

The Legacy of Darwin T. Turner and the Struggle for African American Studies

by Melba Joyce Boyd

WHEN BARACK OBAMA won the Iowa Democratic Caucus, my colleagues at Wayne State University and my neighbors in Detroit exclaimed in amazement, to which I calmly explained my response to the contrary. I told them that I lived in Iowa for six years; that I had taught Iowa natives; and that I was not amazed by this victory. I explained the radical democratic tradition in Iowa, and that John Brown led the enslaved out of Kansas on the Underground Rail Road and into freedom in Iowa. I reminded them that Jesse Jackson finished third in the Iowa caucus in 1984.

I was not surprised that Iowa Democrats supported Obama for the same reason. I was not surprised that he won the presidency. It is the historical consequence of civil rights struggles on and off university campuses. It is the consequence of the impact of minority studies that integrated the curriculum and transformed the perception of American culture and Americanism in the minds of subsequent generations of young people in this country that elected a president "who happened to be black." Many political scientists have speculated on the Obama victory, from the racial angle, the economic angle, the international angle, the domestic disaster angle. But no one has sufficiently addressed this victory from the youth angle, except to say McCain was too old to appeal to this constituency.

I believe the appeal was more than Obama's good looks and cool demeanor, although that did help. I believe it was partially the consequence of decades of exposure to African American Studies, which

resulted in the transformation of the perception of blacks in leadership roles in society. I taught young Iowans who had never known anyone black in their lives, but they respected me and others like me in professorial positions. Likewise, this occurred at universities throughout the nation, and as I've travelled over the years and met young white Americans in a variety of contexts, their response to me being a professor of African American literature is more often than not: "Awesome." Despite some setbacks in Affirmative Action, the consciousness of the nation has been significantly transformed to such a substantial degree that a majority vote altered the national election. Despite the clamoring of conservative "tea bags" and reactionary militia, grasping for forgone glory days of a ruling, white majority, the United States is on the precipice of progressive change.

I decided to frame my presentation in terms of the 2008 election because I believe that those who have gone before us; those who have been sacrificed in order for this nation to achieve a more egalitarian character have also been activist-intellectuals and educators who are rarely recognized for their contributions. In consideration of the early years of African American Studies and the forerunners who built the discipline in mainstream institutions, I feel a consideration of how the ways intellectuals and scholars have contributed to social change often goes unnoticed or unappreciated. "The Legacy of Darwin T. Turner and the Struggle of African American Studies" considers the director of the program when this history

happened. At the same time, there are others of lesser renown who must also be recalled in this historical recounting.

ON FEBRUARY 11, 1991, the *New York Times* published an obituary, "Darwin Turner, 59, A Professor of English," which abbreviated his life into five paragraphs, after explaining that he had taught at the University of Iowa for two decades and that "He died of a heart attack, the university said." "The university said" is possibly the key to understanding Darwin's life in this otherwise anemic write up because Darwin's life was consumed, for better or for worse, by the university. In order to recount his mammoth contributions to the academy, it is necessary to recall the events on university campuses in 1968 for several reasons: first of all, to describe the historical site of the entry of Afro-American Studies; to explain how Darwin T. Turner arrived in mainstream academia and ultimately at the University of Iowa; and to relay my particular connection to the discipline and my introduction to Darwin.

1968 and the Beginning of African American Studies Programs and Departments

ON APRIL 5, 1968 black students at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo staged a demonstration in wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I was a freshman from Detroit and one of approximately 500 black students out of a student body of 22,000. The initial plan was to protest a week later, but the death of the Dreamer instigated us to act, not only in protest, but in tribute to King and to keep us from losing our cool out of angry grief. We shut down the Student Union Building by chaining the entrances, refusing to let anyone in except the workers. A few hours later, a crowd of angry white students were protesting our protest, and like the National Guard that had also assembled on Michigan Avenue to await orders to attack, some of these enraged students were armed. The WMU chapter of Students for a Democratic Society penetrated the angry mob and locked arms to create a buffer between us and the hostile mass gathering in front of the Student Union.

Unlike some student protests, ours ended peaceably, and our demands to increase black and Chicano student populations and for a Black American Studies curriculum were met. Scholarships and faculty lines were initially financed by the Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek in order to circumvent an embarrassing and disastrous moment in idyllic Kalamazoo, which had just been named the "All American City" by *Life* magazine, and which from all my observations, it most definitely was. I also suspected that black folks had and would continue to eat enough corn flakes to merit a bail out in a crisis.

The black student movement at WMU was a part of the broader momentum spreading across Michigan campuses and throughout the United States that instigated initiatives to institute African American Studies Programs. In 1970, a Black Action Student strike in Ann Arbor, resulted in the hire of Darwin T. Turner to teach at the University of Michigan in the Department of English and the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies. Despite the obvious fact that Darwin was a genius—graduating from the University of Cincinnati with honors at the age of sixteen, completing his M.A. in English at eighteen and his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago at twenty-five—Darwin was restricted to professorial positions in historically black colleges because of racial discrimination. At the time, he was a dean at North Carolina A. & T. Likewise, Robert Hayden, who was a Detroit native and a University of Michigan graduate of the MFA Program in Creative Writing (1946), was recruited away from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Dudley Randall, another alum of the University of Michigan (Masters Degree in Library Science, 1951) and who was the poet-in-residence and reference librarian at the University of Detroit, was often a guest professor during the 1970s as well.

I MET DARWIN T. TURNER In 1971 when I was an M.A. student in English at Western Michigan, when my interest in Black American literature was met with considerable consternation from conventional professors, in particular, the Chair and Graduate Advisor in the English Department. At the invitation

of one of the more progressive and younger faculty, Darwin appeared on campus to give a lecture on "Black Drama," and his sheer presence gave me the reassurance to persist with my studies. He delivered a flawless presentation that awed the audience. With perfect diction, he delineated the history and unique accomplishments of black playwrights, such as Lorraine Hansberry, who won a Pulitzer Prize, and more recent talents, such as Detroit's Ron Milner. Darwin confounded the intellectual arrogance and exclusionary perspective of the gatekeepers guarding the literary cannon.

1968 was the beginning of the transformation of conventional university thought with the insistence of a black presence for diversity on mainstream campuses. But, the rough and winding road that stretched before us was no cake walk. Without Hoyt Fuller, who published my M.A. thesis on Chester Himes' *Blind Man with a Pistol* in the March 1972 issue, of *Black World*, I know for a fact that the graduate committee in the English Department at WMU was planning to reject it and to eject me. In fact, I first encountered Darwin T. Turner in the pages of *The Negro Digest/Black World*. Before the inclusion of black scholarship in mainstream journals, this work appeared in historically black journals, leftist publications, and by progressive book publishers. Indeed, I came to a clearer understanding about Jean Toomer by studying Turner's *In a Minor Chord*. Although 1968 brought the struggle to a head, it did not begin with the confrontation with system. The struggle for Black Studies began when the a precocious slave stole a book from Massa's library and risked life or limb to decode it, and when Lucy Terry published her poem about a Native American rebellion against English colonialists in 1746.

Darwin T. Turner and the University of Iowa

IN 1972 The University of Iowa recruited and hired Darwin as an Endowed Chair and the Director of the African American Studies Program. In 1982, eleven years after meeting Darwin at Western Michigan University (and after securing a doctorate in English at the University of Michigan) I

applied for a position as a Visiting Professor of Afroamerican Literature at the University of Iowa. I think he was a bit suspicious of my radical approach to teaching writing through film, but he was certain about my literary publications and my work with Dudley Randall as an editor at Broadside Press. Darwin, like Randall, was "a race man," of Du Bois's "talented tenth," gifted intellectuals who dedicated their lives to advancing the socio-economic and cultural conditions for African Americans. Their articulations and their mastery of any discipline or occupation were aimed for this purpose. These men and women were perfectionists, because even in their perfection, they were deemed flawed through racial coding by antiquated mainstream thought, institutions and systems.

At the same time, in order to advance the race, they were intolerant of any habits that detracted from that purpose. Hence, they were always in pursuit of excellence in order to avoid any rejection on the grounds of error or incompetence. This required the retraining of teachers. In addition to publishing pedagogical essays, Darwin began the Summer Institute. The "Summer Institute" was a marvelous program that provided content and strategies for integrating and diversifying the curriculum. I was not at University of Iowa at this time, but read essays that came out of the institute in special editions of *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*. The institute illustrated the serious teaching component as well as the service oriented aspect of Afro-American Studies during the early years in mainstream universities.

WHEN I ARRIVED at the University of Iowa and became better acquainted with Darwin, I realized that his bibliography not only encompassed publications on Afro-American literature, but it also included published essays on almost every facet of American and English literature, especially Shakespeare; that being in the vanguard required him to master it all. He could not enjoy the leisure of the specialist in one literary period or on the life and work of only one writer. And in that regard, he advanced the struggle of Black Studies, which larger

purpose was to liberate the academy of intellectual imperialism, racial ignorance, and literary segregation.

During my first semester, Prof. Lloyd Jones, who was the Chair of the Department of English at the time, encouraged me to apply for a tenure-track position in composition. After my Fulbright appointment in Germany, Darwin wanted me to continue to teach Afro-American literature, but he said: "An appointment in the English Department as a writing professor would be an advancement. No one black has ever accomplished that position here." It was not an easy appointment. In fact, my candidacy caused quite a ruckus. And I was told that Darwin argued not only logically about my appointment, but passionately about the need to integrate other facets of the English Department.

EMOTION was not a characteristic one associated with Darwin's demeanor. He was always in control. Like the three-piece suits, or the tweed sport jackets and color-coordinated ties he wore, Darwin maintained an almost "patrician" profile of professionalism in the classroom and in the corridors of the English Philosophy Building. He had a sense of humor; but he rarely shared it, unless in safe company. Becoming emotional in an argument with one's adversary was considered bad strategy, so as to not lose face in the case of defeat, which occurred more often than not when the subject of debate involved race, even tangentially.

Darwin, Lloyd Jones, Florence Boos, Peter Nazareth, David Hamilton, Marvin Bell and others who supported my appointment, lost the argument. Alas, I had to result to legal persuasion. I filed a discrimination complaint with the Affirmative Action Officer on campus, who told me: "This is one of the most blatant instances of discrimination [she had] ever reviewed." Subsequently, the vice president of the university met with the English faculty and told them there would be none of this [discrimination] at the University of Iowa. I was appointed to an assistant professor position, which allowed for a year's sabbatical in Germany so I could assume my appointment as a Fulbright Scholar. Someone said to me: "What a terrible way to get a job." I replied: "No it's

not. It's democracy at work. It's justice. I'm not here to be loved. I am here to work."

Although I was not fully accepted by all of my colleagues, I had enough congenial relationships to tolerate an indifferent, and even hostile atmosphere. But by the end of the 1985 academic year, I went to see the Dean of the College to request a transfer from my joint appointment in Rhetoric to the African American Studies Program. I told Darwin: "I need to return to Afro-American Studies, or I'm going back home, returning to Detroit." He said he understood, and besides, there was much work to be done to advance the program.

The Threat of Termination

AS WAS OFTEN the case at many institutions, there came a moment when it was rumored that the central administration, "the Big House," was going to eliminate the Afro-American Studies Program. This could have meant the end of our curriculum on all levels, including the undergraduate major; the M.A. degree and the African American concentration in the Ph.D. Program in American Studies. I informed members of the Black Students Association about the termination of the program, and the black students staged a protest on the Pentacrest and asked us to speak. Darwin came to the Pentacrest, and his presence spoke volumes to the administration. He said, "If the students have the courage to speak up, then I have to be here." The next day, he got a call from the president to reconcile our concerns and to reaffirm the university's commitment to African American Studies.

The African American Studies Program continued to struggle even when we thought things were getting better. Since all the faculty had to have joint appointments, we had to convince other departments to agree to searches and to coincide with our choices for hire. In addition to Darwin, the faculty roster in 1982 included: Peter Nazareth, who was a full professor in the English Department and a specialist in African and African American literature; the late Jonathan Walton, who was an assistant professor in the History Department and was completing a book on blacks in Canadian history; and Alfreita Monagan, an assistant professor in

Anthropology, who was over-extended and did not achieve the publishing quota to acquire tenure. Doug Midgett was an associate professor in Anthropology, who served on the Advisory Committee and taught cross-listed courses. The faculty expanded with the hire of an African historian, James Giblin in 1986, and Mae Henderson, another literature professor, in 1985.

MEEETING a publishing quota was not my problem because I had already published two collections of poetry, some essays on black literature, and I was completing a book, *Discarded Legacy: Frances E. W. Harper, 1825-1911*. But as echoes in the corridors reminded me: "These people have long memories," and my entry without their approval would come back to haunt me at judgment time. In view of impending political circumstances, as well as internal problems—the consequence of the recent inclusion of a "difficult personality," which was far more bizarre and ominous than conventional racism lurking inside tenure committees—I accepted an invitation to interview for a joint appointment in the Department of Black Studies and the Women's Studies Program at Ohio State University in the spring of 1988, which resulted in an offer as an associate professor.

Jonathan Walton also did not expect to make tenure and he accepted a position at Carlton College in Minnesota. I'm sure Darwin felt we were abandoning him, but he also understood the historical circumstances instigating our instinctive moves to other universities. Because of limited resources accorded the program, Walton was often thrust into leadership roles that detracted from his own scholarship, and the book manuscript he needed to publish for tenure in the History Department. But even more so, Walton's sudden death preempted his move, and in some way was an omen about sacrifices and departures.

Darwin's Scholarship

AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES was usually under attack, and from several angles. In addition to his impressive *The Wayward and the Seeking: The Writings of Jean Toomer*, Darwin's later scholarship continued to advocate liter-

ary diversity in the classroom and the encroaching reactionary climate that threatened it. In the article "Teaching Contemporary Literature: A Personal Perspective" published in *The English Journal* (September 1979), Darwin shares his experiences and thoughts on the expansion of the American literary canon and the resistance to that expansion: "I am tempted also to say, after the sixties came, the world would never be the same." But, he continues with:

I wish to consider briefly some of the startling developments in that decade of the 1960s, when everything relevant to literature and humanistic education seemed to change. . .

I believe that four issues of American society can be identified as paramount causes of the changes: (1) awareness that America denied the American dream to some groups of its citizens; (2) awareness of the contrast between America's violence and its protestations of justice; (3) a quest for new values; and 4) a liberalized policy and practice of morality and language. . .

As the successes of liberation movements compelled a re-examination of American society during the 1960s, so also did the deaths of leaders or dissidents, or even innocent bystanders: Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., John and Robert Kennedy, civil rights workers, four young black girls bombed in a Birmingham church, two Panthers shot by police in Chicago, students at Kent State, Jackson State, South Carolina State—all caused a re-examination of America's image. How was it possible that so many important leaders could be killed within ten years in a nation which professed to be the moral leader of the civilized world? In a land which had taught the myths of the friendly policeman on the corner and the noble American soldier fighting for a just cause, how was it possible that so frequently the police and the nation's militia seemed to practice methods which young Americans had been taught to identify only with totalitarian states?¹

But in characteristic Turner style, he offers gentle advice at the end of the essay:

The key to successful teaching of literature is the teacher. As long as the teacher believes that there is only one way to teach... [and only one set of] materials worth teaching, literature will remain apart from life; it will not be relevant. Let the teacher revitalize himself or herself by regaining breath while discarding the mantle of a priest teaching a sacred mystery. Then let us assure the relevance of our studies by teaching them as though they are something more than the pastime of dilettantes, fragile glassware to be admired from a distance, or Sunday sermons for the bored.²

Conclusion

THE LAST TIME I saw Darwin Turner, he was a keynote speaker at "In the Mourning Time: A Conference on Robert Hayden" organized by Robert Chrisman and Robert Weisbuch at the University of Michigan in 1990. I was the director of the African American Studies Program at the University of Michigan-Flint, and an Adjunct Professor on the Ann Arbor campus. Chrisman had the foresight to document the event, and Darwin's views on Hayden's life and work were video-recorded. "Darwin Turner Reading Robert Hayden" presents Darwin's delivery as well as his views and attitudes about literature as art to assist others in the teaching of African American literature. The film elucidates Darwin's understandings about race and literature, the artistry of Hayden's poetry, and the insensitivity of the academy toward Hayden as an artist. The film reveals some of Darwin's views about the responsibility of professors to teach literature in all its complexities and to encourage students to do research to inform their readings instead of acquiescing to the convenience of popular criticism, uninformed opinions, or the vulgarity of rumors. When the documentary is complete, it will be a venue to return Darwin's voice and image to classrooms. A link to an excerpt of the film has been included to complement this essay.

ON NOVEMBER 9, 2009, I returned from Shanghai, China where I spent five weeks teaching a seminar on "African American Literature in Film" at Fudan University for Wayne State University's Confucius Center. The enthusiasm of the Chinese students was inspiring, and the interest in African American Studies in Chinese universities affirms expanding, global recognition of the discipline. Similarly, the Richard Wright Centennial Conference at the American University in Paris entertained an international array of scholars who convened to celebrate and adjudicate the Legacy of Richard Wright. These occasions reflect the current climate and growing trends in African American Studies.

Since leaving the University of Iowa, I've

been all over the world, reading my poetry and advocating African American literary studies. Likewise, up and coming scholars are engaged in research that is global and interdisciplinary; the direction that Darwin Turner anticipated when he instigated the name change at Iowa to Afro-American World Studies. This trajectory was imagined by "race men and women" like Darwin T. Turner before 1968, like the vision to elect a black American president in 2008.³

Endnotes

1. Darwin T. Turner, "Teaching Contemporary Literature," *JSTOR: The English Journal*, Vol. 68, No. 6 (September 1979), pp. 44-45.
2. *Ibid*, p. 49.
3. The essay is based on a lecture the author was invited to present on the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the African American Studies Program at the University of Iowa, December 9, 2009.

ADVERTISE IT!!!!

in

**THE
BLACK
SCHOLAR**

CLASSIFIEDS

Copyright of Black Scholar is the property of Paradigm Publishers, on behalf of The Black Scholar and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.