# Against the 'Vocation of Autopsy': Blackness and/in US Communication Histories

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The January 1970 National Development Project (NDP) on Rhetoric (also known as Wingspread) in Wisconsin has been celebrated as important to the contemporary development of media, rhetoric, speech, and communication in the United States (just called "communication studies" going forward). Organized by prominent scholars like Lloyd Bitzer and Edwin Black,[1] the conference, as Peter Simonson argues, was deemed central to a "collective effort to bend rhetorical theory toward the social problems of the day," "presumably" guided by "designated thought leaders gathered at the conference."[2] A year later, the NDP conference proceedings were published as the book, *The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report of the National Development Project*,[3] a text still used today.

Though to less fanfare, in May 1970, the NDP's National Conference on Rhetoric (NCR) in Illinois would meet to discuss Wingspread's presentations.[4] Occurring just days after the Kent State massacre, the Illinois conference invited two important conference attendees, Arthur Smith (now Molefi Kete Asante) and Lyndrey Niles.[5] Though they went unmentioned in Lloyd Bitzer's final NDP report (on both Wingspread and the NCR), Asante and Niles undoubtedly influenced the call that emerged from this report for study to "be undertaken on the nature of invention in non-western cultures" and for Black Panther Party speeches to be deemed rhetorical artifacts.[6] Here, we can see how Black scholars played critical roles in expanding communication studies' approach to race, racism, colonialism, and Pan-Africanism. Asante and Niles used their platform in Illinois to argue

[1] "Critical Moments in NCA's History," *Spectra: The Magazine of the National Communication Association* 50, nos. 1– 2 (2014): 30–36.

[2] Peter Simonson, "The Short History of Rhetorical Theory," *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 53, no. 1 (2020): 83.

[3] Lloyd Bitzer and Edwin Black, *The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report of the National Development Project* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

[4] I am pulling this largely from Bitzer and Black's *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, as well as the final report of the NDP, both of which note the importance of two national development project conferences, the Wingspread and the National Conference on Rhetoric.

[5] Simonson, "Short History of Rhetorical Theory," 84.

[6] Lloyd Bitzer, *Final Report of the National Development Project on Rhetoric* (New York: Speech Association of America, 1970), 13.

that communication studies was situated in a particular conjuncture that the field could no longer ignore: worldwide decolonial, Black radical struggle.[7] A few examples of the Black and decolonial context, in relation to the United States, will suffice: Black street rebellions raged in U.S. inner cities of the 1960s and 1970s, often in reaction to racist police brutality; just off the U.S. coast, in the late 1950s, Fidel Castro led the revolutionary transformation of Cuba from a U.S. protectorate/colony to an independent, socialist project; the Vietnam War was in full swing, as the North Vietnamese fought to break U.S. neocolonial aspirations; in 1957, Kwame Nkrumah led Ghana to independence from British colonial rule, a rule that the United States backed against Nkrumah; and, the early 1960s saw the establishment of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, organizing socialist resistance to U.S. occupation in Nicaragua.

Many Black communication studies scholars viewed their actions as in line with these larger radical politics, but they were far from dominant in the field. In the mid- to late twentieth century, as NDP rhetorical scholars connected with post–World War II communications scholars to form what became U.S. communication studies,[8] the new discipline gained a mixture of conservative and progressive thought. In 1969, for example, while scholars like Asante, Lucia Hawthorne, and Jack Daniel created the Speech Association of America's (SAA) Black Caucus,[9] other communication scholars weaponized their World War II training in propaganda against the new enemy: Cold War socialism.[10] Some of this conservative thought would be challenged in the Black Caucus, which worked to produce a supportive hub for Black communication scholars, increase opportunities for Black students to enter graduate schools, and to assist in understanding Black modes of knowing and communicating. Niles and Asante used the NCR to extend what the Black Caucus was already arguing: a field organized in highly Western terms could no longer afford to ignore how Black thought existed beyond Westernism.

Thus, to reduce these scholars to communication studies may prove too simplistic. At the Illinois conference, we see an intersection between communication studies and Black studies—the mid-twentieth-century field that called for the valorization of Black people's epistemologies and the material transformation of Black lives worldwide. For the important Black studies scholar Walter Rodney, the call to theorize Black epistemologies exceeded the Western concept of "the Negro," speaking to *Black people*, who were potentially all the "non-whites—the hundreds of millions of people whose homelands are in Asia and Africa, with another few millions in the Americas."[11] We should take seriously Rodney's words: blackness

[7] Reynaldo Anderson, Marnel Niles Goins, and Sheena Howard, "Liberalism and Its Discontents: Black Rhetoric and the Cultural Transformation of Rhetorical Studies in the Twentieth Century," in *A Century of Communication Studies: The Unfinished Conversation*, ed. Pat Gehrke and Keith William (New York: Routledge, 2015), 174.

[8] In 1970, the Speech Association of America, which ran the NDP, became the Speech Communication Association, signifying the increased importance given to more communication studies scholarship. Of course, today speech has dropped completely out of the association's name, which is now the National Communication Association.

[9] For more on this, see Anderson, Goins, and Howard, "Liberalism and Its Discontents," 174; and Jack Daniel, *Changing the Players and the Game: A Personal Account of the Speech Communication Association Black Caucus Origins* (Annandale, CA: Speech Communication Association, 1995), 11.

[10] Jefferson Pooley, "The New History of Mass Communication Research," in *The History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories*, ed. David W. Park and Jefferson Pooley (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 43–69.

[11] This is, of course, also the time when the word *Negro* would be replaced by *Black* in the United States as a new mode of self-identification. For more on this, see Walter Rodney, *The Groundings with My Brothers* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1996), 16.

was not solely a racial identity—reliant on white, racist classifications of African-descendent peoples (the Negro)—but a politico-economic relation for revolutionary purposes (a new proletariat). Here, white people's racial classifications could tell us little about blackness. Likewise, Asante and Niles argued that racism was but *one* element of study that communication scholars could focus on, not the only one. As Asante suggested at the 1972 Black Communication Conference, in addition to racism, Black communication could focus on topics as diverse as the study of nonverbal communication, because "it is possible that the kinesic norms of blacks will differ from those of whites."[12]

To study solely racism may lead to what another important Black studies scholar, Vincent Harding, called "the vocation of autopsy," which situated Black life solely in *reaction* to white racism. In his 1974 essay, "The Vocation of the Black Scholar," Harding argued that autopsy was the domain of white constructs of Black people (the Negro), amounting to the "analysis of human history without celebration."[13] Further, part of the Black scholar's vocation was to break away from reacting to white people. In contrast to the vocation of the Black scholar, autopsy was a vocation that, whether progressive or conservative, centered white definitions of Black people, deeming us as wholly different from all other people (incommunicable), inhibiting revolutionary, collective action. Rather than use white definitions, Black studies sought to create a world in which Black people served as legitimate creators of knowledge of and about ourselves—which may end up saving *everyone*.

Asante and Niles were not mere bystanders in this larger Black studies movement, but full participants. Niles, a graduate of Temple University, would see the Black student movement firsthand, via the establishment of Temple's Black studies department "by the administration in 1969 as a response to intense demands of the black students on campus."[14] That same year, Niles would garner praise for his leadership of the SAA's Summer Conference, where he led a workshop on Black rhetoric.[15] In 1973, Niles brought together communication studies and Black studies in his completed dissertation, "The Status of Speech Communication Programs at Predominantly Black Four Year Colleges: 1971–1972."[16] And of course, Asante would go on to become one of the most prolific and important Black studies scholars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[17]

All of this is to say that the presence of Black studies scholars at the NCR cannot be deemed as a call for the study of solely racism in communication studies, an area of study that remains important yet overemphasized today. Instead, their presence was also a call to study Black modes of knowing and communicating in the world. We

[12] Molefi Asante, "Theoretical Research Issues in Black Communication," 1972, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED082250.pdf, 8.

[13] Vincent Harding, "The Vocation of the Black Scholar and the Struggles of the Black Community," in *Education and Black Struggle: Notes from the Colonized World*, ed. Vincent Harding and Julius Nyerere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review, 1974), 9.

[14] Mario Small, "Departmental Conditions and the Emergence of New Disciplines: Two Cases in the Legitimation of African-American Studies," *Theory and Society* 28, no. 5 (1999): 669.

[15] Lyndrey Niles, "Report of Workshop A: Black Rhetoric," in *Proceedings: Speech Association of America Summer Conference V Theme: Research and Action*, ed. James Roever (New York: Speech Communication Association, 1969), 3–7, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED042785.pdf

[16] Lyndrey Niles, "The Status of Speech Communication Programs at Predominately Black Four Year Colleges: 1971–1972" (PhD diss., Temple University, 1973).

cannot read the 1960s and 1970s as truly about social death, as per contemporary theorizations.[18] In other words, we cannot argue that Black people in the mid-twentieth century were illustrating that Black death was constitutive of white life, that blackness always lies in *reaction* to whiteness. Instead, as Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena argue,[19] we should take heed of the 1960s and 1970s conjuncture, one in which blackness was deemed *not* Negroness, in which Black people thought *beyond* the West. This Black radical, decolonial, and socialist struggle (i.e., new global solidarities, *not* incommunicabilities) appeared, to some at least, to be on the verge of toppling the West. It is in this context that Black studies entered the university (though it existed well before and far beyond the university). At the NCR, Black scholars expressed this Black studies tradition: they argued that Black people have alternative modes of thinking, knowing, *and* communicating, toward a better world.

The question we must ask today is simple: Do we currently have a widespread proliferation of Black (and other) modes of knowing in communication studies? Founded in 1988,[20] the *Howard Journal of Communications* may constitute our closest, most consistent example of a United States–based communication publication that centers people of color in ways that exceeds racism as the defining aspect of our lives. Yet beyond *Howard*, much of communication studies that centers people of color, written by scholars of *all* races, remain largely in Harding's vocation of autopsy—the promotion of Black death as synonymous with white life. In addition, much of these studies self-classify as "Black studies." But I contend that to reduce Black studies to *solely* the study of racism is antithetical to Black studies. Doing so ensures that we cannot leave white people or white theorizing behind; instead, it recenters whiteness as a motivator of *all* aspects of Black life. Of course, few Black people live life obsessed with what white people think about us; those who do may find themselves in largely white, middle-class spaces—not representative of the experience of Black people worldwide. One can imagine that if Black studies were reduced to individual racisms faced by bourgeois Black academics, not the material conditions of capitalism that organize Black life, then a host of white scholars could situate themselves as experts on Black life—as blackness here would be reduced to other white people's racism. The Black Caucus predicted this, stating that in the 1960s, their members sought to create the Black Rhetoric Institute to ease their own paranoia "regarding the possibility of White scholars taking what we [Black scholars] had taught them, and using their access to the 'means of production' to dominate the field of Black Rhetoric."[21] But, as the Black Caucus argued, to study Black ways of knowing did not mean they sought to solely react to racism,

[17] Some of Asante's many accomplishments include starting the first Black studies PhD program at Temple University, as well as his leadership in Black studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. For more on this, see Ronald Jackson and Sonja Givens, *Black Pioneers in Communication Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016); and Small, "Departmental Conditions and the Emergence of New Disciplines," 670.

[18] I do not mean social death, in the Orlando Patterson sense, but social death as it is being used in some circles of Black studies, particularly building off the work of Frank Wilderson, which, of course, pulls from Patterson. For more of this Black studies reading of social death, particularly in communication studies, see Lisa Corrigan, *Black Feelings: Race and Affect in the Long Sixties* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2020); Casey Ryan Kelly, "White Pain," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 107, no. 2 (2021): 209–33; Ashely Noel Mack and Bryan McCann, " 'Harvey Weinstein, Monster': Antiblackness and the Myth of the Monstrous Rapist," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 18, no. 2 (2021): 103–20; and Frank Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[19] Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena, "Anticolonialism and the Decolonization of Political Theory," *Critical Times* (2021), doi.org/10.1215/26410478-9355193.

[20] "Editor's Introduction," *Howard Journal of Communications* 1, no. 1 (1988): 1–2.

[21] Daniel, *Changing the Players and the Games*, 12.

but to accept that racism constituted only one component of what it meant to be Black. Aside from the *Howard* journal, do we, as a field, have such ways of thinking about blackness, beyond current understandings of whiteness and racism? I have found little.

To be clear, I am not arguing that white communication studies scholars cannot, or should not, study race, racism, whiteness, or blackness (they must). I am also not arguing that only white scholars spread the vocation of autopsy in the field (they are not alone). Instead, my concern is with why limited reads of race, racism, and whiteness are deemed *Black studies* in communication? And do such reductive reads of Black studies signify a communication studies that cherry-picks recent Black studies as representative of *all* Black studies?[22] Rather than just race studies, we need a Black studies read of race, one not obsessed with death, or apocalyptic ends, but with alternative epistemological projects that, if taken seriously, would require the reorganization of the world as it currently sits.

The historicization of Black studies that I am trying to do, with admittedly not enough space, may reform what communication history means, particularly as we remember that Black studies scholars attended the NCR. What if, instead of taking limited reads of race, racism, and whiteness as a starting point for U.S. communication studies on people of color (the autopsy), we took Black studies as the starting point to rewrite histories of communication studies? To do so requires new histories, ones that consider communication studies in context. For example, the post–World War II, mid- to late-twentieth-century creation of a new academic discipline called "communication studies" (via the merger of rhetoric, communication, media studies, and more) is inseparable from the Black and decolonial struggle at the time, particularly given that some of the Black Caucus's peers weaponized their capitalistic positions and actions against socialism.[23] To understand mid-twentieth-century Black studies, which often championed socialism in a fight against capitalism and racism, means to consider Black studies as a threat *both* to the United States' capitalistic order *and* to communication studies. To read the history of Black studies alongside communication history may point us to uncomfortable understandings: that at least some mid-twentieth-century communication studies developed in fear of Black and decolonial revolution. Thus, to accept Black studies as the new starting point may undo communication studies (and communication-as-autopsy) and make it anew. It would be truly, as Jefferson Pooley argues, a time for new histories of the field.[24]

[22] To be clear, this is not to say that *all* communication studies centers white racism. Scholars like Ronald Jackson, Herman Gray, Reynaldo Anderson, Marnel Niles Goins, Sheena Howard, and others have done a good job of digging into this history of Black studies from multiple angles. And of course, some of the founders of the Black Caucus, such as Asante, Dorthy Pennington, Jack Daniel, Lucia Hawthorne, Melbourne Cummings, and others, provide us with a foundation for Black studies. Yet there is a more recent trend of reducing blackness to race that I am speaking to here.

[23] Importantly, this discussion of socialism-as-enemy in communication studies lies largely with the social scientific, World War II communications scholars, not as much with the NDP rhetoric scholars, who, at the time, might be considered largely "liberal." However, what I am trying to speak to is how communications scholars would slowly join with the NDP scholars to create a new field called communication studies, toward the mid- to late-twentieth century. It is this merger that, I argue, ensures that today's U.S. field was built off Cold War concerns. For more on the earlier, social scientific communications prior to the merger, see Christopher Simpson, "Universities, Empire, and the Production of Knowledge: An Introduction," in *Universities and Empire: Money and Politics in the Social Sciences during the Cold War*, ed. Christopher Simpson (New York: The New Press, 1999), xii.

[24] Pooley, "New History of Mass Communication Research."

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