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Higginbotham discusses the field of African American Studies and reflects on its early pioneers

Posted Apr 05, 2013 By Vivienne Chen '14

On April 4th, 2013—the anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.—Professor Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham discussed the history and importance of the field of African American Studies in McCormick Hall for the Center of African American Studies' annual lecture "Reflection on African American Studies."

Professor Higginbotham, in her last year as Chair of Harvard University's African American Studies department and former visiting professor at Princeton, remarked on her own experiences as a "participant in the politically charged campus revolts" of the 1960s, particularly with the Black Nationalist movement in college.

"I was among those students who demanded a field of study on the black experience," said Higginbotham of her college years. "I was there to witness firsthand the academic institutionalizing and integration of the field of African American studies."

While some Princeton students today express doubt about the modern necessity of culture-specific departments like African or Asian American studies, Higginbotham showed that the "challenges to the intellectual legitimacy" and appeals to "relevancy" that have dogged African American Studies are historically rooted and still ongoing.

"Those charges that we had displaced objectivity for propaganda," she said, "all of these criticisms were similar to criticisms leveled against our predecessors."

Higginbotham cited some of the greatest black thinkers of the early 20th century, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and Alain Locke, as the pioneers of the field of African American studies, but also as great contributors to American scholarship as a whole.

"The collective contribution of these individuals to their fields ushered in a new intellectual authority," she said. "Sadly, black scholars are rarely included in the histories of the rise of modern social science."

Higginbotham's insights into the history of African American scholarship were numerous—from the field's use of scientific method to foster legitimacy, to challenging mainstream narratives of American history, to the interdisciplinary approach of American anthropologists Melville Herskovits.

"[The majority of American scholars] weren't free of ideological bias when it came to matters of race," she argued. "The early black scholars and important white allies provided a counter-narrative to much of the new social science scholarship."

Higginbotham also touched on the historical relationship between scholarly work and social activism. Rather than resisting academic and scientific rigor, African American studies embraced it as integral to civil rights.

"The early black scholars wanted to do more than fill the gaps," she explained. "Their professed belief in science was inextricably linked to the understanding that knowledge was a weapon in the fight against Jim Crow."

"The knowledge of black history and culture became the tool for black advancement," Higginbotham continued. "For African American scholarship itself was perceived not only as means to foster black pride and self-respect, but also as a means to diminish irrational prejudice."

This historic use of academics in activism is not unique to social justice movements.

"John Hope Franklin believed that since white resistance to racial integration had marshaled social science in defense of its position," Higginbotham said, "that civil rights advocacy must also deploy social science in its defense."

But in the end, Higginbotham reminded the crowd that this sort of scholarship came with a price. It was one thing to extol the virtues of American democracy, she said; it was another to call attention to ways that America's ideals have failed to live up to its practices. As a result, African American studies and other critical cultural scholarship have often faced greater skepticism and scrutiny from the academic community.

Yet Higginbotham believes the pursuit of interdisciplinary African American scholarship remains essential to academia and society.

"We are activists who believe in scholarship, who believe in education—the right education," she said.

