Introducing African American Studies: Systematic and Thematic Principles

Perry A. Hall

Journal of Black Studies, Vol. 26, No. 6. (Jul., 1996), pp. 713-734.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-9347%28199607%2926%3A6%3C713%3AIAASSA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-1

Journal of Black Studies is currently published by Sage Publications, Inc..

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/sage.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

http://www.jstor.org
Sun Aug 5 10:20:12 2007

INTRODUCING AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES
Systematic and Thematic Principles

PERRY A. HALL
University of North Carolina

This article presents a revised, updated, and refined version of ideas that I first began developing when I entered the field of African American studies during the 1970s and that I first published in 1984 (Hall, 1984). The ideas concerned developing an approach, a paradigm, a conceptual framework—an analytical guide for studying, teaching, and researching the "Black experience." The goal then, as it is now, was to

> address the need for the development of principles which bring clarity and focus to the diverse range of intellectual problems and academic materials [constituting] the core concerns of the field . . . [and] to articulate . . . principles which integrate the diverse insights and unify the field. (p. 351)

Certainly, others have made much progress in this pursuit, contributing from many quarters of the Black studies movement. Afrocentrists deconstruct Eurocentric intellectual bias and endeavor to illuminate a common center for all studies of Black life (Asante, 1987). Womanist analyses, such as that of Collins (1991) among several others (Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982), methodically invalidate any framework that ignores or undervalues the perspectives and experiences of Black women in contemplating the fact, life, and survival of African American culture and community. Others such

JOURNAL OF BLACK STUDIES, Vol. 26 No. 6, July 1996 713-734
© 1996 Sage Publications, Inc.

as Dyson (1993) and Gates (1988) weave cultural criticism into a fabric that, spanning from folk culture to "serious" literature to street culture, links a broad range of cultural impulses associated with Blackness.

Regarding African American studies as a unifiable discipline or field of study, however, the need I attempted to address earlier remains prominent. Part of the problem in developing coherent theoretical approaches to examining the Black experience is the "interdisciplinary" nature of the body of knowledge with which African Americanists are concerned. Although it spreads across the boundaries of many conventional academic disciplines, it still comprises one discreet, integral *body* of knowledge and should be presented that way. A distinction is implied here between the terms *interdisciplinary* and *multidisciplinary*. In theory, a body of knowledge or field of study that is truly interdisciplinary does not just cross conventional disciplinary boundaries, it obliterates them. In practice, however, the trend remains that most African American studies programs represent multidisciplinary approaches in which—disciplinary boundaries intact—scholars trained in history, humanities, or social science fields apply their particular disciplinary approaches to some piece of the body of knowledge in relative isolation from the whole.

It surely is not surprising that this trend endures. Before the Black studies movement, information, knowledge, and scholarship related to the historical and contemporary experiences, conditions, and aspirations of African Americans were produced and housed—usually isolated as secondary or subfield concerns—in the various disciplines referenced here. Because to this day virtually all scholars in African American studies programs and departments bring the training and theoretical and methodological approaches of one of those disciplines to their scholarly practices, the result is that programs and curricula still, more often than not, reflect those disciplinary divisions.

Thus curricular taxonomies typically divide the field into areas such as "Black literature," "African American politics," and "Black

history." Although I in no way dispute the importance of these subject areas and approaches, it remains that the task of clarifying, focusing, integrating, and unifying the breadth of insights that constitute the field as a body of knowledge is not yet complete. If, for example, the Harlem Renaissance is presented from an approach that emphasizes the style, form, method, and artistic merit of Renaissance poets and writers, then it is, strictly speaking, literature (and part of a multidisciplinary approach) and not African American studies. If, however, it is presented as one of several forms of cultural reflection of the urban transformation of the Black experience of the early 20th century, accompanied by insights that detail the historical and social context as well as the sociodemographic and macroeconomic changes associated with the great urban migration of Blacks, then it is African American studies (and part of an interdisciplinary approach) and not strictly literature. (I reiterate that I do not criticize the former approach; indeed, I strongly support its inclusion. That is why my answer to the question debated over the years—whether African American studies should be "integrated across the curriculum" or consolidated in "freestanding" programs or departments—always has been that this is not an "either/or" proposition and that *both pursuits should be top priorities in American higher education.*)

The Harlem Renaissance illustration serves further to point to how the problem of multidisciplinary boundaries referenced earlier might be viewed as reducible to one problem of one "metadisciplinary" boundary, that is, the problem of integrating approaches conventionally associated with humanist inquiry (i.e., humanities disciplines) with those conventionally associated with social inquiry (i.e., social science disciplines). With "Systematic and Thematic Principles of Black Studies," I first tried to address this issue in 1984. This new attempt draws on some of my work since then in which I applied or refined some aspect of this developing approach. It also draws on the work of others, past and present, whose insights have significantly informed my own attempts to gain greater clarity and understanding.

SYSTEMATIC AND THEMATIC PRINCIPLES: THE INTERACTION

As my thinking and practice have developed since that 1984 publication, I have refined the approach to one central analytical principle expressed in the following single, if perhaps somewhat complex, assertion: *It is the interaction of external objective (systematic) forces (or conditions) on social structure with internal subjective (thematic) forces (or conditions) on cultural sensibility that shapes the lives of Black individuals and Black communities at any given historical moment.*

The external forces or conditions are discernible largely in sociodemographic and macroeconomic terms and produce historically varied degrees and configurations of sociostructural predicaments for African Americans including socioeconomic hardship, inequality, and oppression. For example, the Great Migration of Blacks from the rural South to the urban-industrial North, beginning around the time of World War I and continuing with a second great spurt following the outbreak of World War II, is associated with such macro-level demographic and economic changes. This (systematic) level of analysis is central to illuminating sociostructural changes affecting Blacks over time.

The internal forces are in essence cultural and incorporate, among other things, elements of the adaptation and struggle (physical, emotional, psychological, aesthetic, social, and political) of Blacks, individually and collectively, against hardship and inequality. The Harlem Renaissance is one of many possible illustrations of the internal, subjective, culturally defined forces that organize reference frames, attitudes, sensibilities, and aspirations and transform self-perception among Black individuals and communities in concert with fundamental historical changes, such as the mass urban migration.

An important corollary to the central principle is that either of these approaches (systematic or thematic) in isolation misses not only the "whole experience" but also the *essence* of the experience. Consider the work of Wilson (1980, 1987), the sociologist whose

ideas expressing what he called "the declining significance of race" created much controversy in academic circles as well as in the realm of public discourse. His historical analysis of sociodemographic changes affecting African Americans is guided by what I refer to as *systematic principles*. In those terms, it is a formidable piece of work whose impact, whether or not one agrees with its thrust, cannot be denied or ignored. However, his relatively few attempts to incorporate *thematic principles*—the internal sensibility, the ethos through which African Americans seek to transform themselves and their communities—are weak and glaringly flawed. As a result, the overall impact of his work, aside from inviting confusion as to the concept of the significance of race as an abstract statistical category with the concrete reality of race as a sociocultural divider, is to paint an exceedingly negative and nearly hopeless portrait of African American communities, especially the so-called "Black underclass." For example, within his perspective there is no accounting for the fact (and implications thereof) that the so-called underclass has organized its own cultural voice (presently manifest as "hip-hop") that has significantly influenced "mainstream" culture.

Thus it is also important not to assume a one-directional cause-and-effect relationship between the external-systematic and the internal-thematic. Rather, they should be seen as *wholly interactive and mutually transforming*. In other words, whereas external forces determining social structure often construct limits and barriers to self-definition, self-determination, and self-actualization, internally generated forces on cultural sensibility often enable individuals and communities to push limits and overcome barriers.

DUALITY: A THEMATIC PRINCIPLE

This two-way interaction of external and internal reflects in itself the basic theme, or thematic principle, underlying the form and function of African American identity and culture: *duality*. First called "double-consciousness" by DuBois (1969), the term duality

refers to the fundamental opposition of cultural sensibilities that shapes, and indeed defines, African Americans as a people. In the broadest terms, the concept of duality refers to the opposition of sensibilities associated with a Black culture or reality to those associated with a White reality. DuBois's description of this fundamental duality or double-consciousness, recorded nearly a century ago, was both eloquent and succinct: "two warring souls in one dark body . . . whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p. 45).

TRANSFORMATION: A SYSTEMATIC PRINCIPLE

The fundamental systematic principle in this analytical framework is *transformation*, the perpetual rearrangement of material and social structures that shape the way people live, think, work, relate, and associate. It is a term—applicable to the history, culture, and experiences of any nation or society as well as of humanity as a whole—that implies both continuity and change. As a principle for examining African American experiences, transformation involves global forces, factors, or conditions that shape the Black experience from the outside and give rise to the social structures and the overall global environments in which Black communities emerge, develop, and transform. Analyses of these environments and structures often are built around the following terms and issues.

WEST EUROPEAN EXPANSION

This term refers to the expansion over the past 500 years of European-based economic, cultural, and political systems to current positions of dominance over most of the world. The proposition that Western civilization's attainment of world dominion has profoundly affected the development and historical fortunes of the rest of humanity, including those of Blacks, is an obvious understatement.

TECHNOLOGIZATION

"Technologization" is a factor in transformation when incorporation of technological innovation causes significant change in the basic cultural and social patterns of groups of humans and of humanity as a whole. For example, 10,000 years after the plow revolutionized food production and produced civilization and history as we know them, the industrial revolution (see the Industrialization subsection) similarly transformed the global reality of humanity. Today, the computer chip, in conjunction with new directions in biomedical and other sciences, is having a similarly profound impact on patterns of living, thinking, working, relating, and associating.

Although the common mind generally views technological applications as positive (i.e., "progress"), there are compelling arguments that some innovations are themselves negative (e.g., the crossbow, gunpowder and firearms, dynamite, nuclear arms) or have unacknowledged or unintended negative consequences (e.g., social inequality, depletion of natural resources, loss of jobs to robotic manufacturing techniques, pollution and environmental endangerment, social fragmentation, alienation, spiritual deterioration) and do not really represent progress at all—at least not in a wholly positive sense. It is drearily predictable that the negative effects of technologization focus disproportionately on Blacks, people of color, and other disenfranchised groups. Although African Americans make considerable progressive use of technological innovation, transformation related to technological change is chiefly an external factor in shaping the experiences of Blacks. This is true because, even when Black individuals themselves invent or create technological innovation (and this has happened much more often than most could imagine), control over development and application invariably falls to mainstream (i.e., White-dominated) organizations and institutions.

COLONIZATION

Colonial systems, established as Renaissance-age technological innovations, increased the capability of Europeans to expand the

limits of their so-called "known world" and organized the resources of colonies in the non-European world in the name of—and for the benefit of—the European colonizers. It was largely a result of the drive to seek and exploit resources in colonies around the world that the slave trade ensued, giving birth to the African American experience. Blacks displaced from Africa in this process, to the Western Hemisphere and other parts of the "African diaspora," can be conceived of as "internal colonies" (Blauner, 1968, 1972). The concept of internal colonies links their experiences, and the conditions in which they live, to those of other colonized peoples through both colonial and postcolonial times.

INDUSTRIALIZATION

Wealth reaped through exploitation of slave labor and colonial resources was sufficient to finance new productive technologies that created the industrial revolution, leading to the international industrialized economic system that dominates the globe today. From the moment that historical forces meshed to eventually create the industrial revolution, and through contemporary signs of its apparent stagnation and decline, the fate of the Black nation has been linked with the growth and/or decline of industrial manufacturing capacity.

ANTICOLONIAL RESISTANCE AND STRUGGLE

Resistance of indigenous peoples to the various forms of colonial dominance always has been a factor of historical transformation. The impact of such resistance on global transformation has been especially evident during the period following World War II. The Chinese in 1949 and the Vietnamese in 1954 (Dienbienphu) and again in 1968 (Tet) demonstrated the existence in the so-called Third World of forces capable of defeating attempts to further expand European-based political, cultural, and economic models. African Americans and others in "internal colonies" (e.g., South Africa) also were significant participants in the global pattern of struggle against oppression and exploitation during that period.

HISTORICAL PERIODISM: ANOTHER SYSTEMATIC PRINCIPLE

For any given historical reference point, external conditions shaping the experiences of Blacks may be described in the interplay of these factors of global transformation. In looking at various aspects or dimensions of this body of history, it often is convenient to refer to a historical periodization—a frame of reference in which the historical experience is divided into a succession of distinct epochs separated by major historical change or transformation. Rather than chronology per se, the focus is on forces, factors, and conditions that characterize social and cultural life during a given period. In this framework, the following *historical periodization* is suitable for framing many aspects of the African American experience:

African period: before slave trade;
Enslavement period: 1500-1865;
Rural/Agricultural period: 1865-1914;
Urban/Industrial period: 1914-1973; and
Urban Crisis period: since about 1973.

As if on some film screen of history, the factors described in the previous section frame the Black experience in the context of global transformation through the centuries. Blacks, like other colonized and oppressed peoples, have contributed their lands and resources, their culture, the value of their labor, and much of their humanity as these transformations have moved history. Financed largely with profits of slave trade, slave labor, and colonial exploitation, the spread of the industrial economy through all parts of the society and the world was a process that stretched through the end of the 19th century. The race among European powers (including, eventually, the United States) to stake imperial claims throughout the non-European world was coming to a climax at that time. The highly competitive situation that developed among the colonial (or "imperialist") powers formed a backdrop for the world wars of the 20th century.

Black labor was not directly involved in the rapid acceleration of industrial development in this country that immediately followed the Civil War. Rather, the steady flow of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe provided the labor for the expanding industrial machine while Blacks were held as a virtual captive nation of sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the rural South. The world war in 1914 led to immigration restrictions, an increased need for production, and an acute labor shortage at the same time that the perfection of assembly-line mass production techniques increased industrial production capability. These conditions comprised a kind of vacuum that sucked virtually whole Black communities from the rural/agricultural South to the industrial centers of the urban North.

First in the colonial-slave-rural setting and then (with accelerated industrial expansion and world wars during the 20th century) as laborers in the industrial centers, Blacks constituted the bottom rungs in the socioeconomic system. After a significant period of social movements and collective struggle following World War II, their fragile positions in this system were eroding rapidly during the current period of transition, a result of structural change in the industrial economy that provided a modicum of social and economic mobility through the first two thirds of this century.

For the Urban/Industrial period (1914-1973) of the complex, fast-moving 20th century, a subperiodization, indicating four separate phases during the period is additionally useful in looking at these changes:

Urban Transition (1914-1929): During this early phase of transition, the rudiments of the complex 20th-century urban Black community emerged dramatically.

Depression Blues (1929-1943): Adjustments to changed economic conditions affected social life, cultural sensibility, and political orientation.

Postwar Coming of Age (1943-1973): Another global crisis loosens economic strictures, and another "victory for democracy" emboldens yet another generation of "New Negroes" to make it real for all.

New Waves (1973 to present): "Postmovement" generational and class divisions characterize this era when structural economic changes

and mainstream attitude shifts have limited progress for some and prevented it entirely for others in Black communities.

DUALITY REVISITED

The cultural transformations characterizing the African American experience during this century reflect the increased salience of double-consciousness, or duality, as a cardinal feature of identity among Blacks as, like DuBois a century ago, more of them experience educational and social mobility with concomitant exposure to and internalization of mainstream cultural sensibilities. The theme of duality reflects the very sense of African American identity in the form of the double identity about which DuBois wrote. The theme also manifests itself in various other forms including the following.

FORM VERSUS ESSENCE

In the context of the African American experience, cultural, social, and political phenomena often involve the infusion of Black or African-based sensibilities (essence) in the adaptation of White or Euro-American cultural artifacts (forms). This is readily demonstrable in the examination of forms of Afro-American music. Virtually all forms of Black music developed from the fusion of basic African musical sensibilities with American or Western instruments and musical forms (Walton, 1971). The African American church and the family, as social institutions, also reflect this pattern.

"FOLK/POPULAR" VERSUS "HIGH/ELITE" (CULTURAL TRADITIONS)

African American cultural life cannot be understood as one whole without taking into account the dualistic experience out of which it emerges. Factors forming the basis for different cultural reference frames among groups of Blacks go to the very origins of the African American experience. From the start, the persistence

of Africanized cultural sensibilities characterized one pole in a spectrum of African American cultural patterns—a folk/popular tradition, evolving and maintaining itself in relative autonomy, largely outside mainstream cultural reference frames. At the other pole, the models offered or imposed by non-Blacks comprise the basis of a high/elite cultural reference frame more closely shaped on mainstream forms and sensibilities. This bifurcation is commonly described as a legacy of the historical dichotomy between the "field slave" and the "house slave." Although these reference points do represent significantly different orientations, a more significant historical dichotomy comes from the differentiation of legacies of those who were free (and mostly northern and urban) from those who were not free (and mostly southern and rural).

Unlike house slaves, free northern Blacks were largely isolated from the masses of Blacks (slaves), whose folk/popular reference frame retained more of the wholly African experience of slave ancestors including cultural and social ideas as well as surviving Africanisms in language, music, and social patterns. These aesthetic elements have transformed over time in conjunction with the social experiences, shared by most Blacks, of poverty and economic deprivation, struggle, and the experience of individual, social, and institutional racism. The high/elite cultural reference frame, relatively isolated from the masses of Blacks, has to a greater degree tended toward values and aspirations internalized from the White or mainstream sector of American society. Ultimately, however, African American culture as a complex whole generally draws on the mainstream reference frame for its forms while infusing its essence from the Black, African, or folk/popular reference frame.

CLASS VERSUS CULTURAL REFERENCE FRAME

Although the framework suggests some overlap among the categories of Black/African, folk/popular, and lower/working class on the one hand and among the categories of White/Euro-American, high/elite, and middle/upper class on the other, the overlap may be far from complete. In other words, persons who are middle/upper class in socioeconomic terms may adhere significantly to a folk/

popular cultural reference frame. This may be especially likely in the case of upwardly mobile Blacks whose origins or roots are within the folk/popular reference frame—*and they choose to retain* their connections to that cultural community. In fact, most African Americans from most classes adhere in some way to elements of both.

Indeed, although the Black experience historically is dichotomized on one level, racism creates a shared experience around which Blacks universally identify, making color a more important identifier than class or cultural reference frame in most contexts. Even compelling gender issues, brought sharply into focus in the wave of penetrating Black feminist scholarship, are defined by most of these scholars in terms of an overall struggle against racism (Collins, 1991; Giddings, 1984; hooks, 1981). The shared struggle against racism, then, comprises a basis for cross-class unity and cultural diffusion among different groups of Blacks. Thus antebellum northern Blacks were fervently involved with abolition, reflecting their recognition of how color tied them to that degraded status, even though most lived in geographic and cultural isolation from slavery.

In earlier work, I have pointed to this aspect of the theme of duality as a reference point in differentiating alternate interpretations of the history of Black cultural transformation.

> In looking at the development and transformation of Afro-American culture in the urban setting . . . the premise of duality [involves a] synthesis . . . of two different histories or views of cultural development. While one history, written from the point of view of "high/elite" culture, might see the urban transformation of Black culture as occurring in New York [Harlem Renaissance] and the East, nurtured by influxes of Blacks from all sectors, another history, written from the point of view of folk/popular tradition, would see this transformation as an impulse which went first up the Mississippi Valley to Chicago, Detroit, Gary, Indiana and other places before going East, or later West, to be recognized.
>
> The Northern, urban Black community, dating from colonial times, was made up of free Blacks and ex-slaves based in the Northeastern cities of Boston, New York and Philadelphia. Many of the historically visible leaders of the nineteenth century came from or were based in this community. They were continually involved

> with progressive ideas and political struggle. However, culturally this community tended toward the American mainstream, divorced from the rural folk culture of the vast majority of Blacks of that time. Blues, spirituals, gospels and other music forms comprising the "blues continuum," which Jones/Baraka [see Jones, 1963] felt was an authentic reflection of the Black experience of any given period, are clearly created from the experience of those folk masses, who were captive in the rural economy through the slave period and into the twentieth century. (Hall, 1985, pp. 3-4)

VOICES OF CULTURE

In context with a high/elite cultural reference frame, African Americans preserve their experiences for history in mostly "literate" forms (e.g., letters, biographies, novels, journals, magazines, newspapers). Forms of cultural expression associated with the folk/popular tradition are mostly "oral." Indeed, for reasons involving indigenous Africanity of spirit and material disadvantage of circumstance, music has provided the definitive voice of the folk/popular cultural milieu.

Thus transformations in musical expression mark every stage on the geohistorical track along which the African soul of Black cultural sensibility has transformed. As the river of African American cultural consciousness flowed from the deep South up the Mississippi Valley and out into the urban centers of the North and the West, spirituals and blues sentiments, having gathered in New Orleans, Louisiana, were infused with ragtime rhythms and orchestrated in band arrangements of many instruments and spread out to points north and west: to Chicago, where Louis Armstrong's horn heralded the Jazz Age (before going to New York, where he and modern jazz were discovered); to working-class urban centers in the industrial heartland, where boogie-woogie developed (helping make good times in economic bad times), where be-bop emerged (attempting to wrest Black music from the control of White swing musicians), where early band-based rhythm and blues developed during the 1940s and 1950s (leading to "rock 'n' roll" on the one hand and transforming to soul, funk, and disco during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s on the other), and where rap music and hip-hop

culture have exploded out of the youth culture of our so-called underclass.

With each transformation, powerful aspects of pure African sensibility were preserved and reexpressed. At each stage, musically, the transformations involve the incorporation of Western musical forms and instruments. In addition, each musical transformation incorporates social sentiments peculiar to those given historical moments. As Jones (1963) wrote,

> The most expressive music of any given period will be an exact reflection of what the Negro himself is. It will be a portrait of the Negro in America at that time. Who he thinks he is, what he thinks America or the world to be, given the circumstances, prejudices and delights of that particular America. (p. 137)

Following a "musical trail" of cultural transformation further highlights the historical relationship of folk/popular culture to high/elite culture and the respective roles of "literateness" and "orality" within each.

> Significant class lines began to emerge with the great migrations to the North. [New] migrants were encouraged to abandon their "country ways" on arrival, often through ridicule. When positive Blackness was . . . expressed in the Harlem Renaissance it was done on the basis that development of "high" cultural forms based on Black life would finally prove that Blacks deserved a place in the American mainstream.
>
> Significantly, the music that developed in Black urban areas during this period was not recognized by most artists of the Renaissance as the musical analog of what they themselves were expressing in literary terms about the so-called "New Negro." The closer the music was to the traditional folk roots of rural Black culture, the more "gut-bucket" and disdainful it was considered.
>
> [However,] in cities like Detroit and Chicago . . . the overall working-class, Southern-folk character of the new urban Black culture was more predominant. Even though both cities had small Black communities prior to the Great Migration, the great industrial capacity of these cities attracted a large portion of the migration and greatly affected the overall character of social development.

> Chicago was not only the blues center of the North in the early part of the century but was also the place where Louis Armstrong and his contemporaries were transformed from traditional New Orleans band musicians to pace-setting jazz innovators. Then he went to New York to become famous. (Hall, 1985, p. 4)

Analyzed in these terms, Black cultural ethos is the product of complex admixtures of White or American and Black or African-based cultural impulses, attitudes, artifacts, and sensibilities. Important to this analysis is the understanding of where the Black or African-based cultural base (the "mouth" or "source" of the cultural stream) has been—that is, in the historical South and, as Blacks migrated north and west away from that source, in the least culturally assimilated areas of the urban centers in those regions. (The migration created, for the first time, a significant urban working-class cultural community. This urban working-class community is directly tied to the rural tenant class that was the social and cultural reference frame of the overwhelming majority of Blacks only one or two generations earlier.)

Most work in this area (transformation of African American folk/popular culture) has focused on Black language (Smitherman, 1977) or music. Thus Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) called this historical Black, African-based cultural stream the "blues continuum." Following along this path, I use the term "folk/popular tradition" and relate it dialectically to the Black high/elite cultural tradition.

THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM AND LITERACY: A PRINCIPAL THEME—A THEMATIC PRINCIPLE

As stated at the outset, the interaction of external, objective, or systematic forces on social structure with internal, subjective, or thematic forces on cultural sensibility shapes the lives of Black individuals and Black communities at any given historical moment. It was further stated that although external forces determining social structure often construct limits and barriers to self-definition, self-determination, and self-actualization, internally generated forces

on cultural sensibility often enable individuals and communities to push limits and overcome barriers. So consistent has been the relationship between the aspirations of African Americans and the limiting conditions of social structure, and so powerful has been the internally generated drive to overcome those conditions, that the idea of struggling for freedom and of overcoming barriers has become firmly rooted in the African American cultural reference frame ("We Shall Overcome").

Indeed, it is axiomatic that the deepest, most widely shared wish of any oppressed people is for freedom. Such strongly held, widely shared ideas have been identified and studied by certain literary critics, who examine literature to understand basic motifs of the culture that produced it. Northrup Frye developed the concept of "pregeneric quest-myth" to refer to such themes. His term connotes a concept of prerational, nonmaterial, and extraordinary archetypes held collectively in the consciousness of a people and discernible in their tradition of literary expression.

Applying this approach to African American literature, Robert Steptoe identifies freedom and literacy as the pregeneric quest-myth underlying the African American cultural tradition. From the recorded experiences of Frederick Douglass and through the Black community's long struggle for equal educational opportunity, it is not hard to see that African American culture embodies a pregeneric awareness of a basic link, or relationship, between the achievement of literacy and the achievement of freedom. Douglass pursued both doggedly through his life as a slave and beyond, through his career as an abolitionist and as an agitator for the rights of African Americans after emancipation. Educational opportunity always has been at or near the top of the list of practical objectives sought by Black movements for freedom and power. Malcolm X's autobiography makes it clear that his self-made prison education was the key to the sense of freedom that allowed him not only to escape his ingrained street-hustler lifestyle but also to become a leader of international renown—arguably the strongest voice for Black self-determination of this century.

In recent years, Harris (1988) has contributed important extensions to the concept of a pregeneric quest for freedom and literacy.

In particular, his extended definition of the term literacy refers to substantially more than just the ability to read and write. His work suggests that, although the quest for literacy begins with the challenge of decoding the letters (which represent information in this society), it expands to encompass ever-enlarging patterns of meaning. Indeed, ultimately literacy, in this extended sense, means "historical literacy" or "cultural literacy"—the ability to authentically locate one's self in the context of one's own history and culture.

Moreover, although literacy in the conventional sense is by definition associated with high or elite culture, Harris's implication is that literacy becomes functional as historical literacy when it recognizes and incorporates the authentic (folk/popular) insight of ancestors and forebears. Zora Neal Hurston was early among those whose literary work incorporated and transformed the Black folk experience to terms of literary discourse. (The work of woman writers such as Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, as women have dominated Black creative writing and literary innovation during the past quarter century, suggests that the womanist perspective may include special insights as to the passing of traditional culture down through generations—the role of the insights of the cultures of their mothers in the contemporary struggle for self, family, and community [Walker, 1983].)

Harris incorporates work from another literary critic, Stephen Henderson, to address relationships between different cultural reference frames using the terms "folk culture" and "formal culture" in ways roughly similar to my use of the terms folk/popular and high/elite.

> The "folk" and the "formal" were and continue to be competing forces in Afro-American creative life and Afro-American life generally. The "folk" refers to the African half of double-consciousness and the "formal" refers to its American half. Henderson describes the relationship between the two as "perhaps too subtle to be called dialectic." He concludes . . . by noting that the folk has had the most significant influence on the formal during periods of the "greatest power and originality." (Harris, 1988, p. 5)

Harris adds that achieving historical literacy, the ability to read "cultural signs," involves immersing oneself in the insights of folk culture. Literacy, allowing the ability to conceptualize oneself in an authentic cultural and historical context, then becomes the key in the quest for freedom.

In practice, Harris (1988) states, "Conflict resolution and the ability to move on after certain goals either have not been obtained or have been radically altered depends on the level of literacy achieved by the individual in question" (p. 9).

Literacy, in this sense, informs both aspects of the African/folk/popular-American/high/elite duality and at some level attempts to resolve contradictions and tensions between them. Suggesting the application of this principle to concrete conditions of contemporary crisis in the African American community, I recently wrote,

> The social symptoms of dysfunction, crime, violence, drugs, etc., manifest the confrontations of a large sector of our people with the legacy, the momentum of their history; a large segment, especially among young people, who sorely lack the special tools of literacy. Infusion of this cultural competence—the very historical and cultural insights that define our field—in the conception and implementation of programs addressing these symptoms would obviously strengthen their effectiveness.
>
> A people's own culture constitutes the medium in which communication takes authentic meaning, whether that communication is in the context of teaching, rehabilitating, intervening, or even punishing, for that matter. A people's own culture is the context in which proactive behaviors are shaped, [are] defined, and have meaning; A program in which participants' social awareness concerning their circumstances as African-Americans is actually transformed into an asset in their individual struggles against symptoms of so-called dysfunction, would have to be conceived and carried out with great care to recognize, account for, and speak authentically to the appropriate set of cultural sensibilities. (Hall, 1991, p. 6)

Harris's extension of the concept of literacy acknowledges transformation, resulting from the interaction through history of systematic and thematic forces that shape the overall African American experience. Indeed, as literacy and freedom had their own

meanings for Blacks during the Enslavement period, so do they have their own meanings for today's Black communities when computerized information superhighways are rendering even more complex the tasks of negotiating paths into an evolving future world dominated by global struggle for limited world resources and a rapidly changing economic structure based on ultra-modern scientific, biomedical, and technological applications.

SUMMARY: LITERACY AND DUALITY—TRANSFORMATION AND SELF-DETERMINATION

If *transformation* represents the winding highway of history over which African Americans (like all humans) must travel, then *historical periods* represent the places (e.g., states, counties, nations) that the road has and will put them. And if *duality* represents the two-barreled carburetor in the engine of Black identity and culture moving across the historical landscape, then the quest for *freedom and literacy* is the fuel that makes that engine go—like a dream that has to be steadily consumed to become actualized, to become reality and no longer be a "dream deferred."

My current and previous involvement with developing and refining the ideas constituting the framework presented here is based on my belief that such a framework—one that effectively organizes and integrates the full breadth of insight and experience of Black life—would be a potentially powerful analytical tool for African American studies as an academic discipline. Any modest degree of success achieved (and any lack of success as well) is reflected in the record of my published and finished pieces of work. Virtually all of these pieces attempt, in some way and to some degree, to apply or integrate the fundamental ideas developed here, although these pieces address a broad range of topics, areas, and approaches. It is also a record that reflects consistent attempts to clarify and refine these ideas and make them more accessible to requirements for finding solutions to intellectual problems and practical problems alike. In the conclusion that follows, however, I have hazarded that my original closing of more than 10 years ago

might still serve its point without any attempt at improvement or refinement:

> As seen in the lives and works of slaves, intellectuals, artists, musicians, political and community leaders, the quest for freedom and literacy is the story of how Blacks continually seek realization in society's terms and ultimately find renewal in their own terms. The quest for literacy begins with the challenge of decoding the letters which represent information in this society and expands to encompass ever-enlarging patterns of meaning. While this literacy brings clarity as to the immediate and extended meaning of one's life, if one is Black it does not usually lead to acceptance, in the wider world, of the authenticity of one's experience, vision, or humanity. Yet it is the use of the tools of literacy to authenticate one's own experience, one's own vision, one's own humanity that enables one to therefore transcend historically structured, socially imposed limitations and experience the true essence of freedom—the freedom of self-determination. (Hall, 1984, p. 358)

REFERENCES

Asante, M. K. (1987). *The Afrocentric idea.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Blauner, R. (1968). Internal colonialism and ghetto revolt. *Social Problems, 16,* 393-408.

Blauner, R. (1972). *Racial oppression in America.* New York: Harper & Row.

Collins, P. H. (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.* New York: Routledge, Chapman.

DuBois, W.E.B. (1969). *The souls of Black folk.* New York: Penguin. (Originally published 1903)

Dyson, M. E. (1993). *Reflecting Black: African-American cultural criticism.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gates, H. L. (1988). *Signifying monkey: A theory of African-American literary criticism.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Giddings, P. (1984). *When and where I enter: The impact of Black women on race and sex In America.* New York: William Morrow.

Hall, P. A. (1984). Systematic and thematic principles for Black studies. *Journal of Negro Education, 53,* 351-358.

Hall, P. A. (1985, March). *Educational and social significance in recent Afro-American popular music.* Paper presented to the National Council for Black Studies, Ithaca, NY.

Hall, P. A. (1991, March). *African-American crisis: Critical issues in public policy.* Paper presented to the National Council for Black Studies, Atlanta, GA.

Harris, N. (1988). *Connecting times: The sixties in Afro-American fiction.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

hooks, b. (1981). *Breaking bread: Insurgent Black intellectual life*. Boston: South End.

Hull, G. T., Scott, P. B., & Smith, B. (Eds.). (1982). *All the women are White, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave: Black women's studies*. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press.

Jones, L. R. (1963). *Blues people*. New York: William Morrow.

Smitherman, G. (1977). *Talkin and Testifyin*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Walker, A. (1983). *In search of our mothers' gardens: Feminist prose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Walton, O. (1971). A comparative analysis of the African and the Western aesthetic. In A. Gayle (Ed.), *The Black aesthetic* (pp. 154-164). Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday.

Wilson, W. J. (1980). *The declining significance of race*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Perry A. Hall is an assistant professor in the curriculum in African and Afro-American Studies at the University of North Carolina. He received his doctorate in education and social policy from Harvard University. His interests include theoretic frameworks for African American studies and African American popular culture.