

## **AAS Visiting Scholar: Dr. Tillotson**

In pursuit of our broad mandate to advance excellence in academic research, undergraduate and graduate education, and intellectual exchange and service within the University and Houston communities, the African American Studies Program at the University of Houston annually invites two scholars whose demonstrated research and teaching are in the discipline of Africana Studies/Africalogy for a year-long visiting appointment. Visiting Scholars add to the richness and diversity of our undergraduate curriculum in Africalogy by teaching one course of their own design. In addition, the program prioritizes applications from scholars who demonstrate a commitment to generating research and publication in the discipline of Africana Studies/Africalogy. Successful candidates are, therefore, afforded an opportunity to add to the ongoing scholarship in the discipline by working toward the completion of a research project. The Visiting Scholars Program is designed to encourage scholars to contribute fresh and innovative teaching and research in the discipline of Africalogy.

African American Studies selected Dr. Michael Tillotson as one of two AAS Visiting Scholars for the 2008-2009 academic year. Professor Tillotson is a May 2008 graduate of the PhD program in African American Studies at Temple University.

In both his scholarship and everyday life, Tillotson has remained committed to the belief that scholars in the discipline of Africana Studies must be problem solvers for African people.

“As a terminal degree holder in African American Studies, my role is to produce relevant solution-centered scholarship that can be translated to African people in a digestible form. I view my work as a resource for African people—this is possible because I seek to maintain an organic connection to the unique challenges facing African Americans,” Tillotson said.

For the past seven summers Tillotson has taught young people through the Upward Bound Program at the University of Louisville. Before his involvement as an instructor at Louisville, he taught Upward Bound for two summers at Indiana University. While completing his doctoral degree in Philadelphia, Tillotson worked as the programs coordinator and curriculum developer for a program called the N.U.L.I.T.E.S.—the National Urban League initiative towards excellence and success.

Although new to the ranks of the professoriate, Tillotson brings an impressive body of scholarly work with him to the University of Houston. He has a book chapter, journal article, three book reviews, an encyclopedia entry, two editorials, one radio interview, and a play in his list of publication credits at this early stage of his career.

After completing the A.A. and B.A. in Liberal Studies at Indiana University, Tillotson entered the graduate program in Africana Studies at the State University of New York-Albany where he studied advanced black psychology under Dr. Marcia Sutherland. He

earned an M.A. in Albany and went on to the doctoral program in African American Studies at Temple University.

“I came to Temple with an idea about problem solving and agency, but my research skills were honed to a much higher level at Temple. The core faculty at Temple believe that the role of the PhD is to be a problem solver.”

Tillotson credits his experience at Temple with having a tremendous influence on his future trajectory in Africana Studies. “I situated myself around a core group of scholars whose *raison d’être* is to solve problems for African people. My advisor and dissertation committee chair was Dr. Molefi Asante. On my dissertation committee was Dr. Emeka Nwadiora, Dr. Ama Mazama, and my external reader was Dr. Marcia Sutherland. If you look at the research agenda of those four scholars, you’ll see that all of them are heavily invested in problem solving.”

For the spring 2009 semester, Tillotson will be teaching a new course in African American Studies, **AAS 3307: Africana Spiritual Transformation in the Social Sciences**. Under his direction, the course will examine the development of the racial paradigm and ideas such as bigotry, prejudice, discrimination, racism and domination as socio-political philosophies that have been absorbed into societal structures and historically used to suppress the life chances and opportunities of certain members of the human family. “We go back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century and look at the development of the racial project,” Tillotson says. “Later on, we look at how [these ideas] started to imbed themselves in the institutional realities of America.”

Tillotson's research interests center on the impact of ideas such as color-blindness, race neutrality, post-modernism, and essentialism on the lives of African people, while his broader interests concern critiquing domination within the social, structural, and institutional realities of American society. Tillotson suggests that “if we accept these ideas uncritically, overtime it will lead to a collective passivity,” on the part of African people, “and further marginalize and oppress us as a people.”

“The project that I am working on is a project in human agency because it reminds African people in the American context that it is too early to lay down the mantle of resistance. Until the statistical realities demonstrate that African people are being judged, as Dr. King once said, “by the content of their character and not the color of their skin,” and we can measure those quality of life/social indicators in the structural realities for African Americans, it is not in the best interest of this population to accept these realities uncritically,” Tillotson says.