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The Black Professor Abroad: Long-Term Teaching Experiences in Foreign Lands

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Abstract

The experiences of African American professors reach back nearly 150 years beginning with their pioneering efforts to educate Africans in Liberia. With the gradual racial integration of the American professoriate in the post-World War II era and the redoubled effort of the federal government and private agencies, along with the support of colleges and universities, African Americans too would have opportunities to travel, teach, and study abroad that previously they had rarely enjoyed. Institutional funding, it was thought, would establish ties between Americans and foreigners that could lead to a more peaceful, tolerant, and enlightened world. Not relying on institutional backing, increasingly black professors seeking to expand their horizons with international experiences have through their own initiative found the means to bring their longer term goals to fruition. An impressionistic survey of the variety of their experiences is presented in this paper.

The Black Professor Abroad:

Long-Term Teaching Experiences in Foreign Lands

We are accustomed to reading here and there about black professors on their way to, or returning from a stint overseas, typically two weeks to a year, funded by a university, foundation, or government agency. But our interest here is not in those who spent relatively short stays of less than three years. Rather, the focus is on those who left for longer term, indefinite, or permanent assignments teaching abroad, whose breath of experiences gave them a deeper understanding of other societies and of human affairs generally.

The history of U.S-born African Americans teaching in foreign countries extends back to 1861 when in Liberia, Africa's first independent nation, white donors underwrote the establishment of Liberia College. Its three founding faculty members were Joseph J. Roberts of Virginia serving as Professor of Jurisprudence and International Law; the proto-Pan-Africanist Edward W. Blyden of the Virgin Islands as Professor of Greek and Latin Languages and Literature; and Alexander Crummell of New York City as Professor of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy and of English Language and Literature. Roberts was president of Liberia College from 1863 to 1876 and Blyden was president from 1881 to 1886. Other black Liberia College presidents from the U.S. mainland were long-time mathematics and science professor Martin H. Freeman of Vermont, president from 1876 to 1878; and Rev. Garretson W. Gibson of Maryland, 1890 to 1895 (Dunn, 2001). A combination of racial pride and religious fervor could not sustain the dream of erecting another "Athens by the sea." Good intentions quickly evaporated as administrators warred with professors and the institution failed to effectively connect with and serve the

native population---factors which completely disillusioned visionaries and exceptional scholars like Crummell and Thomas McCants Stewart of South Carolina, and sent them packing for the United States (Broussard, 1998; Moses, 1989). Later experiences abroad, on the whole, would not be nearly as problematic.

Up until the end of the Second World War it would seem that, with the obvious exception of Liberia, as far as Africa Americans were concerned the rest of the world's schools of higher learning were prepared to admit black students but not employ black faculty. W.E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Anna Julia Cooper, Gilbert H Jones, Mercer Cook, and Mary Church Terrell were among a host of others of the black intelligentsia who broadened their intellectual horizons as students at foreign universities. In contrast, the absence of faculty exchange programs and only sparse foundation support, meant that black professors already constrained to work at segregated colleges and universities had no real chance to escape the cage of race here. Civilization having narrowly survived its most horrifying global conflict, the situation changed dramatically in 1945 with the federal government's adoption of the Fulbright Scholars Program, the brainchild of Arkansas Sen. J. William Fulbright who wanted to promote mutual trust and understanding between citizens of the United States and those of other countries. Over the next sixty years more than 40,000 American scholars took advantage of the program to teach, study, and do research abroad (Arndt & Rubin, 1993). Included in this number are quite a few distinguished African Americans who have reported enlightening and memorable short-term experiences on every continent; and there has been that minority within a minority who for reasons of their own—disgust with American racism,

desire for total immersion in another culture, or a convergence of practical circumstances---sought prolonged stays in distant lands far away from family and friends.

With the support of a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship, in 1946 Washington, D.C. native Elizabeth Catlett, by then a prize-winning sculptor who had taught art history and sculpture at Dillard University and Hampton Institute, trekked to Mexico to study public art. Catlett's marriage to a Mexican artist shortly thereafter; her strong identification with the Mexican working class and indigenous people; and her involvement in local politics eventually persuaded her to become a naturalized Mexican citizen (Herzog, 2000). In 1958 she began an eighteen-year teaching career at the National School of Fine Arts at the National Autonomous University of Mexico as a professor of sculpture and chairperson of her department. Periodic visits to the United States after 1971 in conjunction with exhibits of her lithographs and sculpture generated critical acclaim for her work and, thus, came the recognition of Catlett, alongside novelists Richard Wright and James Baldwin, as one of the most accomplished and best known of America's black expatriates.

Noted Stanford University anthropology professor John G. St. Clair Drake, principal author of the classic *Black Metropolis* (1945), devoted much of his career to interpreting Africa to Americans, black and white. From 1935 to 1942 Drake taught at Dillard University, then eight years at Roosevelt University. In 1954 he and his wife traveled to West Africa to conduct research. While a visiting professor at the University of Liberia he was awarded a Ford Foundation grant to study the mass media in Africa. His solidarity with the proponents of Africa's independence movements and his close association with George Padmore and Kwame Nkrumah brought him to Ghana where he

was made chairman of the Department of Sociology at the University of Ghana in Accra where he worked from 1958 to 1961. Drake returned to the university as a visiting professor in 1965. Later, reminiscing about his time in Africa, he said he was drawn to the continent because a “revolution” was underway and he “felt a strong urge to be on the scene” to help guide it (Baber, 1999, p. 204)

Leaving behind the his Brooklyn, New York neighborhood, Charles H. Nichols got his Ph.D. at Brown University in 1948. He taught English for more than a decade at Morgan State College and Hampton Institute before accepting a position in 1959 teaching American literature at the Free University of Berlin. A Fulbright professorship at Denmark’s Aarhus University opened opportunities that led to his appointment at the FUB. But like most African American academics scattered around the world at that time, part of the reason Nichols found himself in Berlin was an abhorrence of the racial climate back home. He once explained to a journalist: “...it struck me increasingly that there was really no point to living in a part of the world where you’re surrounded by hostile people....It is a great support to one’s ego when you feel you don’t have to fight the business of race all the time, and can feel that whatever you have achieved in your profession counts for something” (Nichols, 1969, p. 170) The racial climate had improved significantly by 1969 and Nichols, no longer constrained to work in the “Negro college circuit,” left Germany for a post at his beloved Brown University where he launched the school’s Afro-American Studies program.

It would be hard to duplicate the international teaching career of Clarence J. Munford who, after earning bachelor’s and master’s at Western Reserve University, finished his doctorate at Karl Marx University in communist East Germany where he

taught from 1960 to 1962. A committed Pan-Africanist and an activist, Munford next taught at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka from 1962 to 1966 (“Department of History Faculty,” 2006; C. J. Munford, personal email communication, November 16, 2005). Thanks to his dual Canadian-U.S. citizenship, he was able to teach from 1966 until his retirement from the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, just 200 miles from his hometown in northern Ohio. The C. J. Munford Centre was established on campus in 1995 in tribute to the revered professor of Black studies and history. In recent years Munford has lectured at Francois Rabelais University in Tours, France and in Germany at Albertus Magnus University in Cologne and the University of Leipzig.

If indeed the circumstance of becoming an expatriate is more or less a matter exercising one’s prerogative then Preston T. King was not an expatriate. Instead, he was more accurately an African American exile as his hasty departure was on the heels of an all-white jury conviction in 1961 for refusing his Albany, Georgia draft board’s insulting order to submit to a physical exam. A fugitive from American (southern) justice, King fled to Britain where three years prior he had earned a master’s degree with distinction at the London School of Economics and Political Science. For quite a while an academic nomad, he taught at the University of Keele from 1961 to 1963; the University of Ghana from 1962 to 1966; the University of Sheffield in England from 1966 to 1969; the University of Nairobi, 1969 to 1976; and the University of New South Wales, 1976 to 1986 (May & Lesniak, 1989). King settled in at the University of Lancaster in 1986 and taught there for the next fifteen years. His last appointments in Britain were at Binbeck College at London University and the University of East Anglia. By the late 1990s the story of King’s mistreatment in Georgia had received wide media attention and

momentum was building to pardon him. In the year 2000, President Bill Clinton granted full clemency to King and this exceptional scholar, the author of eight books on political philosophy, was finally allow to return to the land of his birth.

For black professors in the post-civil rights movement era the brutal reality of American racism could not so easily serve as provocation to flee the country. Their reasons for seeking foreign employment would hence be as varied and complex as that of their white counterparts. James A. Emanuel, a former cowboy and elevator operator from Nebraska, rose to become an innovative poet and English professor at the City College of New York. He taught at CCNY from 1957 to 1983 and upon retirement continued publishing books of poetry. Emanuel was probably more at home in Europe than in the U.S. Divorced, he frequently left behind his adored by deeply troubled son to live in Europe (Watson, 1985). His initial experience abroad was facilitated by a Fulbright professorship at the University of Grenoble in 1968. Another Fulbright paved the way for a year at the University of Warsaw in 1975. From 1971 to 1973 and from 1979 to 1981 he was a visiting professor at the University of Toulouse in southwest France (James A. Emanuel Homepage, 2005). Also an essayist and author of books on Langston Hughes and African American literature, in the 1980s Emanuel established permanent residence in Paris with his French companion, Marie-France Bertrand. It was never really that he took flight from America to lose himself in the crowd in Europe and there is enough evidence to suggest that is was more the case that Emanuel found in Europe enough freedom and distance from America's racial cauldron to better reflect on life and reclaim his poetic voice. More adventurous and eclectic in his selection of foreign teaching assignments is Mississippian Oscar T. Brookins, a tenured economics professor

at Northeastern University in Boston. Since 1972 he has spent four and a half years teaching at universities in Europe and Africa. His longest stays were at the University of Ghana from 1972 to 1974; four terms between 1993 and 2002 at the Eastern Mediterranean University in Turkish North Cyprus totaling 14 months; and six months at the Technical University in Tallin, Estonia (Brookins, personal email communication, November 30, 2005). Shorter stays were in Botswana, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Tanzania.

It is often the case that true expatriates---i.e., those who have no intension of returning to the U.S.---were early on enchanted by foreign cultures and compelled to learn the language and history of their chosen countries. Born in 1938 in Newburyport, Massachusetts, Marron C. Fort graduated from Princeton University and first saw Germany as an undergraduate. He was a Woodrow Wilson scholar at the University of Pennsylvania where he took his doctorate in German, the discipline he then taught at Villanova University and the University of New Hampshire. Fulbright grants in 1976 and 1982 permitted him to teach and study at the University of Oldenburg where he earned the reputation as an expert on the vanishing Friesian dialect and other Low German dialects (*General Anzeiger*, 2004). In the 1980s he worked as Akademischer Oberrat und Bibliotheker for the Ministry of Lower Saxony. He published a 30,000-word Friesian dictionary and translated the New Testament and the Book of Psalms into Friesian. Fort became a German citizen and remained at the University of Oldenburg as a research librarian and linguist until his retirement in 2003. Today he lives in the city of Ostfriesland.

As a boy Frank M. Snowden III, son of a Howard University ancient history/classics professor, spent two years at an international school in Rome. He graduated from Harvard in 1968, received his doctorate in history from Oxford University 1975 and began teaching at the University of London. The author of four books on modern Italian history and the history of medicine, Snowden has worked in the history department at Yale University since 1991 (Snowden, 2003). Lillian K. Beam had been a successful community college administrator in San Diego, California. Deferring retirement, in 1984 she assumed the new post of director the American-run United States International University-Africa in Nairobi, Kenya, which she credited Divine Providence. Ovarro, 1984; Ristine, 1993). For nearly a decade she so ably led the campus that the university's library was dedicated in her honor. After acquiring his Ph.D. in 1963, James C. Bruce commenced a 26-year teaching in the German department at the University of Chicago. Upon retirement in 1989 he started a second career as an English professor at the University of Soka in Tokyo, Japan which lasted eleven years. Raised in a gritty New York City housing project, internationally celebrated opera soprano Reri Grist, though maintaining permanent residence in Europe since 1960, taught voice at Indiana University from 1981 to 1983. She was a professor at the Munich Conservatory of Music 1984 until her retirement in 1997. Harvard-trained sociologist John G. Russell has lived in Japan since the late 1980s. He is Professor of Regional Studies and director of the International Student Center at Gifu University, 160 miles southeast of Tokyo. Russell has presented conference papers and published articles on the image of blacks in Japanese popular culture.

“What are you doing in New Zealand?” This is the question repeatedly asked of Vernon L. Andrews, a sociologist from Oakland, California who has taught in the American Studies department at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch since obtaining his doctorate at the University of Wisconsin in 1996. Andrews has served on the editorial board of *Sociology of Sport Journal* and has published articles on black American athletes as well as “Kiwi” and “Down Under” sport culture and the diffusion of hip hop culture in New Zealand. Although 8,000 miles from the nearest African American neighborhood, he once protested in the *Villages Voice* an incidence of police brutality in New York City and juxtaposed it with his classroom situation in New Zealand commenting: “...it is often difficult to convince my white students, who grew up on the ‘Cosby Show’ here, that there are still problems and (racial) issues to be resolved in the U.S.A.” (Andrews, 2000), and recounted his own mistreatment by policemen.

Claudia Wright, a political scientist alumnae of the Claremont Graduate University in California, rose from department chairperson to Dean of Social Science at the University of Winnipeg in Manitoba, Canada. She has worked in Canada for the past quarter century and continues to sharpen her expertise on Canadian military affairs and state security. Warren Crichlow is Associate Professor of Education at York University in Toronto, Canada. Formerly employed for a few years at the University of Rochester where he got his doctorate in 1994, Crichlow has been a visiting professor at the University of Melbourne in Australia and participates as a faculty member of York’s Centre for the Study of Black Culture in Canada.

Curiously, in Britain, according to one black British professor who teaches in California, it is easier for a U.S-born black to find a position at a British university than a

native-born black Briton. When contacted for this for this project Dr. Mekada Graham, a British expatriate and social work professor at California State University at Fresno, responded:

It is interesting because people (in the U.S.) like my accent and although I am a black woman of African descent in the main my issues are with the British however, for African Americans in Britain they also have the opposite---they are more likely to be hired before me---they (African Americans) have an accent (and) the British love African American music....Black people in Britain have nor been able to penetrate the institutions in the way African Americans have (M. Graham, personal email correspondence, October 3, 2005).

Perhaps the African American mystique worked for Richard Majors III who took his terminal degree in counseling psychology and taught at the University of Wisconsin before he was hired at the University of Manchester in England in the mid-1990s as a Senior Fellow and as an education administrator. It seemed an unlikely career move considering that Majors had such an outstanding record of leadership in black organizations and his books concerning African American males. Nonetheless, it took him a few years to shed the illusion that the British were less racist than Americans.

A prolific scholar with an enviable record of publications in the most respected psychology journals, it seemed in 1997 that Stanley O. Gaines was a sure bet for tenure. But four years later and with five separate charges of racial discrimination and harassment filed against Pomona College in suburban Los Angeles which denied him tenure, Gaines was pressured to leave. He rebounded, however, and after a year at the

University of the West Indies Gaines found steady employment in 2001 as Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Brunel in West London. Gaines has written a scholarly article about his experiences as a black man abroad in the *Western Journal of Black Studies* titled “Discredited and Discreditable Identities: One Black American’s Experiences in the United States, Jamaica, and England (2002). Another former Californian, Glenn Jordan, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Stanford University, taught anthropology and Black studies at the University of Illinois for six years before arriving in 1987 at the University of Glamorgan in Cardiff, Wales where he teaches as Senior Lecturer in Cultural Studies and Photography. He has lectured in Spain, Portugal, Germany, Poland, and Ireland.

As a Cornell University graduate student in German history, Tina M. Campt, currently a women’s studies professor at Duke University, spent six years in Germany conducting research on Afro-Germans and teaching at the Technical University of Berlin (1993 to 1996). Her book is *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* (2004). David “Kwame” Dixon, a visiting professor of Black studies at DePauw University, acquired his Ph.D. at Clark-Atlanta University in 1996 and has taught political science in Madrid, Spain for the past few years in Syracuse University’s Division of International Programs Abroad (DIPA) with which he is still affiliated. An authority on human rights issues that relate to Afro-Latin Americans, he has been a consultant for NGOs like Amnesty International and Centro de Documentacion y Investigacion entre Europa y America Latina. Economist Sam Green (Ph.D., Northwestern University) has taught macroeconomics and statistics for the past

several years at American University in Cairo, Egypt. Two of his research specialties are technology spillover and the economics of discrimination.

By and large confined to historically black schools until the 1950s and rarely recruited to teach at predominantly white colleges and universities until the late 1960s, the African American professor desiring to work abroad was forced to hurdle considerable obstacles, not the least of which was highly competitive funding sources. In nearby Canada, a nation like many others intent on fostering a homegrown professoriate, employment has been limited to Canadian residents. In the United Kingdom where there are no comparable Blacks studies departments, a series of articles in the fall of 2004 in the *London Times Higher Education Supplement* characterized black British academics there as isolated, unappreciated and stampeding to the U.S. (Phillips, 2004). Other nations present different and unique challenges. Certainly most of the world's universities pay salaries and offer fringe benefits that cannot compete with what can be had stateside.

Though far away from these shores, one thing virtually all of the individuals in this survey have in common, including the true expatriates, is that while abroad they maintained an ongoing interest in events transpiring in the United States and readily identified with African Americans. This observation is bolstered when we examine their research, writings, interviews, and note their lectures given and courses taught abroad and their return trips to the U.S. Optimally, what should be gained from a long-term experience teaching abroad is a mutual exchange of ideas---the foreign-born professor shares his experiences and perceptions and in turn he is profoundly influenced by the culture of the people of the host nation. A measure of self-discovery is unavoidable and

typically there is a heightened appreciation for how African Americans are viewed by “the international other,” as one professor put it. And, regardless if the stay is temporary or permanent the ultimate journey is in feeling comfortable in, and having a stronger sense of connection with, the broader human family.

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