"Here They Come, Y'all:" Black Studies, Dr. Daniel Black, and Reflections from The Black School of Thought

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Abstract

During his tenure, Dr. Daniel Black has played a pivotal role in educating and mentoring countless students, fostering their academic and spiritual development. He has intentionally cultivated a tradition of scholar activism in Black Studies, thereby cementing his intellectual legacy. In May of 2024, Black delivered his widely acclaimed commencement address, "Here They Come," at Clark Atlanta University. Dr. Black's commencement address exemplifies his dedication to the legacy of CAU and the advancement of Black Studies. Accordingly, this work presents a reflective essay grounded in Afrocentric theory, centering on Dr. Black's pedagogical approach, and examining its profound impact on next generation of Black Studies scholars.

Keywords: CAU, Black Studies, Afrocentric, Dr. Daniel Black, commencement, HBCU

Introduction

The illustrious Atlanta University, founded in 1865 after the Civil War, and Clark College, founded in 1869, combined in 1988 to form Clark Atlanta University (CAU). Atlanta University, the oldest institution of higher education in the city of Atlanta, Georgia, is also the oldest graduate institution to support a predominately African American student body population in the United States. CAU has a legacy of dynamic educators who include individuals such as

Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, Dr. Rufus Clement, Dr. Pearlie Craft Dove, and Dr. Shelby Lewis. Among this legacy of erudite scholars is Dr. Daniel Omotosho Black.

Dr. Black, a Clark College alum and one of the first scholars to receive a Ph.D. in Africana Studies, has committed thirty years to teaching at CAU. During his tenure, he has educated and mentored countless students both academically, culturally, and spiritually. He has reared many in the Black Studies tradition of scholar activism and created an intellectual legacy. In May of 2024, Daniel Black delivered the now viral commencement speech of the era, "Here They Come, Y'all," at Clark Atlanta University. The speech invoked a spirit of self-determination and evoked CAU's motto, "find a way or make one," not only for the class of 2024 but for all audiences. Dr. Black's commencement speech underscores his commitment to the legacy of CAU and the future of Africana Studies. Thus, this work is a reflective essay grounded in Afrocentric theory that focuses specifically on the teachings of Daniel Black and explores the impact of his pedagogy on the creation of the next generation of Black Studies Scholars.

Establishing a "Black" Tradition

Black's invitation to participate in the Black Studies tradition is evident not only in his speech, but also in his creation of a doctoral cohort coined "The Black School of Thought," which includes Drs. Kyle R. Fox, La'Neice Littleton, Joyce White and Courtney Terry. Indicative of Black's commitment to CAU's motto of "finding a way," The Black School of Thought is an interdisciplinary, humanistic cohort composed of English, History, and Identity Studies scholars who operate through a Black Studies theoretical lens and ground their work in Afrocentric thought and praxis. Scholars in the Black School of Thought adhere to the Black Studies tenets of African centeredness, intellectual confidence and high standards of excellence, and community engagement—all fundamental tenets of the Black Studies tradition, which Black himself inherited and has passed on through rigorous training and study of the African American experience.

The Formation of Black Studies

In the aftermath of the Civil War, formerly enslaved African Americans throughout the South sought out many opportunities including property ownership, citizenship, and access to education. Thus, numerous educational institutions, now commonly referred to as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), were founded to educate the formerly enslaved and to

provide hope for a previously undereducated population. For generations, Atlanta University had been lauded as a premier institution at the forefront of the study of African American history and culture. In the post-Reconstruction era, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois created the first studies of what he termed, "the negro problem," with the *Atlanta University Publications* (1896-1944), spanning the end of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. In the decades between the 1940s and 1960s, African Americans suffered the effects of Jim Crow in the South and discriminatory practices throughout the US. While African Americans suffered these same discriminatory practices within educational institutions, this landscape eventually provided the foundation for what would transform into the formal discipline of Black Studies. During the '60s, students at both HBCUs and predominately white institutions alongside community members fought for the creation of Black Studies programs with curricula focused on multiple facets of the Black experience including, history, literature, and the arts.

The 1960s Black Power Movement was a social and cultural movement of African Americans centered on ideals of self-determination, African cultural reclamation, and community-centeredness. Atlanta University and Clark College were among several other HBCUs that adopted Black Studies courses and programs to provide students with the historical and cultural knowledge they needed to be successful in life and their chosen career fields. Black Studies was founded as an interdisciplinary discipline that allows scholars to traverse traditional disciplines and simultaneously study the Black experience, while maintaining a standard of academic excellence.

Since the 1960s, there has been a surge in scholarly inquiries about improving the educational experience of African American students and teachers. Many of these studies are concerned with the incongruent composition of institutional leadership and the instructional faculty. However, there is a faction that suggests the incongruence is between African American student achievement and their potential for holistic excellence (Hillard, 1992, pp. 87-102). Proponents of this argument suggest that African American students encounter several academic and personal barriers when Eurocentric standards of success are placed upon them. Immersing these students in educational settings that support their holistic development– moral, spiritual, and intellectual– is essential for true success (Hilliard 1992, pp. 370-377). In "Independent Black Institutions: African-center Education Models," researcher Kofi Lomotey (1992) states:

> African centered education enables...students to look at the world with Africa as the center. It encompasses not only those instructional and curricular approaches that result in a shift in students' world view, but it engenders a reorientation of their values and actions as well... It involves more than mere textbooks and other curricular materials; it encompasses a supportive, understanding, and encouraging school climate...it demands that children be viewed as educable and as descendants of a long line of scholars (pp. 456-457).

During Dr. Black's tenure at Clark Atlanta University, he continued the tradition of African-centered education among Black Studies scholars; in turn, he has established a legacy of preparing his students to see the world through an African-centered or Afrocentric paradigm that continues today. In the spirit of his academic forefathers such as Drs. Carter G. Woodson, Cheik Anta Diop, and Asa Hillard, Black's pedagogical philosophy centers the past, present, and future contributions of the African, all while offering critiques of European and African educational, spiritual, and moral shortcomings.

Here He Comes, Y'all: The Musing of Daniel Black

In "Here They Come, Y'all," Dr. Black attests that CAU's faculty, "teach here because black excellence is our hobby. It's our daily bread. It's our living water. It's our reason for waking up in the morning. We teach here because every day we come to work, [and] we see God." (Black, 2024). While the speech's sentiment of CAU faculty dedication in the cultivation of cadres of scholars rooted in Black excellence is clearly articulated, hermeneutically, Dr. Black's words are also rooted in the dedication of CAU faculty to Black scholars and excellence within the broader context and tradition of Africana or Black Studies. Specifically, this part of Black's speech centers the African cosmology and ontology within the pedagogical tradition and legacy of CAU and its faculty. As a preacher in the African American church highlights a particular verse(s) of the bible to deliver a message to their congregants, the importance of the highlighted lines of Black's speech delivers and cements for the audience, and beyond, some of the central tenets and practices Black, and the legacy he hails from, teach and instill. A project reflective of the living and evolution of a people and culture, Black studies firmly centers and plants the wisdom of the ancestors at its core. To honor the wisdom of the ancestors means

beginning at the beginning, across the great waters that carried Africans to the Americas, and to the lands they called home before the Great Maafa. Thus, beginning from an African centered perspective remains a core principle and focus of this interdisciplinary academic endeavor.

As the sign and symbol of the Sankofa bird or heart translates into a return to the past to see the present and understand the future through the ancient wisdom of the ancestors, Black studies can be envisaged as a project of reclamation, "a reclamation of space and place to study and examine Black subjectivity within the cultural cannon utilizing African-ness as the given apparatus" (White, 2022, p. 12). Thus, as Black's speech continues to teach us all, his living word spoken through ancestral wisdom of Africa highlights what many scholars of Black studies articulate as the importance of the living word, or *nommo*. *Nommo,* according to Molefi Asante in *Afrocentricity* (1998) is, "the generative power of the spoken word" (p. 202). Accordingly, Barbara Christian (1985) in her article, "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's: Praisesong for The Widow," argues that *nommo* "is also essential to the ritual, for in African cosmology it is through *nommo,* through the correct naming of a thing, that it comes into existence" (p. 150). Thus, the words spoken by Black, in this game changing commencement speech, set into motion yet another cadre of Black scholars that will exude excellence. Dr. Black names, gives shape to, and calls forth the harvest of the seeds planted within the students, their families, and the alumni witnessing words turn into living and breathing entities endowed with the power and wisdom of the ancestors—as he had done for countless others and his elders had done for him—returning all who would hear the ancestor's call home. Or, in the words of Dr. Black, describing his intended audience for the speech, "I was talking to the students; I was talking to folks who went to Clark. This was a very much in home, at home address" (Carr, 2024). Dr. Black's words and intentions are highlighted by the great scholar and ancestor Dr. John Henrik Clarke (1991) who posits that, "Africa is our center of gravity, our cultural and spiritual mother and father, our beating heart, no matter where we live on the face of this earth." (p. 1).

Reflections from The Black School of Thought

Black's impact as a professor and mentor is best represented and described through reflections of his doctoral students, and particularly, the Black School of Thought because of the years spent developing under the tutelage of Dr. Black. This section consists of reflections from

three members of the Black School of Thought regarding the Afrocentric principles employed by Dr. Black.

Dr. Joyce White: African Centeredness

As a student of Dr. Black—once a student, always a student—who followed in the footsteps and legacy of Clarke and others, these words resonate in my being. Returning home, to my center, is a practice that Dr. Daniel Black continually teaches and instills and one I hope to articulate through a personal example and experience detailed in the next section of this narrative. Homecoming and reunions have been a staple in the Black community since the end of the civil war and has expanded to become a broader practice as West African countries also invite the African diaspora home. During my dissertation defense, Dr. Black returned my gaze and project back home, to Africa, with five words "You need a conceptual framework." Months and months of research and writing my theoretical framework on ritual seemed to hang in the balance. "Do you mean I need to revise my theoretical framework?" I said as my mind went blank and also tried to parse through the pages of the framework to see where the issue resided. My hands trembled and sweat started to bead on my forehead as I recalled the five drafts I had written over the summer. "No," he said, "a conceptual framework." Dr. Black's booming voice echoed in my head as he explained. I could not understand what he wanted me to do. Hadn't I finished all the required sections? What was this conceptual framework he spoke of? As my committee congratulated me on the passing of my proposal, I left the meeting in a fog. My cohort congratulated me and asked questions about the proposal defense, and while I answered as best I could, only the words conceptual framework seemed to loom before me. I researched, talked to others, and asked follow up questions, but nothing brought me to any understanding. I could not get to the bottom of my confusion. Several weeks passed until I was able to wrap my head around it all.

Ironically, I was on my way home researching in the car as my partner drove. Thinking of home, the landscape, and the people, and what it symbolized for me and expressed about my being, revealed the meaning behind Dr. Black's words, which had haunted me for weeks. Returning home, to the sacred place where the spirits of my ancestors shaped and reshaped, cosmologically and ontologically, the landscape and my relationship to it. Home, where the winds blowing through the live oaks whispered wisdom and knowledge of the past and reached far beyond the physical space of home. Home, a place of restoration that signaled the way

forward, the path to healing. My dissertation theoretically discussed the process, purpose, and function of ritual, but where could I place ritual and in what context? In other words, I knew of the existence of home, but where was home located? Or, what was the home of home? In that moment, what I realized is that the project was firmly centered in theory but lacked the African centering of the concept. What, then, was the home of ritual? Dr. Black was asking me to do exactly what Africana or Black studies asks students and scholars to do, to acknowledge and place the study of it into the context of the history and culture, or as is defined: "Afrocentricity is a way of viewing and interpreting universal phenomena from African historical and cultural perspectives" (Anderson & Stewart 2007, p. 37). While on an academic project, Dr. Black prompted me to return home and reach back into the living words of the ancestors to bring forth the knowledge and wisdom of ritual.

Dr. Kyle R. Fox: Intellectual Confidence and High Standards of Excellence

Knowing the Afrocentric paradigm is important for the purposes of illustration. To effectively apply this ideology to his pedagogy, Dr. Black actively engages African historical moments, cultural values, logic, and spiritual systems. Dr. Black and his teaching is the personification of CAU's motto: "find a way or make one," which is consistent with the principles Ngazo Saba. Conceived by Maulana Karenga, the principles are (a) *Umoga* or unity, (b) *Kujichagulia* or self-determination, (c) *Ujima* or collective work and responsibility, (d) *Ujamma* or cooperative economics, (e) *Kuumba* or creativity, (f) Nia or purpose, and (g) Imani or faith (Kifano, 1996, p. 214). Throughout my time as Dr. Black's student and mentee, he has consistently embodied all the aforementioned principles of Ngazo Saba. Dr. Black's African centeredness serves as a source of liberation for me and countless others not only in social spaces but also in educational spaces.

A vivid memory of my dissertation process that has shaped my scholarship is the fight for the inclusion of the Black or African voice in a white dominated field. My dissertation examined the gendered and raced performance of Black male protagonists in contemporary African American literature. In that, I heavily relied on scholars like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. I recall him excitedly saying, "Where is the Black man voice in this? No, sir!" Dr. Black challenged me to de-center the European voice and celebrate Black scholars and their scholarship. Through this challenge, I was able to understand and apply fully the contributions to the communication discipline by thinkers like E. Patrick Johnson and Vershawn Young.

Reared in a predominantly white, conservative, and rural environment can impose significant limitations on one's intellectual and social development. I can partially attribute my exposure to broader philosophical perspectives and transformative experiences to Dr. Black, whose guidance often challenged my limited worldview. A pivotal moment occurred when I first attended the Ndugu and Nzinga African Rites of Passage meetings. There, I observed individuals who simultaneously honored their religious faith traditions while embracing traditional African spiritual ideologies and deities. This experience granted me the freedom to explore both spiritual and intellectual liberation, fostering a more expansive and inclusive understanding of identity and belief systems. Dr. Black instilled in me a commitment to excellence and a deep appreciation for the contributions and cultural practices of Black communities. He emphasized the importance of independent critical thinking and having pride all parts of one's self, cautioning against relying solely on popular perspectives, as they may not accurately reflect one's lived experiences.

Dr. La'Neice Littleton: Communal Focus

I met Dr. Daniel Black fifteen years ago when I enrolled in the master's program in African American studies at CAU. In this time, Dr. Black went from being my favorite professor, to my mentor—academically and spiritually— and finally as my dissertation advisor. Dr. Black's standard of academic excellence and his commitment to the critical and rigorous study of the Black experience led me to pursuing a Ph.D. in Humanities with concentrations in African American Studies and History. My experiences with him in my master's program opened my mind to the extent that I graduated feeling that I had so much more to learn and thus pursued the Ph.D. When I decided to write my dissertation on the impact of literacy on uprisings organized and led by literate enslaved men, Dr. Black pushed me to think beyond these uprising leaders individually and in the Black Studies tradition by widening the scope to focus on the communities that produced them.

As I began to widen the scope of the work of academia in the community, midway through my dissertation process, I shared with Dr. Black that I was not sure if I wanted to pursue the traditional and logical route of a Ph.D. in becoming a tenure track professor. My dissertation work emphasized the importance of community and community building in the Black tradition. Surprisingly, he encouraged me to think of ways that I could be in both campus and community settings and use the knowledge I acquired to reach audiences in and beyond the academy.

Upon completion of my doctorate at CAU, I went on to serve as a Postdoctoral Fellow in Public Humanities and African American Life at Clemson University. After my postdoctoral fellowship, I took a job as the Director of Community Collaborations at the Atlanta History Center, where most of my work is community engagement driven. As a public historian, I work to provide community members access to gathering and preserving history in a myriad of ways which include museum tours, developing exhibitions, conducting and supporting oral history projects, participating in community-based preservation projects, and conducting community presentations and workshops. Dr. Black has been one of my greatest inspirations in doing this type of work. I am inspired by the way that Dr. Black can move between the campus and community spaces as a public facing scholar. I may never have pursued a career in public history if I had not been trained in the discipline of Black studies and encouraged by him.

Conclusion

From our experience, Dr. Daniel Black is the physical and literal embodiment of Black Studies. He is a scholar. He is an activist. He is a mentor. He is a prophet. He is a friend; He is our Baba. Through his teachings, novels, and even his latest speech, Daniel Black reaches the masses with words and messages that uplift the Black community at large. But to know him personally is to be transformed on the most profound levels. To know him is to be loved and challenged at the core of your being. To know him means to strive to be your best self– academically, culturally, and personally.

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