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The Future of the African American Past

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African American History As American History

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The title of this final panel of our three-day discussion of “The Future of the African American Past” echoes a longstanding question for the field: Should the goal of studying African American history be to integrate it into general American history or that it stand apart as a field of inquiry of its own? It was a question raised most intensely during late 1960s and early Seventies, when students across the country were demanding the establishment of Black Studies programs at many of the nation’s leading universities. It was a question that sharply divided generational cohorts, with most veterans of the field adamantly defending an “integrationist” vision of what studies of the black American experience should aspire to, while the scholars in or just emerging from doctoral programs during those years were more likely to embrace a so-called nationalist agenda. Emblematic of the divide was the confrontation at the University of Chicago in 1969, where John Hope Franklin, then chair of the History Department, rebuffed black student demonstrators who were demanding a separate Black Studies Department. For Franklin, as for many others of his generation, the student’s demand for a history of their own seemed to echo similar demands for separate

housing, campus clubs, and other public facilities that were erupting at the very moment American's apartheid higher education regime was being racially integrated.

It's somewhat ironic, then, that fourteen years later Dr. Franklin would articulate what some might take as a very different, even opposite, position on the question of African American History's proper place in the academy. In October 1983, at a conference to assess the past, present and future of scholarship on African American history, organized at Purdue University by our co-panelist, Darlene Clark Hine, Dr. Franklin spoke forcefully of African American history's very distinct, separable, past as a professional field of study.

Every generation has the opportunity to write its own history, and indeed is obliged to do so. Only in that way can it provide its contemporaries with the materials vital to understanding the present and to planning strategies for coping with the future. Only in that way can it fulfill its obligation to pass on to posterity the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the past, which, after all, give substance and direction for the continuity of civilization.

Franklin's core argument that evening was that there were inextricable linkages between the writing of history and the making of history. You have, he told his audience, the solemn obligation to rewrite the African American story from the perspective of the experiences and struggles of your own generation. This, he reasoned, is because there is a clear connection between knowledge of our past and our capacity to address the problems of our present and future. The stakes for our profession, he declared, was nothing less than the very health and vitality of civilization itself.

Explicating this theme, Franklin organized his talk around four generations of historical scholarship, beginning with George Washington Williams' *History of the Negro Race in America*, published in the 1882, down to the work of our own fourth generation, exactly a century later. In between these epochs one could make out the era of Carter G. Woodson and the second generation of scholars and a third generation, epitomized arguably by W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* published in 1935. The audience to which he

spoke largely constituted the fourth generation, which had come of age, professionally as well as chronologically, in the late Sixties and early '70s.

What Franklin described, therefore, was a kind of generational succession of African-American historians, each cohort of which was motivated by a distinct mission, one shaped by its perceptions of the conditions and needs of black people in their time and by the general imperatives imposed by the larger society in its relations with black people. For George Washington Williams' generation the task was to prove that black folk were even capable and worthy of participating in the building of American civilization, that black folk had adjusted to and progressed since their recent emancipation from slavery. Dating from W.E.B. Du Bois's publication, The Negro, in 1915, but organized most effectively by Carter G. Woodson, the second-generation took on the task of establishing that blacks even had a history worth writing about, that they had made significant contributions to American life and society. To that end, Woodson organized the Association of Negro Life and History and promoted Negro History Week for the express purpose of bringing that message to black as well as to white Americans. For blacks, their history mirrored the possibilities of their present; for whites, it might persuade them that their fellow black citizens could be what Du Bois once called "co-workers in the kingdom of culture."

But for the third generation the task was different still; its approach tended to be more analytical than hortatory. This, of course, was Franklin's own generation; he had come of age professionally as it flourished and matured. This generation, he said, "looked less to Afro-American achievements and more to the interactions of blacks and whites, and more to the frequent antagonisms than to the rare moments of genuine cooperation. They tended to see Afro-American history in a larger context, insisting that any event that affected the status of Afro-Americans was a part of Afro-American history even if no Afro-Americans were directly involved." It was a generation that had experienced the Depression and the New Deal, that had fought a second world war to save the world for democracy and--for yet a second time--had witnessed

the betrayal of those hopes. It was a generation that lived the optimism engendered by early victories against segregation and the despair of realizing the limitations of courtroom victories alone. It was also the most integrated cohort of historians of the black experience ever assembled, as leftist whites took on the task of discovering and reinterpreting that history as a possible instrument in the larger cause of social justice. The fourth generation emerged in the late 1960s and early '70s, a cohort I have called "the Civil Rights generation," because its timing and character were profoundly shaped by the struggles, victories, and defeats of that era.

For the most part it was members of that generational cohort who made up Franklin's audience that warm Fall evening in Lafayette. What Prof. Franklin's words did for us that evening, I would write in the introduction to volume that emerged from that conference, was to help us to begin to locate **ourselves in history**, even as we continued to write and make history. For me certainly, it was a welcome space in which to formulate in both intellectual and political terms just what we were about. And this was important I thought, because then (as now--but especially then) the intellectual was often seen--even by intellectuals--as somehow antithetical, at odds with, the political. And here I use "political" in the broadest sense--meaning the work of addressing all aspects of power relations in the world that oppress some and privilege others, that impoverish some and enrich others. This was especially true for my generation because so many of us had been profoundly formed and transformed--personally and professionally--by the Civil Right Movement of the Sixties. We had chosen history as an instrument of the equal rights struggle and so it was reassuring to hear Prof. Franklin speak approvingly of "**the valid interconnection between the history of a people and their drive for first-class citizenship.**" Neither he, nor we (at our best) intended to "politicize" history in the sense of doing shoddy and self-serving work. To be useful, our history must be rigorous, thorough, and above all courageous; unafraid to let the chips fall where they may. For those who cared to listen, therefore, Prof. Franklin was saying that

intellectual work was--in the best sense--also political work; at its best it could be responsive to the world we inhabited without being biased, distorted, or self-serving. There was no necessary contradiction between taking that standpoint and doing ones work with objectivity and integrity. Nor was the challenge to the previous generation' s work necessarily in contradiction with the respect they were due as forerunners in the common struggle.

Indeed, at the time, I interpreted Franklin's talk as a strikingly generous gesture by to an audience whose orientation to the profession, whose professional formation, was so strikingly different from his own—as evidenced by the Chicago student strike of 1969. But in retrospect, I think his gift to us was even more profound, especially as we reach a moment in our life-course that he knew we would—much as he had in 1983. In my commentary on Franklin's declaration, I interpreted his words as articulating the mission my generation of “tenured radicals” would face. His message implied a parallel but distinctive rationale for the study of the African American past not then typical of American history more generally. It was at once both consistent with our history and with the history we sought to write. We were destined to sustain a critical relation, if not indeed an overt opposition, to the main currents of conventional interpretations of the American experience. Clearly, the black experience had from the outset been in tension with the larger national experience: that is, ours is not a history of undisputed claims to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” certainly. It followed that the historical record of that experience must reflect that same tension. This is not to say that African Americans have not been a part of American history, but simply that they have always been, at the same time, distinctly apart from it as well.

The Purdue conference was especially well-timed, then, in that it arrived early in the second decade of a dramatic, historic expansion in scholarship on the African-American experience and most particularly historical scholarship by African Americans. Gathered in that audience were scholars and curators responsible for some of the best historical work of the preceding decade, many of whom would go

on to play major roles in shaping the development of the field--both through their own work and eventually through that of their students, over the next several decades. Most notable, however, was the fact that it was a generation just emerging from a struggle to establish African American history as a legitimate field of intellectual inquiry-- in its own right. That struggle had been waged not only over the appropriate content and objectives of the field, but the very methods and means by which that content would be assembled (e.g., the history of the so-called inarticulate) as well as the professional standards by which that history would be judged and evaluated (e.g., oral and other historical methods for a people otherwise unrecorded).

In many ways, then, our current moment echoes that earlier conference. The building of a museum dedicated to the collection and exhibition of the African American past represents an undisputed milestone in a journey begun in the early years of the last century—and arguably even in the century before that. It suggests that what might have been a fleeting moment of African American progress has achieved a literal solidity on the national landscape. But as in 1983, this very success poses yet new challenges, with its new plateaus being merely the terrain for struggles yet to come. It has always been so. There is little reason to think this moment will be any different.

Whatever those future struggles may be, it would be well to remember the implied message of Dr. Franklin's admonition some 33 years ago. For to say that each generation must rewrite our history implies that that historical project is not simply a creature of academic fashions and conventions, nor motivated by crass careerist ambitions. The purpose, when all is said and done, is—as Franklin declared in that earlier moment of reflection-- to provide “the materials . . . knowledge and wisdom of the past” that might help us understand the present, make our future, and “give substance and direction for the continuity of civilization.” A civilization human and humane; ours, America's, and the world's.

