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Opinion

Reyes-Santos: Black studies is growing, soul-searching

By **Alaí Reyes-Santos**

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The University of Oregon recently announced the construction of a Black Cultural Center. Black studies scholars at UO find ourselves at a turning point.

We are not alone in this endeavor. In my recent travels to Atlanta, Washington D.C., and Chicago — including the National Museum of African American History and Culture — I have spoken with other educators. These conversations reveal several challenges our field must face.

1. Black studies scholars must ask ourselves: What does it mean to build a Black Cultural Center on Native American land? Should we be complicit with colonization or challenge it?

We must recognize that indigenous dispossession is interconnected with slavery, as well as with promises of land and freedom for enslaved people. We must teach histories of native-black solidarity essential to our collective survival.

2. We must tell the stories of black students harassed in dorm rooms; black students asked by faculty to “represent” the heterogeneous black experience in mostly white classrooms; black faculty fearful of taking the bus to work.

We must foster public conversations that seek to undo anti-black racism in our community.

3. We must believe in education as a tool for the transformation of civic life across racial lines.

I have begun to hear students say, “I am not black. I cannot write about anti-black racism for the exam, though I want to.”

We must remind them that they take classes with both black and non-black faculty who are award-winning scholars in black studies. And that black social justice movements have always entailed interracial solidarity, with its promise and challenges. Learning and writing about other people's stories and perspectives is central to it.

4. We must challenge the popular idea that black studies is a homogeneous field; that black studies scholars agree on everything and teach the same material.

This misconception suggests the field is about political correctness and is not a site of deep debates about history, society and culture. We must teach black feminism and black queer studies, where we find useful critiques of the field itself and society as a whole. Reading Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X next to each other reveals inner tensions within black social movements, how people have interpreted the same time period and imagined the path towards freedom differently.

5. We must teach that the black experience is transnational. Reading Raquel Rivera's book about the Puerto Rican communities that helped build hip hop culture energizes my students.

Here in Oregon they marvel at learning that you can be black and Latinx; black and Asian; black and native; black and white; black and migrant. Many of them are relieved to know that their multi-racial families are an intrinsic component of black life.

For our students, it is essential that we share the complexity, diversity and inner turmoil of the field and the black experience in the U.S. For all, we must teach a generation that can effectively address the everyday life of heterogeneous black communities in Oregon and elsewhere.

Let's take the hard road. Let's keep pushing the boundaries of the field as we always have.

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