



## *Siyabonana* Interview with Mario Beatty

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I think Africana Studies at an HBCU has a greater burden and responsibility to help cultivate young brilliant Black minds that will go on to make important contributions to our community. I personally feel the weight of this responsibility when I teach Africana Studies at an HBCU, and I take this very seriously. It's not just about a class or a course of study; it's about our lives as African people and exposing students to optimal Africana knowledge that will be an ongoing contribution to our liberation.

~Mario Beatty

### Introduction

Mario Beatty has dedicated his life to teaching Africana Studies at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and empowering the communities these institutions serve. He is currently an associate professor in Howard University's Department of Afro-American Studies, where he teaches as part of a 'dream team,' alongside Russell Adams, Valetia Watkins, Greg Carr, Joshua Myers, Amy Yeboah Quarkume and other brilliant faculty committed to defining what it means to *do*, and the purpose of, intellectual labor in Africana Studies at an HBCU and for Africana

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people. Trained by some of the most foundational and influential thinkers, psychologists, and linguists who have defined systems of knowledge within the African-centered movement, Beatty serves as the president of the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilization, and he is one of the only scholars in the discipline who is an expert in the art and science of the Ancient Egyptian language, Medu Netcher. Over the last two decades, his groundbreaking scholarship has appeared in numerous journals and edited volumes, including *The Preliminary Challenge: The African World History Project*, *African Journal of Rhetoric*, *ANKH: Revue D’Egyptologie et des Civilisations Africaines*, and *International Journal of Africana Studies*. Interview questions were written by Siyabonana co-editors and emailed to Beatty on August 25, 2022.

**Siyabonana:** *Thank you very much for taking time out of your schedule to participate in this interview for our inaugural issue of Siyabonana. As one of our intellectual leaders in Africana Studies, it is an honor to include your voice in this special issue. Please discuss who you are, your academic background and training, and your research and teaching interests. What motivated you to dedicate your academic career to Africana Studies? Who are the elders and ancestors who were central to your development?*

**Beatty:** Thank you for the opportunity to be interviewed and I wish you all great success with this journal. I received my bachelor’s degree in Black World Studies from Miami University, Oxford, Ohio; my master’s degree in Black Studies from The Ohio State University; and my doctoral degree in African American Studies from Temple University. I think reading Carter G. Woodson’s *Miseducation of the Negro* early on, during my first semester of college, had a profound impact on me. This book awakened something in me that had been stirring for a long time. I was the youngest of six children and fourteen years separates me from the next oldest. I was always fascinated by listening to the stories from my older siblings around student activism in desegregating the school system in the 1960s. Woodson’s work made me interrogate my own education in a way that I had never done before. As a freshman, I was also beginning to be influenced by Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, and although I never became a member, I was deeply inspired by Minister

Louis Farrakhan's penetrating and insightful critiques of the ideology of white supremacy and its impact on Black life. Early in my academic career at Miami University, I intended to pursue a major in International Affairs with a focus on Africa, but I quickly shifted to Africana Studies, viewing it as the best course of study that would allow me to delve into the fullness of the Black experience and master it.

I have been very fortunate to have had some great teachers and mentors. At Miami University, I credit Othello Harris, an expert on Black athletes, with showing great confidence in my intellectual abilities and actually taking me to a conference to present with him. He was very demanding and exacting and passionate about overturning the stereotypes and misrepresentations of Black athletes. I learned a great deal about African history, especially South African history, from Maynard Swanson and although he was white, he had a very sympathetic way of presenting African history, deeply grounded in engaging primary texts, which I greatly appreciated.

But Susan Mosley-Howard, a psychologist, and Yvette Harris, co-taught a course on African American Psychology; this course was a revelation for me in so many ways. Dr. Mosley-Howard attended the University of Michigan with Naim Akbar, and Yvette Harris was a former student of Kobi Kambon. They brought Kambon to campus and I sat in a classroom riveted by his African-centered approach to psychology. The course introduced me to these African-centered ideas for the first time and I was hooked. I enrolled in an Independent Studies course with Dr. Mosley-Howard and worked closely with her, after taking the African American Psychology course. I delved deeply into a full range of African-centered thought, which prepared me to go to The Ohio State University and learn from and study under one of my greatest teachers, Dr. Linda James Myers. At Ohio State, William "Nick" Nelson was also a great influence for me in Black Politics.

When I arrived at Temple University in the Fall of 1993, I was looking to continue my interest in African-centered psychology, and I was looking to work with Daudi Azibo. But unfortunately, as I was coming in, he was leaving, and I had to recalibrate my focus. I had a major interest in Marcus Garvey's philosophy of race and also the era of Black Reconstruction. In 1994, Theophile Obenga, the great African linguist and intellectual disciple of Cheikh Anta Diop, arrived at Temple University and changed the whole trajectory of my life and academic career. I took his course on Egyptian hieroglyphs and he wanted me to seriously pursue this area for my dissertation. I was initially very hesitant, but he was persistent, and I eventually yielded

to his wise counsel and wrote my dissertation on the *Book of Coming Forth by Day*, a corpus of spiritual texts written on papyrus and buried with the deceased, to assist their transcendence to celestial dimensions.

My classmate and dear brother Greg Carr introduced me to the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations (ASCAC). He has also deeply influenced my intellectual growth and development in so many ways. His brilliant mind and constant pursuit of excellence has always been a beacon of light in the academy and in the community. Jacob Carruthers, one of the founders of ASCAC, served on my dissertation committee and I got to know him very well throughout that process, even staying at his house in Chicago while doing extensive research on my dissertation at the Oriental Institute.

My research interests are vast, but my scholarship has been principally focused on Ancient Egypt. My research interests include the Ancient Egyptian language (Medu Netcher), history, and wisdom literature; astronomy in Ancient Egyptian religious texts; comparative analyses of African cultures; the image and use of ancient Africa in the African American historical imagination; the theory and practice of African American Studies; and Pan-Africanism. At Howard University, I currently teach courses on Introduction to Africana Studies, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Black philosophy, religion, and ritual, and research and writing in the discipline.

**Siyabonana:** *Since completing your dissertation, “The Image of Celestial Phenomena in the Book of Coming Forth by Day: An Astronomical and Philological Analysis,” you have published numerous articles and chapters on classical African cosmology and language. What is the importance of cosmology and Medu Netcher within undergraduate and graduate training in the discipline?*

**Beatty:** I started training undergraduate students in Medu Netcher as soon as I started my initial teaching position at Morris Brown College. Theophile Obenga equipped me with the best approach and skills to do this and he charged me with spreading this knowledge as widely as possible among our students and in our communities. Language carries culture and worldview, and when you learn the language of Medu Netcher, you are intimately being exposed to an African worldview. The Ancient Egyptian worldview is steeped in distinct, yet, complimentary unities

(heaven and earth, above-below, light-dark, day-night, life-death, male-female, cosmos-disorder, etc.). The uniqueness of their worldview is that they do not highlight differences between themselves and animals, or even between themselves and vegetative or cosmic phenomena. Ancient Egyptians are always striving to stress the affinities and connections. There is no separation between animate and inanimate, matter and spirit, or body and soul. This is a cosmology that produced a deep theory of life that generates and manifests itself in literally all phenomena of being. It is a much more holistic approach than the approach that drives the West which, in many ways, frames human beings as lonely strangers in this world. Integrating this more holistic approach in Africana Studies at both the undergraduate and graduate levels has the potential to produce a different kind of student that is able to deeply see reality on African terms, and build theory and practice from that grounding, as opposed to merely Blackening up Western cosmology and approaches to reality. It is much more difficult to engage in this deep kind of cultural work, of intellectual independence, which is why it is so rare to see these attempts made in the academy.

**Siyabonana:** *You are currently the president of the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations (ASCAC). What is ASCAC, the origins of the organization, and its mission? What is the relationship between ASCAC and the discipline of Africana Studies?*

**Beatty:** ASCAC was born during the “First Annual Ancient Egyptian Studies Conference” in 1984 held at Southwest College in Los Angeles, CA with the theme of, “Rescuing and Reconstructing Black History and Humanity.” At the close of the inaugural conference, it was agreed that the next meeting would take place in Chicago, Illinois, a major epicenter for those within the African-centered movement to study the Ancient Egyptian language. Since 1978, Jacob Carruthers had been the director of the Kemetic Institute, which was in Chicago. The founding directors, Yosef ben-Jochannan, John Henrik Clarke, Jacob Carruthers, Asa Hilliard, Leonard Jeffries, and Maulana Karenga, developed the outline of the organization in Los Angeles and it was formally organized and chartered in 1985 in Chicago. ASCAC’s mission is to provide a body of knowledge that continuously contributes to the rescue, reconstruction, and restoration of African history and culture. ASCAC’s purpose is to promote the study

of African civilizations for the development of an African world view. ASCAC seeks to build African-centered study groups as a means to spread this knowledge throughout the global African community, while also promoting the spiritual and moral development of our members.

Africana Studies should never be reduced exclusively to a conversation around race. I have always taken the position that the discipline must be anchored in a conversation about the fullness of African humanity across space and time; the discipline must be able to use this knowledge as a way to help students, and our community, see and respect, African people's internal frames of reference as grounding for building the discipline. Being steeped in the depth of ideas that spring from our own particular humanity helps us to see alternative ways of viewing reality and provides us with the necessary knowledge and courage to imagine and fight for a better and more just world. ASCAC helps Africana Studies to see the real and concrete value of a deep study of the African past, as critically necessary to engage the present, and to imagine the future.

**Siyabonana:** *You earned your undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees in Africana Studies at historically white institutions (HWIs); yet, you have labored in the discipline at Morris Brown College, Bowie State University, Chicago State University and now Howard University. Why did you decide to teach at historically Black colleges and universities and a predominately Black institution?*

**Beatty:** During my last year at Temple University in 1998, I began to think deeply about where would be the best place for me to launch an academic career, and where could I potentially have the greatest impact on Black students. I decided to move to Atlanta, Georgia because of the dynamic Atlanta University Center composed of various HBCUs: Morris Brown College, Morehouse College, Spelman College, and Clark Atlanta University. I called around to all of the schools looking for a work, and I was really just looking for an adjunct position to get my foot in the door, and then to see where the journey would take me. I received a call back from Dr. Tshilemalema Mukenge, a professor at Morris Brown College and chair of Africana Studies who was looking to bring some younger scholars in to inspire more students to major in the discipline. I thought I was interviewing for an adjunct position. But at the end of the

interview, he told me that they didn't have any adjunct positions available; they only had a full-time position available, and he asked if I was interested in accepting this. Of course, I immediately accepted the position and I have never regretted it. I probably would have stayed at Morris Brown College for the long haul, but when it lost its accreditation, I was forced to try to secure my future at another institution. I decided on Bowie State University and worked there for four years teaching African and African American history before taking the leap to Chicago State University as chair of the Department of African American Studies. In 2011, an opportunity opened for me to be reunited with my dear brother Greg Carr at Howard University. I came to help him bring into being a dynamic department that would be able to quickly build a graduate program, and really make a statement about scholars trained in the discipline of Africana Studies, who come together to collectively build a department.

**Siyabonana:** *Howard's Department of Afro-American Studies was the first autonomous, free-standing department in the discipline at an HBCU. It emerged in response to Howard University students' 1968 demand for a Black university. Briefly discuss the origins of the Department of Afro-American Studies in response to this demand, its early architects, the mission, and the early curriculum. How and in what year did the department emerge in response to the demand of students?*

**Beatty:** The student demands at Howard University in the late 1960s have to be contextualized in the long river of the freedom struggle and within that river, the more immediate and specific influence of the Black power movement on Black students throughout the nation. Students felt that Howard University needed to be more responsive to the Black community and more relevant to Black culture, and that the university should center that study throughout the educational curriculum. The narrative importance of this thrust is captured insightfully in the work of my colleague at Howard University, Joshua Myers, who has written a very important book, *We Are Worth Fighting For: A History of the Howard University Student Protest of 1989*. Among the fifteen demands that students had of the university, during the March 1968 protests, were particular curriculum demands to expand the teaching of African American history and African Studies; to add jazz courses to fine arts; for African American literature to be taught every semester; and to have the economics, social

science, and government departments deal with the specific problems of African Americans, and to specifically study the communal systems and governments in the non-Western world.

Later in the year, these demands were followed by a very important “Toward a Black University” conference which, was in turn, followed by more student protests in 1969, and a takeover of various university buildings. In this charged environment, the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Vincent Browne, announced in March of 1969, that Howard University had a “special responsibility” to contribute to the national interest in Black Studies by creating a department. The department officially and formally started in the fall of 1969 with the help of a Ford Foundation grant in the amount of \$143,567. Despite this grant, the Ford Foundation did not dictate the terms of the development of the department and indeed, the department would have been formed even without the assistance of this grant because the student demand was so strong.

In 1969, five major courses were offered: Introduction to Afro-American Studies I and II; Survey of Afro-American Literature; The Negro in the United States to the Civil War; and the Negro in the United States from the Civil War to the present day. By 1972, the course offerings had swelled to seventeen. Russell Adams, who still teaches in the department today, was the initial chair, and by 1971, there were four faculty members: Stephen Henderson (English); Robert McGuire (Political Science); Archie Sanders (English); and Charles Fry (Political Science).

**Siyabonana:** *In the last fifteen years, both HWIs and HBCUs have faced fiscal crises due to budget constraints, the rising costs of tuition, and overall low enrollment, among other factors. In this climate, many university administrators have often restructured, downsized, and even eliminated Africana Studies units. For example, during the recession that began in 2007, Tennessee State University administrators terminated the autonomous, free standing, bachelor’s degree granting Department of Africana Studies, and reduced the degree offering to a minor. The HWI, Western Illinois University, eliminated the Department of African American Studies in 2016, and began to only offer the minor. During this same period, Chicago State University’s Department of African American Studies became a program with faculty housed in varying “traditional” disciplines, while still offering an undergraduate degree. What*

*lessons can Howard University's Department of Afro-American Studies offer administrators about the viability of Africana Studies as an academic unit? In other words, how has Howard University's Department of Afro-American Studies remained an autonomous and robust degree granting department for over 50 years? Discuss the curriculum in your department, and explain how it has been integrated into the College of Arts and Sciences, and the university overall? How many students are currently majoring and minoring in the discipline?*

We currently have fifty majors in our department, and I am sure well over one hundred minors; but I am not sure on the specific number of minors. Before the pandemic hit, we had reached sixty-eight majors. I definitely think that the pandemic negatively impacted our numbers and has added another dimension that has to be factored into the future. During his tenure as chair, Greg Carr was able to secure faculty lines that brought in four faculty members with doctoral degrees in African American Studies. Most students who major in Africana Studies do not come to the university with this idea in mind, so it is extremely important that the Introduction to Afro-American Studies courses are conceptualized and done well to attract students to the major. Despite our wide-ranging interests as a faculty, we are all teaching the Introduction to Afro-American Studies courses, and these courses fulfill both a university and College of Arts and Sciences General Education requirement and because of that, they are in high demand. This change occurred as a result of the student protests in 1989. At Howard University, it is much easier for a student to double major and to see the value of two disciplines, and I also think that this has helped us. In addition, as chair, Greg Carr was present and visible in a wide range of media platforms while, at the same time, teaching a full course load. He exponentially increased the visibility of the department under his leadership, and this has also been a major factor in students being attracted to the major.

As universities are captured more and more by neoliberal logic, numbers and money become more important than knowledge, genuine student growth, and development. The administration at Howard University is really no different from other universities in terms of this conservative trajectory; this can clearly be witnessed in recent efforts by Howard's Board of Trustees to get rid of student, alumni, and faculty voting representation from the Board. When I initially experienced academic program assessment for the first time at Morris Brown College, we were constantly

told that the goal of assessment was to improve academic programs, but over the span of my academic career, I have witnessed again, and again, universities principally using assessment as the ideological rationale to get rid of programs and departments that are deemed as “underperforming.” In this kind of Darwinian environment, Africana Studies will always be vulnerable, but we have to know that these types of decisions are primarily arbitrary, subjective, and political, not academic. I have always understood the cold politics of the Western academy and how Africana Studies has fit within it. I have always sought to understand how power operates in that specific university, as a way to best understand how to promote and secure the existence and development of the discipline. If Howard teaches us any lesson, it is really the power of students and faculty that must take the lead in reimagining a better university. As a faculty member wherever I’ve been, I have strived to serve on university curriculum committees and the faculty senate, as a way to concretely understand how power moves in that university; and to build relationships across the university.

Like in the late 1960s, I think that this current historical moment makes it easier to make a case for the importance of Africana Studies in a university curriculum, but we are concurrently dealing with the post-pandemic transformation of higher education; scholars in the discipline have to share stories, and experiences, and have serious special convenings to help to navigate the way forward in an environment that presents us with a new, unique set of challenges.

**Siyabonana:** *Are the objectives of Africana Studies at an HBCU, like Howard University, similar to, or distinct from, the mission of Africana Studies at HWIs? If similar, how? If distinct, what are these differences? Please discuss the unique challenges and assets of Africana Studies units at an HBCU?*

**Beatty:** In my experience at HBCUs, I have found that they can be liberating spaces to hold deep family conversations in a way that is very different at HWIs. Students are coming to HBCUs for a range of reasons, but I think one very important one is to transcend their miseducation and to find a sense of their historical and cultural identity, without having to self-consciously filter that conversation exclusively through race, and the gaze of whiteness. Students come to HBCUs expecting something different. They come expecting a family atmosphere, to be supported, and to be

equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge, to prepare them for life; they come to anchor themselves in a deep sense of their historical and cultural heritage. I think Africana Studies at an HBCU has a greater burden and responsibility to help cultivate young brilliant Black minds that will go on to make important contributions to our community. I personally feel the weight of this responsibility when I teach Africana Studies at an HBCU, and I take this very seriously. It's not just about a class or a course of study; it's about our lives as African people and exposing students to optimal Africana knowledge that will be an ongoing contribution to our liberation.

Most HBCUs have limited resources, but I think that Africana Studies should be a central course of study in every HBCU because it provides the necessary background, grounding, and meaning to the whole academic and intellectual enterprise for Black people in the US. I am sure that most HBCUs feel that select course offerings with Black content sprinkled in various programs and departments is sufficient, but it is not, and this is the ongoing challenge. Africana Studies is not just about what we study; it's, more importantly, about how we study African people in space and time. Africana Studies is really the only space in the academy that provides scholars with the potential breathing space to do this kind of arduous, innovative intellectual spadework. Ultimately, Africana Studies has to always do a great job of serving students at HBCUs and demonstrate the value of this discipline through our teaching, research, and service.

**Siyabonana:** *The Department of African American Studies, Africana Women's Studies, and History at Clark Atlanta University offers a doctoral degree in Africana Women's Studies. Howard University has offered an MA in African Studies since 1953 and a PhD in African Studies since 1969. Recently, Morgan State University in Baltimore created an MA degree in African American Studies. In your opinion, why are there so few graduate programs in Africana Studies at HBCUs?*

**Beatty:** First, I think most HBCUs principally serve undergraduate students and do not have graduate schools; this amounts to an inherent structural barrier. But, most HBCUs also do not have undergraduate degree majors in Africana Studies. So, it is really impossible to conceptualize a graduate program if you do not have the necessary faculty on the ground, working in concert to complete this kind of work. There is also

a dynamic at HBCUs among administrators, that I will say amounts to a hesitancy of appearing too Black as an institution, not in terms of race of course, but in terms of ideas and knowledge. It's subtle, but it's ever present, and I have witnessed this up close in numerous encounters at HBCUs. Somehow, coming off as too Black, in terms of ideas, could translate into offending potential donors; so, the thrust of the institution just tries to mimic HWIs, as opposed to boldly delving into the depth of the particularity of the Black experience and enter into disciplinary conversations regarding theory, knowledge, and social practice.

**Siyabonana:** *Given the grounding of the faculty in the Department of Afro-American Studies at Howard, are there any plans for the creation of a master's or doctoral program in the foreseeable future?*

When I first arrived at Howard University in 2011, we began to immediately conceptualize a graduate degree program. Our graduate proposal was very comprehensive. It included a master's and doctoral program, and it moved up through all the levels of the university. It was approved by the Graduate School, and unfortunately, when it made it to the provost's office, the university was in the midst of an administrative transition to the presidency of Wayne Frederick; everything stopped at that point. This year we are currently in the process of making another effort at this, so we will see where it goes, and hope for the best.

**Siyabonana:** *What do you envision as the overall future of Africana Studies at HBCUs?*

**Beatty:** I think Africana Studies is needed now more than ever at HBCUs. The tenuous and troubled moment that we are in now, is going to call for a long struggle that is going to require intense, sustained activism, and our best minds to navigate the way forward. I would like to see greater collaboration in terms of programming among Africana Studies units at HBCUs. We have to be in conversation more. I do think that this virtual environment provides us with clear opportunities to do more collaborative programming, and to also share individual and collective experiences and strategies, for success across HBCUs. With the obvious fraying and fracturing of

the US on the horizon, Africana Studies in the US has the potential to play a very important role in curriculum development and social change. It is going to be even more critical for our community to have family conversations to navigate the troubled waters ahead. Also, we have to see our vision as transcending the academy. We have to plant the seeds of our knowledge throughout our community and within all institutions with which we engage.

The pandemic has, in many ways, shifted the whole paradigm of higher education and I really think that those in Africana Studies, especially at HBCUs, have to engage in deep, extensive conversations around what *this* means as well, and think about how to maintain and sustain the presence and viability of these units into the future. All disciplines in the academy must adhere to universal intellectual standards of clarity, accuracy, relevance, depth, and significance, but the future of Africana Studies at HBCUs is dependent upon faculty never losing sight of the importance of the students we serve and the community that supports us.

I think, as Africana Studies scholars, we owe it to our ancestors and our community to be constantly present in our struggle. HBCUs are a critical training ground for our future, and we have to do everything in our power to invest in young brilliant minds so that they can have the necessary tools to continue this sacred intergenerational work. As scholars, our research and professional lives cannot be detached from our moral commitment, and obligation, to lessen human suffering, particularly for African people; we must create positive social changes, grounded in ideas that reflect a deep engagement with the fullness of African humanity across time and space.

**Siyabonana:** *Thank you so much for your commitment to our liberation and taking time out of your schedule to complete this interview.*