<sup>102</sup>

In African American Studies, Euro-American figures and ways of knowing are not erased, but they are not cast in the central roles that they have historically occupied in American institutions of higher education.

Moreover, as Erica R. Edwards, Roderick A. Ferguson, and Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar point out, the contemporary African American Studies landscape is marked by exigent “conditions of possibility—or rather, conditions of necessity,” including—

the flowering of both local and national social and political movements addressing the evisceration of Black lives by carceral and surveilling apparatuses, the resurgence of overt white supremacy, the decrease in resources devoted to Black studies on many campuses and the opposite (the dramatic increase in resources devoted to the programming and hiring in Black studies) on others, the meteoric rise in both the velocity at which knowledge in the field is produced and the sheer number of sites for that knowledge production on the Internet and in public spaces.<sup>103</sup>

In other words, this is a crucial juncture, both on and off college and university campuses, for fostering the wide-ranging research, coursework, and community-engaged activities that constitute African American Studies.

We recognize both the necessities and the possibilities engendered by these sociocultural and political circumstances; however, the African American Studies program that we administer has had a

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<sup>102</sup> James Stewart and Talmadge Anderson, eds., *Introduction to African American Studies: Transdisciplinary Approaches and Implications* (Baltimore: Inprint, 2015), 7.

<sup>103</sup> Erica R. Edwards, Roderick A. Ferguson, and Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, eds., *Keywords for African American Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 6.

history of ebb and flow at our university, and has never functioned as a standalone department. Instead, it has been available to students as a minor with classes taught in various departments to support the program, and typically one tireless faculty member has been at the helm until she or he retires or leaves the university. These patterns have also contributed to the lack of documented historical data regarding how the program has been maintained. It is our understanding that, until 2010, our university had an active African American Studies program. Its absence from campus between 2010 and 2016 was felt. In Fall 2017, our former colleague relaunched the program, and chose to make the public announcement as he introduced Angela Davis, the keynote speaker at a symposium on diversity being held at the university. That opening night, so to speak, was one of nearly unrivaled activist energy, and students began enrolling in the newly launched minor almost immediately. The previous director's objective was to re-establish an interdisciplinary minor that drew together a range of courses already on the books, not to add specifically African American Studies courses to the curriculum, as we have done. In other words, by design the African American Studies interdisciplinary minor did not compete with other existing programs, thereby assuaging departmental fears about enrollment numbers on the one hand and safeguarding against potential anxieties about a more robust Afro-centric curricula on the other. For the most part, then, the reestablishment of the African American Studies minor was not met with the institutional resistance that, historically, has often accompanied the creation of Afro-centric programs within the academy.<sup>104</sup>

A year into the new program, the director announced that he would be leaving the university, and he expressed his concern regarding the program's future. He convened a meeting with us and other figures at the university to discuss the possibilities. It became clear that his home department's

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<sup>104</sup> As Ibram X. Kendi (formerly Ibram H. Rogers) notes, a significant backlash to Afro-centric programs began shortly after their establishment in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, leading to charges of so-called "reverse racism," among other fallacious justifications for maintaining a Eurocentric status quo. "The professed standardization of inclusion," Kendi avers, "now too often excludes the champions of diversity from instituting race-specific programs, the primary way to eliminate past (and not to mention present) inequities." See Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement*, 164.

infrastructure could not maintain the program once the director left. We were personally told that an African American Studies director needed to be put in place immediately, and this is when we met for the first time to discuss the possibility of us (a tenured Black woman CJC professor and an untenured white woman English professor) partnering to lead the program. It is important to underscore that we did not know each other prior to this meeting because forging an alliance has been one of the key mechanisms for growing the program, even as it has also meant being conscientious about the distinct set of experiences and worldviews that we bring to our collective table. To complicate matters, the administration of the program has for a variety of reasons been maintained by three different departments, with faculty members from numerous other departments teaching African American Studies courses. This piecemeal infrastructure often causes confusion for students, faculty, and administrators, not to mention us, becoming a distraction from the real work at hand: centralizing the experiences of African Americans and, in the process, dismantling Eurocentrism.

In other words, while interdisciplinary collaborations are often quite beneficial, they are also challenging to manage on both logistical and personal levels. They return us to the questions of who is able to make and remake freely, as well as to whose stories are not only told but institutionally preserved. In this regard, our collaboration and our program goals are guided by the belief that, especially at PWIs, we need to invest in empowering Black students, faculty, and staff. We want to remake our community into one in which whiteness is neither the default norm, nor the black/white binary the only opportunity to discuss African American life. As Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it in his National Book Award-winning *Between the World and Me* (2015), “They made us a race, we made ourselves into a people.”<sup>105</sup> This focus on African American *people*, not fallacious constructions of racial essences, has provided generations of Black students and their allies with epistemological refuge, especially at PWIs. Further, as Roxane Gay describes in “Feel Me. See Me. Hear Me. Reach Me,”

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<sup>105</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 149.

“When it comes to showing young black students there are teachers who look like them, when it comes to mentoring and being there to support students, I feel like it’s everyone’s job (regardless of ethnicity), and if you don’t believe that as a black academic, you need to check yourself.”<sup>106</sup> We are invested in building a supportive, affirmative community that ensures that all of our students and colleagues feel seen, heard, and valued. Our partnership has been rewarding, and our commitment to ensuring that Black worldviews receive the attention they deserve is steadfast, but it should be noted that, for distinct reasons stemming from our own backgrounds and experiences, it has been an ongoing struggle not only to maintain the African American Studies program but also to ensure its relevance and rigor.

The question of who is vested with the agency to envision and implement curricular and, ultimately, institutional change is crucial. We feel certain that our colleagues elsewhere, both inside and outside academe, grapple with these concerns about voice and agency when pushing for Afro-centric approaches at PWIs, especially when these efforts are spearheaded by Black women. First and foremost, one must confront a history within predominantly white organizations and institutions of promoting and rewarding whites in contrast to a history of trepidation surrounding Black-led initiatives. Organizational behavior scholars Samantha E. Erskine and Diana Bilimoria explain that the white hegemonic gaze thwarts professional Afro-Diasporic women’s advancement through “a ubiquitous system of surveillance, permissions, and exclusions by an objectifying gaze that racially interpellates Blackness, makes Afro-Diasporic people feel as though they are either guests or strangers in White spaces, and with expectations that since Afro-Diasporic people are being ‘accommodated into a White system,’ they should therefore be grateful and not complain about racism.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Roxane Gay, “Feel Me. See Me. Hear Me. Reach Me,” in *Bad Feminist: Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 7.

<sup>107</sup> Samantha E. Erskine and Diana Bilimoria. “White Allyship of Afro-Diasporic Women in the Workplace: A Transformative Strategy for Organizational Change,” *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 320.



Further, the time and energy expended not only in striving to implement change in the face of institutional barriers but also over anxieties about support affect faculty of color and their allies differently. As Stephanie M. Wildman and Adrienne D. Davis note, “Members of privileged groups can opt out of struggles against oppression if they choose.”<sup>108</sup> In other words, white scholars (and activists) working toward racial equity nearly always have an escape hatch, lowering the material and even emotional stakes of their efforts in comparison with their colleagues of color. In addition to these endemic forms of bias and exclusion, pioneering women within Black Studies arenas have not always received the prominent place that they deserve. As Shirley Moody-Turner and James Stewart observe, “Africana studies faces a continuing challenge of combating the invisibility of Africana women in the public sphere and the marginalization of their historical and contemporary voices. This challenge is not unique to Africana studies; rather it is one that derives from the patriarchal nature of most societies and is reflected in the fields and modes of inquiry.”<sup>109</sup> In our collaboration, we have tried both to confront and guard against these historical and contemporary biases and erasures and to share these experiences in order that they might offer guidance to current and future scholars, teachers, and activists who find themselves in similar circumstances. In what follows, therefore, we examine our individual perspectives and then offer brief takeaways about the process of attempting to remake places and spaces that ensure the centrality of Black life at a PWI.

## **THE DIRECTOR’S PERSPECTIVE**

As a Black mother who is an associate professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, and a community-engaged scholar, I wear many hats but had very little experience

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<sup>108</sup> Stephanie M. Wildman and Adrienne D. Davis, “Making Systems of Privilege Visible,” in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, ed. Paula Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2012), 111.

<sup>109</sup> Shirley Moody-Turner and James Stewart, “Gendering Africana Studies; Insights from Anna Julia Cooper,” *African American Review* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 42.

working with university administrators prior to assuming the role of director of African American Studies with the departure of my colleague. Moreover, my interactions with faculty outside of my department was limited to serving on university and college committees and the few Black faculty whom I have connected with to form meaningful friendships. My focus on being promoted from associate professor to professor enabled me to rationalize that this isolation was important because I needed the time to work on the requirements for being promoted. Although the university and college expect larger amounts of service in promotion from associate professor to professor, the gold standard is still publications. Taking on additional responsibilities that go beyond serving in one's home department, in the community, and in one's discipline can be prohibitive to one's goals for promotion, simply due to the time-consuming nature of service work. Because women of color are often tapped to serve on more committees than their white and male counterparts, I have had to think seriously about my level of service. Amado M. Padilla has used the phrase "cultural taxation" to describe the extra burden of service responsibilities placed upon minority faculty members because of their racial or ethnic background.<sup>110</sup> As he reports, in some cases, faculty members may feel obligated and will not say "no," recognizing the importance of having cultural representation. Others will not say "no" due to fear of repercussions. Faculty of color take on these service responsibilities, limiting their ability to maintain an active research agenda, which in turn affects their ability to move forward in promotion. With all this in mind, I have approached my service responsibilities with kid gloves, consciously limiting the amount of service I commit to within an academic year.

This concern about service coupled with my goal for promotion meant that I never envisioned that I would be leading a university program or department, although I do have career aspirations to one day direct a center that focuses on community engagement within an urban setting. The day I was

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<sup>110</sup> Amado M. Padilla, "Ethnic Minority Scholars, Research, and Mentoring: Current and Future Issues," *Educational Researcher* 23, no. 4 (1994): 24.

appointed as director of the African American Studies program was therefore not a day of celebration but rather one that was full of trepidation and uncertainty. At the same time, as the only tenured Black female in my home department, I thought that leading African American Studies would at least be an opportunity to build community and to address the feeling of isolation that myself and other faculty of color face.<sup>111</sup> I also hoped that serving as the director of the program would allow me to connect with students of color, since in my field of study engagement with students of color is rare. Ultimately, I recognized that taking on this role would slow down my progress toward promotion from associate professor to professor, but I opted to focus on these community-building experiences because I knew it was important not only for me but also for affirming and preserving Black stories in a PWI setting.

When I took over as director of African American Studies, the program did not offer any course with the African American Studies prefix (AFAM). My initial goal was to revise the curriculum and to develop standalone courses that would have the AFAM prefix. After careful research and consideration of students' needs, I developed three new courses: Introduction to African American Studies, African American Studies Theory and Methods, and African American Studies Capstone. The creation of these courses was important to ensure that African American Studies began developing its own identity as a standalone program. Moreover, these AFAM classes would offer students a sustained, scaffolded course of study in Black life, both past and present. When instituting new courses, the university requires that they go through various committees for approval to ensure that they meet the goals of higher education and that they do not compete with other courses already being offered. Perhaps surprisingly, we had very little pushback for the creation of the three new AFAM courses.

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<sup>111</sup> Frank Tuitt, Michele Hanna, Lisa M. Martinez, M. Salazar, and Rachel Griffin, "Teaching in the Line of Fire: Faculty of Color in the Academy," *Thought and Action* 25 (2009): 65.

With these courses now in the catalog, we are just beginning to see the realization of my initial goal, but this is also only the first step to ensuring that Afro-centric courses are more widely available. As I reflect on curriculum development, I am hopeful that colleagues and departments will move beyond teaching multicultural curricula and focus more on courses that center the Black experience. For example, my plan to teach a special-topics course on Black criminology is the first of its kind in my home department, while also providing African American Studies minors with an opportunity to use Black theoretical paradigms and decolonized research methodological techniques as they study the treatment of Black people within the criminal justice system. I hope that more departments will take my lead and see the value of developing courses that consider Black experiences through the lens of Afro-centric theoretical models.

### **THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE**

As a cisgender woman of European descent who teaches African American literature and African American Studies courses, I am nearly always confronting scenarios in which I have to consider the limitations of my lived experience versus my academic knowledge. Nearly two decades ago, I began my teaching career in a predominantly Black high school—an experience that both awakened me to my unearned racial privileges and set me on my current path as a scholar-teacher of African American literature. My subsequent immersion in African American Studies has been transformative, facilitating the process of destabilizing my rather Eurocentric upbringing and shifting my attention to the African Diaspora, especially its profound significance for understanding American history, art, politics, and society more generally. In my current role as the assistant director of an African American Studies program, I strive to leverage my position and (white) privilege to empower Black students and colleagues.

At the same time that I divest of Eurocentric ideologies in my life and work, including in my predominantly Black classrooms, I am consistently aware of the power dynamics that have been scripted before any of us set foot on campus, and my role as the assistant director of African American Studies has put these concerns into even sharper focus. I am grateful for these opportunities to examine the sociohistorical hierarchies that continue to structure university curricula, as well as the relationships between colleagues, teachers and students, and faculty, staff, and administrators. “Certainly, there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex,” Audre Lorde writes in “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference.” “But,” Lorde continues, “it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.”<sup>112</sup> In my writing, teaching, activism, and personal relationships, I am mindful of this refusal to countenance silence surrounding the ways we embody both historical and contemporary social stratifications. Civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer put it like this: “You are not free whether you white or whether you black, until I am free.”<sup>113</sup> Freedom for my students, colleagues, and members of the community means that I, too, will no longer be shackled to systems of injustice. Yet, as Angela Davis reminds us with the title of her most recent book: *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*.<sup>114</sup>

Because the director and I stepped into the leadership of African American Studies to ensure the stability of the program in the wake of our colleague’s announced departure, we have had to add to our workload in ways that have been unexpected. While I am fully committed to the project of African American Studies in my professional and personal life, I, like the director, never imagined

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<sup>112</sup> Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 117.

<sup>113</sup> Fannie Lou Hamer, “‘The Only Thing We Can Do Is to Work Together,’ Speech Delivered at a Chapter Meeting of the National Council of Negro Women in Mississippi, 1967,” in *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*, ed. Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 73.

<sup>114</sup> Angela Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016).

myself leading a program. Further, I have felt a significant amount of concern about assuming a leadership role in African American Studies as a person of European descent in an already predominantly white setting. For example, “diversity” and “inclusion” are terms that are used with increased frequency in academe, and I am invested in both of these concepts. At the same time, I remain keenly aware that these terms are capacious and elastic, capable of being invoked to engineer equitable change *and* to support the status quo. As Davis cautioned in an interview with Gary Younge in 2007, “When people call for diversity and link it to justice and equality, that’s fine. But there’s a model of diversity as the difference that makes no difference, the change that brings about no change.”<sup>115</sup> Jennifer C. Nash likewise observes that diversity initiatives often “selectively usher a few bodies into exclusive institutions” without fundamentally remaking the exclusions that constitute those institutions.<sup>116</sup>

If we are to remake PWIs into spaces that are inclusive of all backgrounds and experiences, that do not implicitly privilege the worldviews of dominant groups, it is incumbent upon us and the institutions in which we labor to engage in truth and reconciliation work. To give Black (and brown, queer, nonbinary, disabled, among others) individuals a seat at the table is the first step, and the next ones must include where we have been as a community in terms of injustice and exclusion, and what it would mean to reimagine a landscape that does not perpetuate the inequities of the past and their contemporary residue. Personally, I have to be strategic about using my voice to amplify the perspectives of people of color, but I also need to be keenly aware of when I need to step back. Moreover, through the unearned advantage of skin pigmentation I have *decided* to dedicate much of my personal and professional energy to challenging anti-Black ideologies and policies. My friends and colleagues of color, on the other hand, do not always have that choice.

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<sup>115</sup> Angela Davis with Gary Younge, “We Used to Think There Was a Black Community,” Nov. 8, 2007, *TheGuardian.com*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/nov/08/usa.gender>.

<sup>116</sup> Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 24.

## WHOSE STORIES ARE BEING TOLD, AND HOW ARE THEY BEING PRESERVED?

In “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” Lorde reminds us of the danger of “historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread.”<sup>117</sup> “We find ourselves having to repeat and relearn the same old lessons over and over that our mothers did,” she adds, “because we do not pass on what we have learned, or because we are unable to listen.”<sup>118</sup> As we have learned through our individual and collective reflections on the challenge of maintaining and further enriching the African American Studies program at our institution, we must not only listen to our elders but also take stock of and share our stories so that we all do not suffer amnesia. As critical race theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic note: “Powerfully written stories and narratives may begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity. . . . They reduce alienation for members of excluded groups, while offering opportunities for members of the majority group to meet them halfway.”<sup>119</sup> Put another way, the stories of African Americans and other marginalized groups are vital forms of testimony, combatting the long-standing American tendency to focus on Eurocentric experiences and worldviews. In our program, we recognize the power of Black stories—whether they be penned by canonical writers or passed down by our friends and neighbors—as crucial to remaking the university into an inclusive space that values, non-hierarchically, a variety of worldviews.

We also heed the lessons of Dr. Irma McClaurin, whose current work on the Black Feminist Archive focuses on preserving the multifaceted lives of Black women. In a recent interview, she asked pointedly: “What are you doing to preserve your life?” and then reminded us that “Not unlike the

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<sup>117</sup> Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 117.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 49–51.

Black Lives Matter movement, we have to emphasize self-preservation.”<sup>120</sup> As we work toward race and gender justice and guard against Eurocentrism in our personal and professional lives, we also have to *preserve* our experiences, passing them along to younger and future generations so that we can build intergenerational, interracial knowledge dedicated to the task of Black liberation. As the archivist Pellom McDaniels III likewise argued, “The white majority worked systematically to regulate and manage the narratives associated with people of African descent and their individual and collective histories, especially those that demonstrated blacks’ ability to rise above their circumstances. To be born disconnected from one’s history—past and present—is one sure way to confuse and alienate an individual’s sense of destiny and purpose.”<sup>121</sup> A chief purpose of our African American Studies work, within and beyond the classroom, is to restore those connections, ensuring that Black faculty, students, administrators, and community members have sustained access to empowering narratives of past and present.

We have thus begun documenting our African American Studies events and conversations with students and colleagues to become part of our archive. We have also been increasing our capacity for community-engaged courses focused on, for example, documenting the challenges faced by individuals reentering society from prison and the social justice activities of African American women in our local area. Additionally, we are launching a workshop course that will not only teach students about the dehumanizing impact of racism but also actively engage them in the work of, to borrow the phrasing of Ibram X. Kendi’s recent title, becoming antiracist.<sup>122</sup> All of these endeavors represent our commitment to collaborative storytelling and archiving as means of making marginalized voices heard

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<sup>120</sup> Irma McClaurin, “Archival Interventions and Agency: Irma McClaurin in Conversation with Emily Ruth Rutter about the Black Feminist Archive,” forthcoming in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, special issue “Women and Archives,” Spring 2021.

<sup>121</sup> Pellom McDaniels III, *The Price of Jockeys: The Life of Isaac Burns Murphy* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 44.

<sup>122</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World).



and, further, remaking the institutional value system into one that privileges interdisciplinary community.

Even co-writing about the historically significant aspects of how the program came into fruition contributes to the body of literature regarding the development of Black Studies programs at PWIs across the United States. These peer-reviewed publications will also work to support our own journeys toward tenure and promotion, ensuring that our service commitments are working hand-in-glove with our scholarship and our core investment in the significance of African American stories. In this regard, this essay is really only a chapter in an unfolding narrative about what it means to remake and revise, to share and preserve, and, more broadly, to struggle toward a dismantling of Eurocentrism within the context of a diverse and affirmative community.

Moreover, in this moment of increased racial consciousness, as well as COVID-19 and economic recession, both of which have disproportionately impacted Black and Latinx communities—people in all sectors, including higher education, are eager to champion the rallying cry of Black Lives Matter. Since the inception of our program, we have been centering Black experiences and underscoring why they matter. While we appreciate the many statements and action plans being issued by our colleagues in other fields, we remain committed to the anti-racist, intersectional, Black-centric agenda that we have been pursuing for years. We will continue to sustain and enrich our curriculum; mentor and create meaningful classroom experiences for our Black students; and collaborate with groups such as the Student Anti-Racism and Intersectionality Advisory Council, which we launched well before the murder of George Floyd. We also want to remain mindful of the ways in which Black faculty and staff are overburdened during this time of protest. Non-Black colleagues and community members want guidance: What books and articles should we read, and how should we discuss these texts with our friends and family? How should we counsel our children regarding anti-Black violence? And, the list of questions goes on and on. We want to provide guidance

because we are so deeply invested in these issues, but we also need to be careful not to, once again, overburden faculty of color with teaching white people about racism. As we all know by now, racism is a white problem, and it requires white individuals and groups (including academic departments) to take responsibility for dismantling white supremacy—internally, interpersonally, ideologically, and institutionally. As an African American Studies program, our role is to stay focused on the ongoing work of maintaining Black-centered curricula and programs, as well as ensuring the well-being of Black students, staff, faculty, and community members.

As we look to the future, we also recognize that our positions of leadership within the program may not be forever, but our commitments to the discipline, to students, and to the broader community are steadfast. In this respect, we have to think about how our story will end and what we are leaving behind because in that way we are constantly thinking about our archive—of African American Studies, of our experiences within it, and about the rewards and challenges of striving to decenter whiteness in predominantly white spaces. As we are currently in positions to support and develop the study of Black life, we must do so with conscientiousness and care. As leaders, we must be aware that with every conversation, program, and course we offer we are creating a narrative about the program, and these narratives and artifacts are part of our legacy.

Fifty years ago, as students nationwide were urging universities and colleges to adopt Black Studies curricula, June Jordan issued a defiant call in her essay “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person”: “We look for community. We have already suffered the alternatives to community, to human commitment. We have borne the whiplash of ‘white studies’ unmitigated by the stranger ingredient of humane dedication. Therefore, we cannot, in sanity, pass by the potentiality of Black studies: studies of the person consecrated to the preservation of that person.”<sup>123</sup> With this historical urging both for

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<sup>123</sup> June Jordan, “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person,” 1969, in *Civil Wars* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), 53.

community and for a holistic commitment to Black/African American Studies in mind, we recently held a celebratory dinner at which we honored the graduation of our inaugural class of minors. An African American Studies faculty member read her poetry, each of us spoke briefly about the pride we felt in our students' achievements, Black alumni shared their words of wisdom, and, ultimately, we glimpsed the possibility of writing a new story with the nurturing of Black spaces and places at its center. One student emailed later to say, "I didn't want the night to end." As we consider what kinds of experiences and stories to preserve, this is an important one, for amidst all of the challenges of remaking a historically Eurocentric curricula and institutional culture into one that values Black life in all of its beauty and complexity we also want to preserve (à la Dr. McClaurin) the rewarding moments when all of the pieces to this new narrative fell into place. "I didn't want the night to end," indeed.

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