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ARTICLES

"Of the Wings of Atalanta": The Struggle for African American Studies at the University of Virginia, 1969–1995

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Abstract Anything but peripheral to the institutional and political struggles of African American Studies in the post-Black Power era, the University of Virginia (UVA) occupies an important place in the field's history. Combined with its role as a major funding source for graduate students and advanced scholars with research interests in the history, culture, and politics of the African diaspora, the University has been the site of passionate debates over the field's transformative potential in both the academy and the larger world. It has also been an institution with a rather complicated relationship to the Black Studies project, due in no small part to internal divisions over the best way to advance the field's pedagogical goals, research agenda, and political objectives. Consequently, UVA's African American and African Studies program, particularly its "institute model" of scholarly advancement, provides an excellent case study for examining the regional breadth of the Black Studies movement and its broad impact on knowledge production within and beyond the academy.

Keywords Vivian Gordon · Armstead Robinson · African and African American Studies · The Carter G. Woodson Institute · National Council for Black Studies

More than a century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois in his magisterial study, *The Souls of Black Folk*, identified the Jim Crow South as a critical site for the training of a diverse cadre of students committed to addressing the global problems of white supremacy and labor exploitation. Looking optimistically toward the future, Du Bois predicted that the South's institutions of higher learning would play a decisive role in bringing forth a more empowering modernity for the world's dispossessed. "The wings of Atalanta," he enthused, "are the coming universities of the South" (Du Bois 1903: 71). Frequently, when engaging this particular passage from the *Souls of Black Folk*, my thoughts turn to the research interests and pedagogical commitments that

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brought me to the University of Virginia (UVA) in the fall of 2004. No small factor in my acceptance of a tenure-track position at the University was my dual appointment in the Corcoran Department of History and the Carter G. Woodson Institute for African American and African Studies (CGWI). The Woodson Institute's richly textured history, its reputation as one of the South's most intellectually rigorous centers for research on the African diaspora, and its geographical proximity to the nation's capital corresponded perfectly with my pedagogical goals and research agenda. Fortunately, my tenure with the Woodson Institute has served me well. Teaching the Institute's introductory course to African American and African Studies has afforded me the opportunity to familiarize undergraduates with the discipline's intellectual foundations and political struggles. Moreover, my teaching experiences have also deepened my interest in Virginia's complex relationship to the Black Studies movement.

Anything but peripheral to the institutional and political struggles of African American Studies in the post-Black Power era, the University of Virginia occupies an important place in the field's history. [1] Combined with its role as a major funding source for graduate students and advanced scholars with research interests in the history, culture, and politics of the African diaspora, UVA has been the site of passionate debates over African American Studies' transformative potential in both the academy and the larger world. It has also been an institution with a rather complicated relationship to certain schools of thought within African American Studies, due in no small part to internal divisions over the best way to advance the field's pedagogical goals, research agenda, and political objectives. Thus, the ways in which African American Studies has been conceptualized, practiced, and funded within the University must be held up to critical scrutiny.[2] Especially in this current moment of fiscal retrenchment in which questions surrounding the fate of the humanities loom large in academic discourse, scholars housed in Black Studies units across the nation must speak honestly and critically about the institutions that influence the intellectual integrity and trajectory of the field. However, if such conversations are to produce meaningful change, they must be grounded in a firm understanding of the contested history of African American Studies.

[1] Here, my deployment of the term "field" in reference to UVA's African American Studies program reflects a conscious attempt on my part to use terminology representative of the *dominant* perspective—and by extension institutional arrangements—at the University of Virginia. This is not to say, however, that the University did not have scholars and students who viewed African American/Black Studies as a discipline. As was the case at many colleges and universities throughout the country, students, faculty, and administrators at UVA did not arrive at a general consensus on the question of whether African American Studies constituted a discipline or a field. On the one hand, scholars such as Armstead L. Robinson, along with key University administrators, viewed African American Studies as an interdisciplinary field of knowledge production that drew on the paradigms, methodological approaches, and theoretical frameworks of traditional disciplines (i.e., History, Sociology, Anthropology, and English). On the other hand, Vivian V. Gordon, a sociologist who served as the director of UVA's Afro-American Studies program during the second half of the 1970s, embraced the position that Black Studies was indeed a discipline with its own methods of research and theoretical analyses. Hers was a perspective that increasingly drew the support of many black students during the late 1970s and the early 1980s.

[2] For example, critical questions must be raised about the Carter G. Woodson Institute's pre-doctoral and post-doctoral fellowship program, the intellectual profile of its recipients, and the extent to which the scholarship of the Institute's fellows represent the diverse modes of inquiry within the field of African American Studies.

Toward that end, this essay traces the history of Black Studies at the University of Virginia, from the founding of the University's Afro-American Studies program in the fall of 1970 to the institutionalization and maturation of the Carter G. Woodson Institute under the directorship of Armstead L. Robinson. It engages three important phases in the history of Black Studies at UVA: (1) the formative years (1969–1974) in which a biracial coalition of progressive students and faculty (most notably Paul Gaston, George W. Taylor, Raymond Gavins, Joseph R. Washington, Jr., and Houston A. Baker, Jr.) pushed to solidify Black Studies' presence at the University; (2) the growth and ideological revamping of the AAAS program under the steady leadership of Vivian V. Gordon between the fall of 1975 and the spring of 1980; and (3) the emergence of UVA as an internationally renowned center of African and African American Studies research during Armstead Robinson's tenure (1981–1995) as director of the CGWI. Obviously, space does not permit an exhaustive analysis of the many historical figures, developments, and debates that gave the Black Studies' struggle at UVA its dynamism and uniqueness. Thus, the following essay represents only a modest attempt to insert the University of Virginia into the dominant narrative on the emergence of African American and African Studies as a recognized field within the academy. Over the past few years, the appearance of works by Derrick White (2004), Noliwe Rooks (2006), Fabio Rojas (2007), and Jeffrey Turner (2010), among others, has enriched our understanding of the history of Black Studies and its institutionalization at various colleges, universities, and institutes. Combined with debunking many misconceptions about the field, this burgeoning body of literature has offered great insight into the ways in which local contexts shape and define new forms of knowledge production (Small 1999). It is my hope that the pages that follow build upon this important work by provoking further interrogation into the University of Virginia's complicated relationship to the Black Studies project, the central role of student activists in strengthening and diversifying the discipline's presence at the University, and the expansive intellectual legacy of two seminal figures in Black Studies, Vivian Gordon and Armstead Robinson.

To adequately capture the varied Black Studies' perspectives represented at the University, this essay does not limit its focus to the inner workings of the African American and African Studies program. It also devotes ample attention to the vital work of the Black Student Alliance (BSA) and the Office of African American Affair's Luther P. Jackson Cultural Center (LPJCC), two institutions which in the 1980s and 1990s performed a pivotal role in familiarizing students with the broad intellectual range and depth of Black Studies. Initially organized as the Black Students for Freedom (BSF) in 1968, the BSA has historically been the most vocal proponent for granting UVA's AAAS program departmental status. Via its guest lecture series and cultural programming, this highly influential student organization has also been central in promoting epistemological frameworks and philosophical orientations marginalized by traditional academic units within the University, including at times the Woodson Institute. Early in the spring semester of 1991, for example, the BSA—with the assistance of the Office of African American Affairs—convened a highly successful Afrocentricity Workshop, which featured an address by Temple University's Molefi Asante. A similar role in acquainting students with some of the leading figures in the field of Black Studies would be played by the Luther P. Jackson Cultural Center, which hosted scholars like John Henrik Clarke

and James Turner. Only by engaging simultaneously the intellectual history of the LPJCC, the BSA, the AAAS program, and the Carter G. Woodson Institute can we fully appreciate Black Studies' far reaching influence at the University of Virginia.

The Early Struggle for a Black Studies Program at UVA

Student activists at the University of Virginia laid the foundation for the development of the school's African American and African Studies program in the spring semester of 1969.[3] On February 18 of that year, 1,000 students at the University assembled on the steps of the historic Rotunda in a moving display of political solidarity and self-determination. Spirited yet peaceful, their assembly marked the culmination of a 3-day campaign protesting the University's "Racist Atmosphere" (Faulders 1969). Over the course of the 90-min rally, African American and white student leaders demanded that the University's president, Edgar Shannon, fully integrate African American students into campus life, eliminate application fees for low-income students, and establish a Black Studies program by the fall of 1970 (Faulders 1969). Concurrent with this public display of support for a Black Studies program, African American students intensified their efforts to convince the University's administration of the necessity of creating a more diversified curriculum. Under the guidance of sociology major George Taylor, the Black Students for Freedom put tremendous energy and thought into drafting a 17-page proposal promoting the formation of a Black Studies program as an effective way to expand the University's African American undergraduate population, augment the number of black faculty, and enrich UVA's intellectual life.

On March 14, Taylor and Wesley Harris, the faculty advisor for BSF, submitted a "Proposal for an Afro-American Studies Program" to President Shannon and various department chairs in the College of Arts and Sciences.[4] The seriousness with which the BSF regarded the emerging field of African American Studies was particularly evident in the pedagogical portion of the proposal. To ensure a sound curriculum, the students demanded the immediate implementation of an "Introduction to Afro-American Studies" course. This introductory course, according to the BSF, would provide undergraduates with "an interdisciplinary survey of Afro-American life from its African origins to the present" (Ad Hoc Committee of the Black Students for Freedom 1969: 11). Topics would include "the connection with Africa, the impact of slavery, freedom movements, socio-economic characteristics, community structure and organization, literary and artistic contributions, and contemporary strategies of liberation" (Ad Hoc Committee of the Black Students for Freedom 1969: 11). Fully aware that a viable program required more than an introductory course, the BSF proposed that the University offer 22 additional courses pertaining to the field of Black Studies. These classes included but were not limited to: "the History of Slavery in the United States," "the Role of Police Power in Urban Environments," "Economics of the Ghetto," "African Folklore," "The Geography of Africa,"

[3] For a firsthand account of these developments see Gaston 2009.

[4] Taylor and Harris submitted the proposal on behalf of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Black Students for Freedom and Members of the Black Academic Community.

"Swahili," "Philosophy of Afro-American Music," "African Religions," and "Research Problems in African Art" (Ad Hoc Committee of the Black Students for Freedom 1969: 9). Since the University lacked the faculty to offer such a wide range of courses, the BSF recommended that school administrators hire "11 specialists in Afro-American Studies at the tenure level" (Ad Hoc Committee of the Black Students for Freedom 1969: 8). The organization's preliminary timeline called for the appointment of a director for the AAS program, as well as the hiring of at least one sociologist and one economist before the end of the 1969–1970 academic year. To round out their faculty recommendations, students also suggested that a "prominent contributor to Afro-American literature… be invited to the University of Virginia as writer in residence for 1969–1970" (Ad Hoc Committee of the Black Students for Freedom 1969: 9). If University administrators believed that African American students would be content with the addition of one or two "race courses," then the contents of the BSF proposal probably caught them off guard. On top of its hiring demands, the BSF also put forth a request for the establishment of an Institute for Research in Afro-American Studies. Convinced that the University of Virginia should play a central role in advancing and funding scholarship in the emerging field of Black Studies, the BSF recommended that the Institute "have faculty associates who were members of their respective departments, and who also taught graduate or undergraduate courses; provide for visiting research associates and teachers; support the research work of graduate students; employ its own research associates; and meet the costs of field research" (Ad Hoc Committee of the Black Students for Freedom 1969: 6).

As their proposal made clear, BSF leaders envisioned a comprehensive program that would fundamentally alter academic life at the University of Virginia. They demanded that the AAS program be intellectually rigorous, politically relevant, and adequately financed by the University's administration.[5] "The obligation of American universities in regard to Afro-American culture is not satisfied by a spate of undergraduate programs put together in response to the demand for recognition of the subject. It is our opinion that a sincere and meaningful response requires a

[5] Conspicuously absent from the UVA proposal is any discussion of how the future AAS program would serve the larger Charlottesville community, particularly African Americans. Such an omission is telling given the fact that most proposals demanding a Black Studies program devoted considerable attention to the field's "practical dimension." For example, in his important 1969 essay, "Black Studies: A Concept and A Plan," James Turner, director of the Afro-American Studies Center at Cornell University, let it be known that his center would be deeply committed to responding to the needs and concerns of the African American community. "Contemporary black students," he noted, "feel a keen sense of themselves as an extension of the Black community-a distinct few who seek to gain educational and scientific experiences in order to work within the Black community… Increasing, Black students are seeking to promulgate a conceptual and theoretical framework within which constructive change may be channeled into the black community. They seek to build; thus, a relevant education becomes a necessity." A parallel perspective appears in Darwin Turner's proposal for the Center for Afro-American Studies at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University." In that text, Turner wrote: "What is essential to the proponents of such a Black Studies program is that each item of the program be planned in reference to a goal of liberation and development of black people. In short, the student is not to be trained to be a 'credit to his race'—to echo the old platitude of praise—but to be an asset to his people." Though the University of Virginia's "Proposal for an Afro-American Studies" recommended courses that would address issues of concern for African American communities, one never gets a sense that the program would have an intimate connection to local people (Turner; Turner 1969).

balanced and integrated program of undergraduate and graduate teaching and research" (Ad Hoc Committee of the Black Students for Freedom 1969: 2).

Far from an isolated phenomenon, the BSF's push for a vibrant Afro-American Studies program at the University of Virginia was part of a much larger political movement. The eventful year of 1969 witnessed such important developments as black students' takeover of Cornell University's student union building, the founding of Malcolm X University in Greensboro, North Carolina, and the formation of the highly important, Student Organization for Black Unity. "For many political activists," writes historian Peniel Joseph, "the university as a repository of labor, educational, and ideological production and orientation, was increasingly seen as a site of revolutionary struggle and contestation" (2006: 266). It was within this context of political struggle that black student activists and young scholars like Bertha Maxwell-Roddey, James Turner, and Armstead Robinson articulated their demands for the institutionalization of a Black Studies curriculum. Of course, as the recent work of Noliwe Rooks demonstrates, several of the political initiatives that gave birth to Black Studies as a field had a "decidedly interracial" character (2006: 4). Take as a case in point, the political situation at Duke University. On February 13, 1969, 1,000 white students mobilized in support of black campus activists, who, in their push for the establishment of an African American Studies program, staged a sit-in at the Allen Administrative Building on Duke's West Campus.[6] Not at all oblivious to political developments at Duke and elsewhere, white and black students at UVA sought to build upon the political fervor engulfing colleges and universities across the country. To borrow the words of Africana Studies scholar Carole Boyce Davies, these students embraced wholeheartedly the idea of the academy as a "liberatory space" (Davies 2003: x).

Fortunately for campus activists, their endeavors to transform UVA into a liberatory space corresponded with University administrators' growing support for a Black Studies program. On September 24, 1969, David Shannon, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, announced the appointment of a committee for Black Studies. A rather eclectic group, the biracial Committee consisted of professors John Graham (Speech and Drama), Donald Hirsch (English), Alan Howard (English), Charles Longino (Sociology), Sanislaw Maxie Makielski (Government and Foreign Affairs), African American graduate students Timothy Byrd and Raymond Gavins, and the lone undergraduate representative, George Taylor of the BSF (Buford 1969). Under the leadership of historian Paul Gaston, the Committee discussed the need to diversify the University's curriculum, surveyed black and white students on their topical interests, and strategized over the most effective ways in which a Black Studies program could assist in minority student and faculty recruitment (Ruford 1969). Not long after the formation of the Committee, the Department of History announced plans to offer an interdisciplinary course on Afro-American Studies, which would be taught by Professor Gaston. Scheduled for Mondays and Tuesdays

[6] For more detail on the student protests at Duke University consult the following sources: *New York Times*, "Protesters Disrupt Duke and C.C.N.Y," February 14, 1969; Fergus 2009. Significantly, the campuses of UNC-Chapel Hill, UNC-Charlotte, UNC-Greensboro, and North Carolina A&T also witnessed a great deal of political unrest as youth activists organized around issues ranging from workers wages to the formation of Black Studies programs. See Fink 1995.

in order to accommodate guest lecturers, the proposed class thrilled African American students and their white progressive allies.

All signs indicated that the formation of a Black Studies program would soon be a reality. Envisioning the creation of an African American Studies major as an important component of the University's push to improve black student enrollment, which stood at an embarrassing 1.9% in 1969, the College Faculty-Committee on Academic Legislation approved the interdisciplinary major in African American Studies on March 25, 1970 (Pearson 1970). Four months later, the State Council of Higher Education, along with UVA's Board of Visitors, also stamped their approval on the major (Charlottesville-Albemarle Tribune 1970). None of these developments escaped the notice of the press, which duly noted the symbolic significance of one of the most illustrious institutions of higher learning in the South offering a major in Black Studies. Stories on UVA's new interdisciplinary program appeared in outlets ranging from the local black newspaper, *The Charlottesville-Albemarle Tribune*, to the popular weekly, *Jet Magazine.*[7] Equally intriguing for many outsiders was the University's hiring of literary critic Houston A. Baker and theologian Joseph R. Washington. Twenty-seven at the time of his arrival in Charlottesville, Baker was putting the finishing touches on what would become the first of his many books, *Long Black Song: Essays in Black Liberation*. Moving quickly to steal Baker from Yale, UVA enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to add to its faculty roster a young scholar certain to leave an indelible mark on the field of African American Studies and literary criticism. "The University of Virginia," Baker later recalled, "made a job offer (including doubled salary, tenure, and much more) that I could not refuse" (Baker 2007).

Fortunately for UVA's small black undergraduate population, the rising star was academically and socially accessible. To a degree that has yet to be fully appreciated, Baker contributed immensely to black academic life at UVA. Combined with teaching courses, Baker served on the Afro-American Studies Program Advisory Committee and the Steering Committee of Black Faculty and Graduate Students, mentored African Americans involved with the University's Minority Pre-Freshmen Summer Programs, and provided enormous support for BSF's "Black Culture Week" (BCW). Of course, Houston Baker was not alone in his commitment to serving the intellectual and social needs of African American undergraduates. Joseph Washington, the first director of UVA's fledging Afro-American Studies Program, quickly developed a reputation for his dedicated service to black undergraduates.

Joseph Washington's Tenure at UVA (1970–1974)

If the University of Virginia aimed for a high profile scholar whose appointment as the head of its Black Studies program would generate enormous buzz in the larger academic world, then they found the ideal hire in Washington. Ever since the publication of his highly controversial text, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (1964), Washington had been the subject of enormous praise and criticism for his views on the theological authenticity of black

[7] *Jet Magazine*, "Virginia to Offer Black Studies Major," August 13, 1970.

Christianity and the ecclesiastical formations (or lack thereof) within the African American church. His assertion that "the central theological questions of faith, particularly the teachings of the church on social issues, have not entered the religious realm of the Negro" infuriated many within the black religious community, particularly scholars whose work would lay the foundation for the field of black theology (Washington 1964).[8] Few questioned Washington's ability to spark an intellectual debate, but could the Madison, Wisconsin native who held degrees from the University of Wisconsin, Andover Newton Theological School, and Boston University build a vibrant African American Studies program in the heart of the South? Would he be able to mobilize black students behind his academic agenda? And if so, would the University grant him the necessary resources to construct an intellectually stimulating and culturally enriching program?

Coming to UVA from Benoit College, Professor Washington seemed prepared for the challenge. One semester into his arrival, he assumed responsibility for the University's "Introduction to Afro-American Studies" course. Topics of critical inquiry included but were not limited to black cultural, political, and religious nationalism; African American and West Indian social thought; the black power ideologies espoused by George Jackson, H. Rap Brown, and Stokely Carmichael; and the strengths and weaknesses of moderate, militant, and revolutionary strategies of resistance. To ensure political balance, Washington brought in such guest lecturers as NAACP head, Roy Wilkins, and former CORE president, James Farmer (Kimball 1971).

As the director of the Afro-American Studies Program, Washington also recognized the importance of developing strong alliances with African American students and their organizations. Not lost upon the politically astute scholar was the fact that many African American students had already set in place important cultural and intellectual programs that complemented his agenda for UVA's Afro-American Studies program. One case in point was BSF's "Black Culture Week." Inaugurated in 1970, BCW featured forums, lectures, poetry readings, and musical performances from a wide range of artists. The first year featured a presentation by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, lectures by historian James Brewer of North Carolina Central and Howard Fuller (Owusu Sadaukai) of Malcolm X University, and a history exhibit by a local activist (Pritchard 1970). Working in partnership with black students, Washington relied on his personal contacts and intellect to build upon Black Culture Week's previous success. As a result, the 1971 BCW program bore the imprint of Washington's intellectual and political influence. On February 14, 1971, Black Culture Week opened with a moving lecture by Georgia Legislator Julian Bond, who mesmerized the crowd with his fierce criticism of the Nixon Administration. The next day, the academic portion of BCW featured two of Black Studies most important figures, Harold Cruse, author of the influential, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, and Bryce-LaPorte, head of Yale's Afro-American Studies department. Over the next few days, students were treated to inspiring presentations

[8] According to James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, Washington's negative reply to the query of whether African American churches were Christian "made him the most talked about and controversial Black scholar of religion" during the late sixties. See Cone and Wilmore 1993. For a small sampling of Washington's immense contributions to black religious thought, as well as the scholarly critiques of his work see Wilmore 1983; Coleman 2000; Evans 1992; Baldwin 1992.

by Nikki Giovanni, Toni Cade, Arna Bontemps, William Grier, and Elizabeth Koontz (Berry 1971). To his credit, Washington worked tirelessly to ensure that students had meaningful contact with the intellectuals and politicians visiting UVA. For example, after Julian Bond delivered his address at University Hall, Washington convened a meeting between the state legislator and more than 60 African American students at his residence (Kimball 1971). Such encounters strengthened Joseph Washington's faith in the possibility of transforming the University of Virginia into a viable center for Black Studies.

Though Washington strongly believed that the continuation of Black Culture Week was vital to broadening undergraduates' knowledge of the major figures, personalities, and theoretical viewpoints dominating the fledging field of Black Studies, he also recognized that UVA's AAS program required greater academic, administrative, and fiscal autonomy. "A major concern for the committee [the Afro-American Studies Committee]," Washington explained in 1971, "is to develop a separate department… the University doesn't fund a budget for anything but departments… We need money to pay for positions for two assistant professors. We need people to create new courses because we don't have the necessary budgets" (Kimball 1971).

Until his departure from the University in 1974, Washington labored earnestly to strengthen UVA's Afro-American Studies program, as well as improve the quality of life for African American undergraduates who looked to him for mentorship. Taking seriously the responsibility of nurturing a positive self-concept among African American students, Washington discouraged black undergraduates from seeing themselves as outsiders: "This is their University," he explained to the student newspaper, "and they can get a solid education here" (Kimball 1971). Convinced that African American students could flourish at "Jefferson's University," Washington stressed upon his black students the importance of cultivating the necessary intellectual and social skills for meaningful contribution to the larger society. African American students, he insisted, "have to develop themselves to full potential here in order to make a contribution to the black community, and then to the community as a whole" (Kimball 1971).

So much more than a foundational figure in the intellectual history of American and African American religious Studies, Joseph Washington also occupies an important place in the history of African American intellectual life at the University of Virginia. His institutional building efforts as director of the Afro-American Studies program combined with his invaluable mentorship of black undergraduates struggling to navigate the troubled waters of university student life deserve both our respect and praise. Though his tenure was short, Washington left an enduring legacy of academic excellence and commitment to student mentorship.

Fortunately, his important work would be continued by an individual whose commitment to the Black Studies project and African American students was equally impressive: Vivian Verdell Gordon. Widely regarded by many of her peers as a seminal figure in the field of African American Studies, Gordon authored such important works as *The Self-Concept of Black Americans* (1977), *Black Women, Feminism and Black Liberation: Which Way?* (1987), and the frequently

anthologized, "The Coming of Age of Black Studies: Beyond 'Relevance'" (1980).[9] For many who attended the University of Virginia during the 1970s and 1980s, she is primarily known for her herculean efforts to transform UVA into a thriving center for Black Studies research, as well as her many endeavors to address the racial and structural inequities pervading the city of Charlottesville. Much can be said about her activist work through the Albemarle County 4-H Club, the Thomas Jefferson Economic Planning Commission, the Monticello Area Community Action Agency, and the Shelter for Help in Emergency, but for the purposes of this essay, our attention will focus on Gordon's stellar contributions to UVA's Black Studies program between 1975 and 1980 (Nicholson 1983).

The Vivian Gordon Regime

Few, if any, scholars better understood the regional peculiarities of central Virginia, as well as the enormous political potential of a socially engaged and intellectually rigorous African American Studies program at the University of Virginia than Vivian Gordon. A native of Washington, DC, Vivian Susan Verdell was born on April 15, 1934. Much of her early childhood was spent on the campus of Virginia State University (VSU), where her father, Thomas Verdell, served as associate professor in the Health, Physical Education, and Recreation department, as well as coached the University's football, track, and basketball teams. A former, four-star athlete at Northwestern University, Verdell, along with his wife, Susan Robinson, instilled within their daughter the importance of education and community service. If the Verdells' goal was the creation of a socially engaged scholar, young Vivian would not disappoint. Coming to intellectual maturity during the formative years of the Modern Civil Rights Movement, Vivian Verdell balanced coursework at Virginia State University with a rather busy activist schedule centered on increasing Petersburg's black electorate. Notwithstanding the many demands on her time, Verdell received her Bachelor of Science degree in Physics in 1955. Immediately after graduation from VSU, Verdell entered the University of Pennsylvania as a M. A. student in sociology. As was the case at Virginia State, Gordon's educational experience would not be confined to the classroom. The knowledge acquired in her graduate courses would be broadened as well as challenged by her experiences as a case worker for a local child-welfare agency in South Philadelphia. Slowly but surely, Verdell was developing not only her philosophy of education but also a methodological approach to knowledge accumulation and production.

Significant transformations also occurred in her personal life. The same year Verdell received her master's in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania she married Ronald Clayton Gordon, who like his wife, received his B.S. in physics from VSU in 1955. A confluence of forces brought Vivian Gordon to her birthplace, Washington, DC, in 1957, the year she accepted a position as a researcher on Capitol

[9] For more on Vivian Gordon's intellectual work, see Gordon (1977, 1981, 1987). A pithy yet informative overview of Vivian Gordon's contributions to both African American Studies and sociology can be found in Aldridge 2009.

Hill. Until her departure from the nation's capital in 1962, Gordon amassed data for congressmen working on and introducing civil rights legislation, including the historic 1957 Civil Rights Bill, which President Dwight Eisenhower signed on September 9, 1957. Though deeply appreciative of her experience, Gordon later expressed dismay at the workings of the political system. "Legislation," she noted, "may be designed on the surface to accomplish one purpose, but when implemented it actually works against certain groups" (Sudranski 1975a, b). Not particularly satisfied with life in Washington, Gordon moved to Los Angeles, where she worked with the Upward Bound and the Educational Participation in Communities Program at Cal State University.

All of these experiences factored significantly in Gordon's intellectual development, which shifted into another gear upon her decision in 1969 to enter the Ph.D. program in Sociology at the University of Virginia. Returning to school was challenging, but Gordon vowed to make her life experiences work for her: "Sometimes when you come from the Black Experience of the 1950s and 1960s, this experience so dominates one's thinking that it is difficult to capitalize upon the valuable insights it affords and to place this involvement into the framework of critical and analytical sociology" (Gordon 1974: 3). Thanks to assistance from her advisor, Charles Longino, Gordon successfully completed her doctorate in the summer of 1974. Interdisciplinary in scope and method, her superbly researched dissertation, "The Self-Concept of Black Americans," constituted an important contribution to the fields of sociology, social psychology, and African American Studies (1974). Moreover, her research earned her a tenure-track position with the Sociology department, as well as the directorship of UVA's Afro-American Studies program.

As one might expect, Gordon faced an uphill battle in her new role as director of UVA's Afro-American Studies program. First on her agenda was the task of defending African American Studies as a legitimate enterprise worthy of the intellectual respect granted to traditional disciplines. In response to the myopic yet frequently spewed charge that Black Studies facilitated the further "ghettoization" of African American intellectual activity, Gordon reminded the field's critics that many African American scholars had been "forced into compartmentalization by the failure of traditional scholars to recognize the existence of a multiethnic society." "If not for this failure," she continued, "there would be no need for these programs" (Sudranski 1975a, b). Of course, the situation was not that simple. To be sure, the white supremacist logics and practices of the academy help propel the formation of African American Studies programs across the nation. Nevertheless, the Black Studies Movement also derived its energy from proactive scholars convinced that their fledging interdisciplinary institutes, programs, and departments possessed the ability to open up new avenues of scholarly inquiry and thereby push forward new regimes of knowledge. Fully aware of this aspect of the movement's history, Gordon contested the commonly held stereotype that "Afro-American Studies" was simply "a major for black students with an identity crisis" (Sudranski 1975a, b). In fact, the new director emphasized how the discipline of African American Studies provided its students with an impressive set of cognitive, interpersonal, and political skills that enabled them to navigate an increasingly diverse and complex world: "The value of a major in Afro-American Studies is not emerging with a narrow specificity but with

a broad background and a heightened sensitivity to the problems of America's largest visible minority" (Sudranski 1975a, b).

Flushed with an unwavering confidence in African American Studies' intellectual viability, Gordon pressed ahead in her academic and administrative endeavors. Much of her energy as the director of UVA's AAS program would be focused on providing students with the academic training, intellectual space, and political mentorship to facilitate their development as scholars and responsible citizens of the world. Gordon's most immediate goal was enhancing the curricular offerings available to African American Studies majors in particular and African American students in general. Toward this end, she assumed responsibility for the major's largest course, "Introduction to African American Studies," which familiarized students with the major theoretical frameworks and research questions pursued by the leading figures in the discipline. A testament to Gordon's talents as a teacher and the growing interest in African American Studies topics, her introductory course averaged between 75 and 100 students each semester. Crucial factors in the class's popularity were Gordon's dynamic personality, her use of Socratic questioning during her lectures, and her frank discussions on students' social responsibilities. A major point of emphasis for Gordon was the need for students to think critically about the ways in which they could create a more liberated existence for all of humanity. "If our ultimate aim isn't to make a better society," she once explained, "then we're wasting our time" (Sudranski 1975a, b).[10]

Sensitive to power dynamics within the classroom, Gordon also willingly performed the role of pupil in her courses. If African American Studies was to maintain its dynamism as an academically rigorous and politically relevant discipline, then students had to be given the space to articulate their own opinions and concerns. "Each student generation," Gordon insisted, "brings its own input. If you don't stay in tune to it you stop growing as a teacher and as an individual. I don't want to become an educated snob or an educated fool" (Sudranski 1975a, b). Such openness endeared Gordon to hundreds of students who respected what she routinely promoted as her "educational ideal" (Sudranski 1975a, b).

Despite the demands of teaching and research, Gordon also managed to put together an impressive lecture series for the AAS program. To complement existing courses on the African American experience and contemporary race relations, as well as expose University students to some of the nation's leading journalists, writers, and intellectuals, Gordon poured tremendous energy into the Afro-American Studies Guest Lecture Series, which brought some of the brightest minds to the University. Some of the invited lecturers during Gordon's first semester (Fall 1975) as program director included the political scientist Charles Hamilton, sociologist Robert Staples, and historian John Blassingame. Subsequent semesters featured Harold Cruse, Grace Harris, Tony Martin, Harry Edwards, Jacquelyn Jackson, William Harris, Chuck Stone, and Anna Grant. Topics ranged from the state of the black family to the policy decisions of the black urban regime to the future of African American Studies in the academy. Few, if any, lectures were more moving or pertinent than Harold Cruse's "The Academic Side of the Movement and the

[10] *Cavalier Daily*, October 13, 1975.

Movement Side of the Academic." A native of Petersburg, Virginia, Cruse addressed the generationally specific challenges and opportunities currently facing African American Studies majors:

> Black students in Afro-American Studies programs are no longer children of the sixties. They did not participate in the initial stages of Afro-American Studies and are, therefore, not motivated by the same needs and drives that created Afro-American Studies. I am told that here at the University of Virginia, as in many other sections of the country, radically creative academic endeavors have given way to career concerns, and that many Black students no longer relate to academic studies unless these studies are essentially geared toward career goals; anything outside that thrust does not hold much interest for them…Afro-American Studies cannot thrive in such an atmosphere. Afro-American Studies can only thrive where there is intellectual curiosity about society at large. Since it is not a conventional or traditional discipline, it must be related intimately to the outside world. That is its great merit. That is its great strength (Cruse 1979).

Feeling as if the messages of Cruse and the other guest lecturers deserved a wider hearing, Vivian Gordon decided to publish several addresses from the lecture series in the volume, *Lectures: Black Scholars on Black Issues*. An invaluable resource, *Lectures* offers tremendous insight into Gordon's commitment to African American Studies, as well as her desire to situate her program's institutional battles within the broader context of the discipline's struggles for legitimacy within the academy. "Here, as throughout the nation," Gordon explained in the preface to *Lectures*, "there continues to be questions about the academic validity of Afro-American Studies. There remains for Afro-American Studies at this University, the challenge of education for many who are locked into a tradition which refuses to recognize the legitimacy of study and research about the black phenomenon from a black perspective" (Gordon 1979).

Obviously, by the time of *Lectures'* publication, Gordon was thinking deeply about the direction of Black Studies as a discipline. Concurrent with colleagues elsewhere, Gordon increasingly concerned herself with matters relating to theory, research methodology, and paradigmatic consistency. Strong evidence of this can be found in Gordon's prefatory remarks in *Lectures*, as well as her address, "Black Studies: Methods and Implementation", at the National Council for Black Studies' 1978 conference.

Unfortunately, Gordon's expanding vision for Black Studies did not have the support of UVA's administration. In fact, her intellectual agenda was at odds with the structural realities of the AAS program. One major disagreement between for Gordon and the administration was the issue of department status. Not long after accepting the position of program director in 1975, Gordon predicted that the Afro-American Studies program would transition into a department within 2 to 3 years (Sudranski 1975a, b). Her prediction proved widely off the mark. Insisting that African American Studies was not a discipline, Robert Kellogg, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, was vehemently opposed to granting the Afro-American Studies program departmental recognition. The existing program, he argued, lacked the

disciplinary focus required for departmental status and the necessary faculty support to operate effectively. Of course, as Gordon routinely pointed out, the program's faculty shortage spoke to two unresolved issues: (1) the University's inability/unwillingness to implement a successful hiring and retention program for African American faculty and (2) the College of Arts and Science's disregard for the structural impediments preventing current faculty members from meaningfully contributing to the Afro-American Studies program. Speaking directly to the issue of tenure and promotion, Gordon deemed it necessary to inform the student body and the larger public as to why certain faculty members abstained from active involvement in African American Studies. Job security concerns, she insisted, rather than disrespect for African American Studies as a credible academic enterprise compelled newly hired faculty members to center their academic and teaching endeavors in the department responsible for evaluating them for tenure and promotion. To begin the process of remedying this problem, Gordon insisted that the College immediately set aside the resources for hiring "at least one other member who could devote his time to the program and be evaluated for tenure for that work" (Minton 1978).

Up for tenure at the time of her comments, Gordon appeared unconcerned about the repercussions of her stances. Never one to mince words, the junior professor pushed the University to consider its larger responsibility to the Commonwealth of Virginia. On the pages of UVA's *Cavalier Daily*, she explained how the administration's neglect of the Afro-American Studies program was a disservice not only to black students, but also to the state of Virginia since UVA was the only public university in the Commonwealth offering a degree in African American Studies. Her message was simple: If the University of Virginia was truly committed to racial diversity and equity, its administrators must direct their energy and resources into transforming the Afro-American Studies program into one of the premier centers for research and teaching on the African diaspora by aggressively recruiting black faculty, augmenting its funding for the program's lecture series, and rethinking its tenure and promotion policies.

Sensing that the University was unwilling to meet her challenges, Gordon stepped down as the director of UVA's AAS program. Five years after assuming the position, she announced that the spring semester of 1980 would mark the end of her tenure as the leader of Virginia's Afro-American Studies program. "Unfortunately, the reality is that a significant number of faculty and administrators do not consider the Afro-American Studies program a viable academic discipline" (Taylor 1980a, b). Weary from her long battle with administration, Gordon vowed to concentrate her energies on beginning research for a 3-year sociological study for which she had recently received a $175,000 grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (Taylor 1980a, b).

If school administrators expected tranquility to follow Gordon's exit, they were in for a rude awakening. Frustration gripped many African American students, who bemoaned the fact that Gordon had not been given the necessary support from the administration. In the student newspaper, one undergraduate detailed Gordon's many contributions to Black Studies, the University, and the larger Charlottesville community:

> Gordon, an associate Sociology professor, continually has sought to improve the Afro-American Studies program during her term as its director. With her

> enthusiasm and determination, Gordon has expanded and upgraded the program's offering and brought it up to par with many other University departments. Her recent invitation and visit to the White House underscored Gordon's record of participation in a wide variety of social and administrative programs outside the academic sphere. In the past, Gordon has served as a delegate of the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors to the Monticello Area Community Action Program. If we were not dealing with the Afro-American Studies program, the loss of such a qualified member perhaps would not be so greatly felt. However, Gordon's departure from the Afro-American Studies program could detract noticeably from the Black Studies curriculum. Since Afro-American Studies is only a program and not an actual department, it must rely on various University departments to satisfy the need for courses and instructors within the program's curriculum. Unfortunately, neither the departments nor the University administration have shown much interest in helping the program stay on its feet. It has remained at the program level, failing to obtain departmental status, for more than 10 years. Recruitment efforts for black faculty continually have been poor. In fact the program and the special role it fills for all students at the University have in large part succeeded because of Vivian Gordon. It will not be easy to find someone to take over the chairmanship with the strength and talent Gordon brought to the job. (*Cavalier Daily* 1980).

Students did not confine their activities to letter writing. The month following Gordon's resignation witnessed the Black Student Alliance and the UVA chapter of the NAACP sponsor political rallies, organize a 2-day sit-in at Cabell Hall (one of the principal classroom buildings on grounds), confront both the University President and the College of Arts and Science's Dean at their respective homes, and demand that the University's administration permit a team from the National Council of Black Studies (NCBS) to visit the campus to evaluate the Afro-American Studies Program. Writing to Joseph Russell, the president of the NCBS, in April, BSA President, Mike Campbell, and NAACP President Will Johnson explained why black students and their principal advisor, Vivian Gordon, preferred outside intervention:

> Last year, Vivian Gordon requested $400.00 from the University to bring representatives from the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS) to the University to evaluate and make suggestions for the AAS program. Dr. Gordon was denied her request on the grounds that the University would be able to evaluate the program itself. The purpose of bringing the NCBS representatives was not only to get an unbiased opinion of the AAAS program, but to: (a) provide a wealth of information to the AAAS program that this University simply does not have the resources to provide; the NCBS being a widely acknowledged and highly acclaimed organization with a host of scholars expert in the field of Black Studies; (b) evaluate any problems, and then give a point-by-point analysis of how the program can bettered; (c) send in experts to train and advise the institution's teachers and administrators on how the AAAS courses should be set up and directed (Black Student Alliance Archives 1980a; b).

The historical importance of the students' endeavors, along with the symbolic significance of their choice of allies, did not escape the notice of leaders within the

Black Studies community. Situating UVA students' endeavors to strengthen the AAAS program within the larger context of the national battle not only to preserve Black Studies, but also to defeat the conservative upsurge from the Reagan-led Right, Talmadge Anderson applauded Mike Campbell and his BSA comrades for their endeavors:

> On behalf of the members of the Black Studies Program and the Editorial Staff at the *Western Journal of Black Studies* at Washington State University, I commend you and the members of the Black Student Alliance for your courageous demonstration and struggle to increase Black faculty and to enhance the status of Black Studies at the University of Virginia. It is encouraging to know that the Black Students at the University of Virginia are in the forefront of demanding affirmative action in employment and equity in academic funding for Black People in higher education. For the Struggle that was initiated in the 1960s's is not over and it must resume before the meager gains that were made are lost. (Black Student Alliance Archives 1980a; b).

Not particularly interested in seeking assistance from the NCBS, UVA administrators had already fixed their gaze on a rising young star in American history and an established figure in the field of African American Studies: Armstead Louis Robinson. Sharing a dual appointment in UCLA's Center for African American Studies and the History Department, Robinson had first garnered national attention in the late 1960s for his vital role in the creation of Yale's African American Studies Department and his co-editorship of the seminal volume, *Black Studies in the University.* Shortly after his graduation from Yale's M.A. program in divinity, Robinson began graduate study at the University of Rochester, where he trained under the noted historian Eugene Genovese. Considered one of the emergent stars in the field of U.S. Southern History, Robinson was on the radar of UVA's Afro-American Studies Committee chair, Paul Gaston. No less important, UVA administrators endorsed the idea of making Charlottesville Robinson's permanent home.

Fully aware of the need for someone with multidisciplinary talents and national stature, Dean Floyd proceeded with a rather intense courtship of Robinson, who in the spring of 1980 enthusiastically accepted a tenured position in the school's Corcoran Department of History. To the chair of UCLA's History department, Robinson enumerated the professional reasons for his move:

> I write to inform UCLA of my intention, effective June 30, 1980, to resign my position as Assistant Professor of History in order to accept an appointment as Associate Professor of History at the University of Virginia. This decision has been a difficult one, for I have nothing but gratitude for the generous way UCLA, particularly through its Center for Afro-American Studies, has supported my research activities. The decisive factor in Virginia's favor was not a monetary one. Rather, my decision to join the faculty at UVA reflects my belief that their university and their history department offer a superior intellectual and collegial environment. As I discussed the relative merits of UCLA and UVA with a number of senior colleagues at other universities, I became convinced that UVA's offer reflected the seriousness with which one of the most distinguished centers for studying and teaching southern history

> views my efforts in southern and Afro-American history. In the final analysis, it was this intangible factor, my sense of the informed seriousness with which they regard my work, that persuaded me to accept their appointment (Armstead Robinson Papers 1980a; b).

Toward the end of the letter, Robinson suggested that more than the stature of UVA's history department influenced his move: "The first year of my UVA appointment revolves around a special assignment to advise on the revamping of their efforts in Afro-American Studies. Because I believe passionately that Afro-American Studies must have a place in the major southern universities, I think it is critical that I be able to spend all of next academic year at UVA" (Armstead Robinson Papers 1980a; b).

Upon his arrival in Charlottesville, Robinson discovered a fervent group of undergraduates who had their own ideas about the direction of the University's AAS program. African American student leaders like Cassandra Newby, Michael Campbell, and Will Johnson had grown weary of status quo politics at UVA, particularly with regard to matters of black student life and race relations. Typically, scholars think of the 1960s and early 1970s as the watershed of black student activism; but at UVA, the early 1980s was a period of great political unrest in which a significant number of African American students engaged in numerous protests. Organizations such as the UVA chapter of the NAACP and the Black Student Alliance called for the University to divest from apartheid South Africa, hire more African American faculty, and elevate the Afro-American Studies program to departmental status. Most notably for our purposes here, African American students' relationship to the Black Studies project also changed dramatically. Now more than ever, African American students embraced the future of Black Studies at UVA as *their issue*. Over the course of the 1980–1981 academic year, disgruntled students confronted members of the Board of Visitors, held numerous rallies on grounds, and built relationships with black organizations outside the University in the hopes of securing an African American Studies department. UVA administrators preferred to handle disputes privately, but many African American student leaders had grown weary of backroom negotiations. Thus, on October 11, members of the Black Student Alliance and the NAACP arrived at the UVA-Clemson football game dressed in all black, in protest against the shortage of black faculty and the absence of an African American Studies department. Strong condemnation of their activities echoed from various corners of the University, but students pressed ahead in their organizing efforts. As BSA president Michael Campbell explained to a *Cavalier Daily* reporter: "We will do whatever we have to until we see some results" (Hathaway 1980).

Meanwhile, University administrators unveiled plans for the formation of an "Interdisciplinary Institute of Afro-American Affairs." The announcement came from the University's Vice President and Provost David Shannon, who insisted that this proposed institute would "vastly improve" the African American Studies major (Strolberg 1980). With the hopes of convincing students that they had their best interests at heart, University administrators announced that they were working closely with one of the nation's leading Black Studies experts, Armstead Robinson. Cognizant of the tense political situation on

campus, Robinson endeavored to convince the Institute's detractors that a single department would not meet the broad needs of African American Studies: "The mission is so broad that no single department could do a credible job of doing it all" (Cavalier Daily 1980). This line would be repeated by Faculty Dean, Edwin E. Floyd, who on November 12 announced that the Afro-American and African Studies Advisory Committee had voted (11 to 2) in favor of the Institute: "I have always felt that a department would be much too limiting." This proposed Institute, he continued "is is the best way to increase the number of black faculty at the University and the best way to give impetus and strength—and greater influence to the undergraduate Afro-American Studies program" (*Cavalier Daily* 1980).

Needless to say, the AAS committee's vote did not go over well with pro-department factions. While acknowledging the importance of research to the development of the field of African American Studies, Vivian Gordon expressed concern that the issue of undergraduate instruction was not receiving the necessary attention from the pro-Institute faction: "My quarrel is not with the institute, but with the inattention to the very basic needs of the undergraduate program." [11] A week after Gordon shared her concerns, William Harris, dean of the Office of African American Affairs, stated his preference for an African American Studies department. "Excellence in academic scholarship," Harris insisted, "will be realized only through this mechanism" (Taylor 1980a; b).

Toward the goal of adding some "objectivity" to the debate, the Black Graduate Student Association and the Black Student Alliance polled a random sample of 168 undergraduate and 47 graduate students, along with 30 faculty and administrators, regarding the department versus institute debate. Survey results indicated that approximately 60% of the undergraduate and graduate student body preferred a department (Jordon and Crawford 1980). Slightly less than 10% of UVA's student population favored the creation of an Institute, while 25% expressed uncertainty regarding the best direction for the African American Studies program. The remaining respondents recommended "an alternative program to the two suggested routes" (Jordon and Crawford 1980).

Spirited discussions continued in the weeks to come. On the eve of final exams for the fall semester, Dean Floyd hosted a forum in which students, faculty, and administrators were encouraged to express their desires and concerns. One of the Institute's principal supporters, Professor Theodore Mason, cited fiscal difficulties, lack of student interest, and job concerns as major deterrents to the creation of a department. "We are in a period of financial disarray which would mean fearful consequences for departments" (Katz 1980). On top of his concerns about budgetary constraints, Mason worried that the program did not have the necessary support from black faculty, whom he insisted preferred the stability of established departments. "I have heard no black faculty members who would join a [AAAS] department... Large, well established departments offer more job stability than small fledging departments" (Katz 1980). In response, Vivian Gordon noted that "there is something wrong with a system that allows its small departments to be pushed in the background. If that is the case here, we better have a long, hard, look at our system" (Katz 1980). Continuing her defense of the departmental model, Gordon

[11] Consult *Cavalier Daily*, November 11, 1980.

also railed against the suggestion—articulated by the chair of the History Department, Alexander Sedgewick—that the formation of an African American Studies department would "take away the Afro-American courses in other departments." The courses offered by the proposed department, Gordon insisted, "would be supplementary and complementary, not competitive" (Katz 1980).

Strong opinions also emerged from black student leaders, many of whom were convinced that the Institute would not change what they viewed as AAS' colonial position to other departments and the larger university. "Should the program assume institute status," the Executive Board of UVA NAACP chapter bemoaned, "it will continue to be staffed only by the faculty of other academic departments. Additionally, the Institute's ability to direct its own affairs will be hindered by the reality that many decisions made by the Institute are subordinate to the whims of the College's Interdisciplinary Dean, who is not required to be overwhelmingly knowledgeable in the field of Afro-American and African Studies" (Executive Board 1981) NAACP leaders also expressed concern that the proposed Institute would promote a star system in which highly sought-after professors boosted the public profile of the University yet offered little in terms of undergraduate instruction, black graduate student recruitment, or community involvement: "The most plausible projected advantage of having an Institute is that its funding will make it possible to offer lucrative salaries to the nation's most sought-after black scholars. This undeniable advantage would appear to be easily undercut by the Institute's dramatized inability to cull from these professors' strenuous efforts toward the advancement of the study of Afro-American affairs" (Executive Board 1981).

Privately, Armstead Robinson seethed with discontent. To one of his dear friends, Ruthie Gaston, he shared his frustration:

> I came to Virginia in order to teach History and to advise on Afro-American and African Studies. The history teaching part is going fine, but the advising is something else. I have managed to convince the faculty and the administration to create a stronger version of the UCLA CAAS at UVA. Unfortunately, several of the black faculty members already here cannot cope with the idea that a "stranger" came into a situation they had pronounced hopeless and managed in less than 3 months to get commitments to do things in a bigger and fancier way than any of them had imagined before I got here. This professional jealousy manifests itself in the form of diehard support for a department, irrespective of the fact that such departments have not worked at any of the schools where they exist or the fact that the faculty and administration here will not allow such a department to be created. So I find myself caricatured as an "Uncle Tom," servant of the white people. Some of the students have even taken to calling me "Instead Of a Department." So my friend, I may yet have the "privilege" of being the object of campus protest by black students, all because I have managed to put together what will be the best financed and most comprehensive Black Studies research institute in the country. Oh well, God never said the life of a prophet was going to be easy. When some of the students challenged my right to fly in the face of their will, I reminded them of the "Golden Calf" story of the Bible, about Moses chastizing [*sic*] the Children

> of Israel for worshiping [*sic*] a false idol while he was on the mountain top communing with God and receiving the Ten Commandments (Robinson 1980a; b).

Well into the spring semester, the department versus institute debate remained intense as both sides issued one counterattack after another. On several occasions, the attacks between the two groups turned ugly. One particular case involved Armstead Robinson, who deeply angered black students and a few faculty members with his dismissal of the proposed African American Studies department as a "Jim Crow refuge" (Johnson 1981a, b). On the surface, his commentary might have struck some as markedly similar to arguments put forth by Roy Wilkins, Kenneth Clark, and other contributors to the 1969 study, *Black Studies: Myths and Realities*. Especially vocal in his critique of African American students' struggle for academic self-determination, Roy Wilkins, for example, had condemned Black Studies units as "another version of Jim Crow and segregation." Though he defended the "usefulness of a study of Afro-American history and culture," he was unequivocally opposed to the "Black Studies" demands put forth by students at places like San Francisco State, Howard, and Cornell. "They are right," he explained, "in calling for increased enrollment of Negro students and in requesting more black faculty members. But in demanding a black Jim Crow studies building within a campus… they are opening the door to a dungeon… In its sealed off, Black Studies centers, it will be simply another exercise in racial breast-beating" (Wilkins 1969: 38–39). Unlike Wilkins, Robinson was not opposed to the formation of institutional units specifically designed to advance the field of Black Studies. Rather, he objected to a department model, which in his view was not the most effective way to advance the field at the University of Virginia. Not just fiscal concerns but serious doubts about his colleagues' institutional commitments informed his opinion. "None of the faculty who deal with the Afro-American Studies program," Robinson hissed, "will join the department, not even the people who proposed it" (Johnson 1981a, b). His assertion did not sit well with Vivian Gordon, who condemned Robinson's statement as a "gross misrepresentation of the situation." She explained: "There are a number of people here who support a department and would teach in such a department in another university. But because this administration does not support the department why should they commit academic suicide by admitting they support the idea" (Johnson 1981a, b).

The debate between Gordon, Robinson, and other members of the UVA community serves as an important reminder that Black Studies remained a highly volatile subject in the 1980s. Moreover, the disproportionate attention given to tenure and promotion matters, along with the invoking of worn out "Jim Crow" and ghettoization arguments, during the debates proved the inability or reluctance of certain participants to engage the important question of how an African American Studies department might provide the practitioners of Black Studies with the intellectual space and resources to engage research questions which could not be pursued through permanent affiliation with History, Sociology, Economics, English, or any of the traditional departments. In fact, few of the proponents of a department appeared ready to defend Black Studies as a legitimate discipline with its own methodological techniques, conceptual apparatus, and theoretical frameworks—and therefore in need of its own institutional space. Thus, so long as campus-wide

conversations veered away from serious engagement with Black Studies as a self-sustaining intellectual enterprise, faculty and administrators unversed in the history or development of the field could easily present themselves or their bedfellows as experts on the best way to build viable and sustainable African American Studies units.[12]

The Triumph of the Institute Model: Armstead Robinson and the Realization of a Dream?

On February, 24, 1981, UVA administrators announced the establishment of a 2-year fellowship program designed to lure the brightest scholars specializing in Afro-American and African Studies. Two pre-doctoral fellowships would be offered at the rate of US $10,000 and one post-doctoral fellowship would be offered to an assistant or associate professor at a salary commensurate with rank. While insistent that the needs of the undergraduate population were still unmet, Vivian Gordon applauded the formation of the fellowship program: "If they have money to give to bring black graduate students in, I'm all for it" (Stolberg 1981).[13] Several weeks after the announcement of the fellowship program, Vice President and Provost David A. Shannon announced the formation of the Afro-American Institute. "One of the major functions of the University is to advance knowledge as well as teach it. I feel the institute holds more promise for a research university than a department" (Katz 1981). Spokespersons for the Black Student Alliance, however, felt otherwise. "The BSA stance is still clear," noted its president, Farid Akanni, "we do not support the institute as it is and we remain firm to the establishment of a department. We knew what was going to come down, from the massive non-support of student demands" (Katz 1981).

Elated by the turn of events, Armstead Robinson pledged nothing less than a complete restructuring of the University's curricula, research emphasis, and hiring patterns: "We are expecting to touch practically all the departments, especially the humanities and social sciences, in the arts and sciences area" (Johnson 1981a, b). The University appeared ready to deliver on his promises. That spring, UVA's list of newly hired, tenure-track faculty members included four scholars of Africa and the African diaspora, most notably the Haitian political scientist Robert Fatton. The inaugural class of research fellows included historian Richard Ralston, chairman of the Black Studies program at the University of Wisconsin; Ira Lowenthal, a Ph.D candidate in history at John Hopkins University; Catherine Macklin, a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley; and Leslie Rowland, a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Rochester (Hamilton 1981a, b).

Though dissent persisted in certain corners of the University, Robinson was convinced that the "institute model" constituted the most viable route to securing

[12] It is important to note that the National Council for Black Studies regularly engaged in these debates. Vivian Gordon, the only UVA faculty member with strong ties to the NCBS, was often a participant in these debates.

[13] *Cavalier Daily*, February 24, 1981.

international prominence and financial stability for the University's AAS program. Moreover, he insisted that an Institute would increase the number of black faculty at UVA, as well as provide African American students with access to some of the nation's leading researchers. Of course, the Institute model—with its emphasis on the synergy created by the pre-doctoral and post-doctoral residential fellowship program—certainly had its flaws. One of the most glaring problems was the transient nature of the fellowship program, which offered very little in terms of improving the academic experience of African American undergraduates in general and African American and African Studies majors in particular. Quite simply, academics usually accept fellowships for research rather than for pedagogical reasons. Another unresolved issue was the exact nature of the Institute's relationship to the larger project of Black Studies. Would the selection of post-doctoral and pre-doctoral fellows be based solely on the aggregation of future "superstars" or would there be a deliberate attempt to attract like-minded individuals with a shared commitment to a specific research and/or pedagogical agenda? Would recipients of CGWI fellowships be expected to engage in or employ epistemological frameworks approved by the leading theoreticians in the field/discipline of Black Studies? Or was a researcher's stated interest in studying black people/African phenomenon the only requirement for obtaining fiscal and institutional support from the Institute?

To begin to arrive at some understanding of how Robinson approached these important questions, as well as his preference for the Institute model, one has to consider his intellectual goals as a professional historian dedicated to transforming the contours of American, Southern, and African American historiography. Immersed in a research project whose intellectual antecedents stretched back to his undergraduate years at Yale University, Robinson had embarked on the ambitious task of rendering obsolete conventional narratives on the emergence of U.S. modernity through an extensive remapping of Civil War and Reconstruction era politics: "Only by integrating analyses of the causes and consequences of the Civil War and Reconstruction era into the very center of our study of the middle period," Robinson explained in his article, "Beyond the Realm of Social Consensus," "are we likely to be able to comprehend how this critical age of transition helped to wrench America from the rural-agrarian world of Revolution and to move it into the urban-industrial milieu of the twentieth century" (Robinson 1981: 227). A self-described historian of the Confederacy, Robinson appeared preoccupied, almost obsessed with not simply revising the way we think about US modernity but securing legitimacy from his peers in the historical profession.

And yet, Robinson's ambitious project of rewriting mid-nineteenth century Southern political history fits squarely within certain strands of the Black Studies tradition. To my mind, Robinson's intellectual agenda—particularly his goal of challenging conventional understandings of Western democracy, class struggle, and political economy—emerges from the same fertile soil that gave rise to pioneering (meta) theoretical works like Angela Davis' *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), Molefi Asante's *Afrocentricity* (1981), Vincent Harding's *There Is A River* (1981), Cornel West's *Prophesy Deliverance* (1982), and Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* (1983).

Simply put, Robinson (as did many other scholars in the broad field of African American Studies) aimed at nothing less than the construction of new knowledge regimes (Judy 1993). He also endeavored to realize Du Bois' dream of transforming the US

South into a geographical center for research on Africa and the African diaspora. To rally the broader University and the Charlottesville community behind his efforts, Robinson drafted a report on the Institute's many objectives. On April 21, 1981, he outlined six immediate goals for the Institute:

- Create and sustain a community of Afro-American and African scholars and teachers.
- Integrate Afro-American and African Studies teaching and research into the center of university life
- Help increase the number of Afro-American and African scholars working at the University
- Facilitate research efforts by faculty and graduate students in Afro-American Studies.
- Encourage curriculum development in Afro-American studies in several departments.
- Facilitate community outreach to areas related to Afro-American and African Studies. (Johnson 1981a, b).

Numerous challenges confronted Robinson, but he proved quite successful in his early endeavors. The fellowship program thrived in its first year as young scholars benefited immensely from the rigorous scholarly exchange between senior faculty members and fellows. Moreover, UVA's intellectual climate was greatly enhanced by the Institute's colloquium series, which featured lectures from specialists on the culture, history, literature, and politics of the African diaspora.

None of these developments pleased the pro-department faction, which remained quite vocal. On the pages of the Office of African American Affairs' newly established newsletter, *Ujamma*, students raised pertinent questions regarding the pedagogical shortcomings of the AAS curriculum. One major, Allen N. Lewis, went so far as to question whether the AAS program even qualified as "Black Studies": "Does the University of Virginia have a Black Studies program? Of course! After all, there is an Institute of Afro-American and African Studies located in the basement of Garrett Hall. Being a Black Studies major myself, I'm not really sure about my curriculum. I wonder if the majors in French or History Departments have feelings similar to mine. It's possible, but I doubt it. Can my level of confidence be attributed to the fact that my area of study has been denied departmental status? Why a department? Department status is essential to any academic discipline and Black Studies is no exception" (Lewis 1981). Continuing his argument, Lewis then addressed the issue of philosophical orientation and the ways in which certain institutional arrangements severely limited AAAS's effectiveness:

> Lack of autonomy is why Black Studies is not really Black Studies if studied in the absence of a department. A lack of department reflects a lack of control. The control needed is total control over the focus and direction of the study. As is usually the case with Black Studies on predominantly white campuses, it is presented from a Eurocentric point of reference. In effect,

> Black Studies is taught in a paternalistic atmosphere which is really 'White Studies' (Lewis 1981).

Summing up his views on recent developments, Lewis wrote: "To deny Afro-American and African Studies departmental status denies its entire validity as a viable academic discipline. The magnitude of contributions by people of Afrikan descent is undeniable; the institute is unworthy of validation" (Lewis 1981). Far from alone in his sentiments, Lewis was a part of a national conversation regarding the best way to advance the discipline of Black Studies. Thanks in part to their relationship to Vivian Gordon, Lewis and other pro-department black students derived tremendous inspiration and knowledge from the discourses on "the desirable organizational characteristics of Black Studies units" taking place under the auspices of the NCBS (Stewart 2003:17).

As Lewis' closing remarks indicate, the relationship between black students and the Institute had clearly gotten off to a rocky start. Nevertheless, Armstead Robinson pressed ahead in his work. Coupled with handling the day to day challenges of building an Institute, Robinson also assumed responsibility for naming UVA's new research center. Consistent with his goal of situating the Institute's agenda within the larger context of African American intellectual history, Robinson, who officially assumed the directorship of the Institute in the summer of 1981, named the Institute after Virginia's most famous African American historian, Carter Godwin Woodson. Combined with producing seminal studies in the fields of African history (*African Background Outlined* (Woodson 1936)), migration studies (*A Century of Negro Migration* (Woodson 1918)), and education (*The Mis-education of the Negro* (Woodson 1933)), Woodson had created two institutional cornerstones of black intellectual activity (the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and the *Journal of Negro History*), mentored such pioneering scholars as Alrutheus Taylor and Charles Wesley, and provided an exemplary model of what it means to be a public intellectual. Woodson's intellectual contributions were immense, and Robinson embraced the challenge of extending his legacy through the work of the CGWI.

Within a very short period of time, Robinson surpassed many of the University's expectations. His greatest accomplishment in the eyes of many was the CGWI's fellowship program, which benefited immensely from funding from the Ford Foundation. Over the years, the list of research fellows included literary scholars Charles Rowell, Eric Lott, and Marcellus Blount; anthropologists Gertrude Fraser, Christopher Taylor, and Deborah Kaspin; and historians John Thorton, Tera Hunter, Stephanie Shaw, Brian Ward, and Julius Scott. Equally impressive were the scholars invited to participate in the Institute's colloquium series: Dr. Ben Yochannn, Robert Farris Thompson, James Turner, Elsa Barkley Brown, John Cell, and August Meier, to name a select few. To increase the University's profile, the Woodson Institute sponsored a series of seminars and conferences attended by scholars from around the world. In January 1983, the Institute hosted the Southeastern Regional Seminar in African Studies. Five months later, Armstead Robinson organized the "Emancipation Conference," which covered post-slavery societies in North America, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. Counted among the historians in attendance were Thomas Holt, Sidney Mintz,

Frederick Cooper, Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, Thavoilia Glymph, Joseph Reidy, Leslie Rowland, Harold Woodman, Eric Foner, Steven Hahn, Larry Powell, and Julie Saville. Subsequent conferences and symposia included "Awareness in Southern Africa," "The Black Experience in Virginia," "Blacks on the Bench Symposium," and "New Directions in Civil Rights Studies."

The latter conference, held in 1988, was sponsored under the auspices of another brainchild of Robinson, the Center for the Study of Civil Rights. Created in the summer of 1985, the Center was "established to support a residency program at the University of Virginia and to provide these fellows an opportunity to interact with scholars active in Civil Rights Studies as well as interaction with the research fellows of the Woodson Institute's Afro-American and African Studies fellowship program" (Center for the Study of Civil Rights Brochure 1989). None of these endeavors would have been possible without external support from the Ford Foundation, which awarded the Institute sizable grants in 1983 and 1987, as well as substantial funding from the Rockefeller Foundation.

To many within and beyond the University, the Woodson Institute was progressing remarkably well in terms of its research agenda. Its fellows landed positions at some of the most respected institutions in the country and went on to publish critically acclaimed books in various fields. Furthermore, the Institute was a place on which a wide range of scholars converged to discuss major interventions and developments within their respective areas of interests.

Even with this outpouring of support from his colleagues, Robinson refused to settle into complacency. Not lost upon him was the fact that the Institute's contribution to the field of Black Studies would be measured not only in terms of fellowships awarded, but also in the quality of its undergraduate and graduate program.

Necessarily then, Robinson thought long and hard about the most efficacious ways to improve the University's undergraduate and graduate offerings in African and African American Studies. "Our undergraduate program," Robinson proudly noted in a report to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, "has seen the increase not only in the numbers of majors and enrollments, but also in the quality of students and in the level of their interest in graduate training in Black Studies, an interest which we are at present unable to address (Robinson 1989: 5)" To better address this growing need, Robinson proposed the establishment of a "multidisciplinary Master of Arts degree in Afro-American and African Studies." "Such a program," he continued, "would be both the logical extension of our current activities and also the first such program in the Commonwealth" (Robinson 1989: 6). A major impetus for the creation of an M.A. program was Robinson's desire to enhance the CGWI's institutional links with the University's professional schools, particularly the Curry School of Education. Of immediate interest for him were the opportunities opened by the state of Virginia's new multicultural requirements for primary and secondary public school teachers. In Robinson's view, social studies teachers required to meet the new Virginia Standard of Learning (SOL) goals adopted by the State Board of Education in early 1989 could benefit immensely from the Institute's M.A. program. "The need for such a program is evident from the current situation where requirements for multicultural education, SOLs, are mandated by the state without the provision of training to meet those standards.

An M.A. program which facilitated joint programs with the Curry School of Education could be an effective mechanism for meeting this need" (Robinson 1992). Significantly, Robinson also eyed possible collaborations with the Law School and the Medical School.

Here lies the underappreciated significance of Armstead Robinson's legacy as an institution builder: his commitment to the intergenerational transmission of knowledge about the field. Not at all satisfied with assisting the academy in conferring superstar status on the chosen few, Robinson also wanted to produce a cadre of young scholars who would be responsible for a "fundamental alteration of disciplinary canons across the spectrum of our intellectual universe" (Robinson 1992).

Concurrent with Armstead Robinson's intellectual endeavors at the Woodson Institute, the Black Student Alliance also made significant strides in strengthening Black Studies presence at the University. Thanks to assistance from the Office of African American Affairs and the Luther P. Jackson Cultural Center (LPJCC), the BSA worked hard to ensure that students had exposure to the many dimensions of Black Studies. Especially important was its crucial role in exposing the University community to African-centered/Afrocentric thinkers held in high esteem by Africana/African American Studies departments across the country and within the larger black community. The extent to which undergraduates remained attuned to intellectual developments outside the University of Virginia was evident in such endeavors as the BSA's 1991 Afrocentric Workshop. Though Afrocentricity assumed a marginal position within the Woodson Institute, the social movement and academic theory associated with Molefi Asante definitely had its supporters among students, as well as administrators affiliated with the LPJCC, most notably Ishmail Conway. One reason for this were the highly visible debates surrounding the ascension of Afrocentricity, its infusion in public school textbooks and curricula, and its mounting list of critics, which included historians Diane Ravich and Arthur Schlesinger (Ravitch 1990; Asante and Ravitch 1991; Schlesinger 1992). A desire to better understand the roots of this argument, as well as defend the legitimacy of the Afrocentric paradigm, compelled the BSA to sponsor a workshop on Afrocentricity in the spring of 1991. "Our intent," wrote BSA president, Tahnee Jackson, "is to explore the methods of infusing the contributions of Africans, and those of African descent into university level curricula. The workshop will focus on defining Afrocentricity and the extent to which it should be implemented into the educational systems. Our goal, after discussing the controversy surrounding the topic, is to determine the intrinsic value of an Afrocentric education" (Black Student Alliance Archives 1991). On March 30, 1991, the BSA's Afrocentricity workshop opened with a lecture by Molefi Asante, followed by a question and answer session moderated by political scientist Robert Fatton and then additional panels on the best way to advance the Afrocentric agenda within and beyond the classroom. Conversations around Afrocentricity and other intellectual movements within the field of Africana Studies remained a part of black student discourse well into the mid-1990s, due in no small part to the intellectual endeavors of Ishmail Conway, who assumed the directorship of the LPJCC in 1994. Under Conway's guidance, the LPJCC stood out as an important *intellectual center* for the

dissemination of information on the major figures and ideas associated with the ever-growing and increasingly diverse field of African American/Africana/Black Studies.

Not too far away from the Luther P. Jackson Center, the Woodson Institute remained intellectually viable despite budgetary constraints. Ever the visionary, Robinson was determined to make UVA and by extension his beloved South the center of research on "the origins, experiences, and present conditions of Africans and peoples of African descent throughout the world." Unfortunately, several of his dreams for the Woodson Institute in particular and Black Studies in general would go unfulfilled. On August 28, 1995, Armstead Louis Robinson had a fatal brain aneurysm. The scholar extraordinaire, disciplinary architect, and institution builder was only 48 years of age. Sadly, the discipline of Black Studies suffered another monumental loss in 1995. In the spring of that year, Vivian Verdell Gordon died after a lengthy battle with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, more commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Across the nation, scholars in the field of Africana Studies mourned the loss of a pioneering intellectual whose theoretical contributions to such topics as the self-concept and black feminism/womanism were immense. Regrettably, her central role in the struggle for a viable Black Studies program at the University of Virginia has largely been forgotten by those within and beyond the UVA community. Taking over the program in 1975, she sparked a fire in hundreds of students with her innovative research and teaching, cultural programming, and expansive community service work. Even more, she provided exemplary leadership for undergraduates whose relentless political endeavors put the administration on notice about the seriousness in which many regarded the discipline of Black Studies. If not for the sacrifices of Vivian Gordon and Armstead Robinson, the trajectory of African American Studies at UVA would have been radically different. So, too, would the fields of African American and African Studies.

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