

"BLACK STUDIES": (RE)DEFINING A DISCIPLINE

**A National Symposium
May 22 - 24, 1997
Columbus, Ohio**

Black Studies as a discipline in the American academy emerged out of the crucible of the Civil Rights and Black Power struggles of the 1960s. Thirty years later, as the field has expanded, it is confronted by a host of theoretical and practical issues arising out of new political and socio-economic realities framing the lives of Black people the world over. This situation poses a new challenge to Black Studies in particular, and to the academy in general, a challenge related to the (re)production and uses of knowledge in the public sphere.

It is against this background that the Department of Black Studies at The Ohio State University is pleased to announce a NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM to discuss some of the crucial and controversial issues confronting Black Studies at this particular historical juncture which are likely to affect the development and future direction of the discipline. The symposium will take the form of in depth presentations by distinguished scholars who will examine a variety of topics, including:

- *Origins and changing (national and global) context(s) of Black Studies
- *Concepts of Identity and their relevance to the Black World
- *The relationship between Black Studies and the Western academy
- *Theories and paradigms which have informed and shaped the discipline
- *New and emerging perspectives as we approach the 21st. Century

The keynote addresses will be delivered by:

Prof. Niara Sudakasa, President of Lincoln University, and

Prof. Ali A. Mazrui, Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities, and

Director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies, SUNY (Binghamton).

It is hoped that the symposium will provide an opportunity for reflection and for a wide-ranging discussion of these and other related issues, and involve the invited speakers and the audience in a productive dialogue, with both a theoretical/scholarly value in the academy and a practical significance in the world beyond.

For more information, please contact:

Carolyn Carey
Department of Black Studies
The Ohio State University
486 University Hall
230 N. Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43210

Tel: 614-292-3700; Fax: 614-292-2293; E-mail: ???@osu.edu???

This is a time for reflection on the past and anticipation of the future. We've had 30 years of Black Studies, and we're on the verge of the 21st century. It's a sort of last chance for those of us who were there at the beginning to have a say and help forge the next stage of development as well. At least that's the optimistic view, and its my view.

It has been my privilege to have been an intellectual activist throughout this recent history of Black Studies. In the 1960's I was a graduate student and a SNCC activist who got involved in Black Studies from the very beginning. I guess I'm a veteran. It's great to have persevered and be in position to have a say at this time, to reflect on our history with an attitude of self criticism, and to help plot a line of march for the future.

The main thesis of this presentation is that Black Studies reflects the contradictions of a complex political culture - including the so called mainstream of society, Black people, and

specifically the American institutions of higher education. This seems a simple point and yet it has to be understood as a broad dynamic process usually not understood (or admitted) and certainly not reducible to a great person theory of history (whether a Michael Jordan type or even a full dream team!), or even salvation from the ancient wisdom of Africa, the mother land. Indeed, by examining the basic historical forces at work we can understand how we have developed over the last 30 years, and then carefully plot a course for the next decade or so.

Black Studies emerged after the decisive years 1965-1966. This was a turning point in the popular political culture of Black radicalism. Martin Luther King led the Selma to Montgomery march and contributed to the passage of the 1965 Voter Rights Act in May. This was the symbolic victory that virtually ended or at least transformed the southern based civil rights struggle into a more radical fight modeled on third world national liberation movements. This

was a more complex problem than civil rights, and changed Black political culture. This change was dramatically unleashed by the assassination of Malcolm X (on February 21st), as well as the murder of several civil rights activists in Alabama: Jimmy Lee Jackson February 26th , Rev James Reeb on March 11th , and Viola Liuzzo on March 25th .

The mass turning point from civil rights to Black liberation was up to that point the greatest urban rebellion in US history, the insurrection of Watts California in August, 1965: 34 dead, nearly 1000 injured and 4000 arrested, property losses over 200 million. Watts reoriented a radical wing of Black political culture from the goal of seeking first class citizenship within the structure of US democracy, integration as first class citizens, to the goal of liberation based on destroying the structures of oppression and exploitation, the rebirth of a new Black community (with or without a new society). The approach or method of struggle changed from one with emphasis

on persuasion and negotiation to an emphasis on power struggle.

In the early summer of 1966 James Meredith was shot leading a march against fear into Mississippi. This set the stage for the militants of SNCC to proclaim Black Power as the new ideological icon of the movement. Black Power became the clarion call to urban youth in the industrial north. Major rebellions were breaking out, such as in Chicago and Cleveland. Finally, the political break with civil rights took place with the formation of the Black Panther Party in October 1966, followed by the major summer of rebellions in 1967, including Newark (26 dead) and Detroit (40 dead).

It is important to revisit these times as they help us understand the political and polemical origins of Black studies. Black studies is not the direct result of the civil rights movement though it could not have existed without it. Black studies was part of the newly emerged Black power movement. This is an ideological difference

based on different regional priorities and different class forces. The South was ending a historic fight for democracy denied after the Hayes Tilden Compromise of 1877. The North had smoldering ghettos of under employed and unemployed youth suffering from a de facto segregation and economic lock down even though they enjoyed the formal democracy the south was fighting for. These street forces of urban youth were the key element.

The civil rights movement on the American campus had been designed to reform higher education for small numbers of Blacks as the vanguard of integration. The Black power movement was designed to fight for resources and protection for a critical mass of students and faculty who would be forced to chart their own way in a hostile context.

The ideological orientation came from Malcolm X, but the objective forces - the students - came from the mass motion linked to civil rights and Martin Luther King. it was only after King was

assassinated in April 1968 that Blacks were invited into the 1960's expansion of higher education.

"Between 1955 and 1965, the number of students (undergraduate and graduate) enrolled in US colleges and universities more than doubled. The total of three million students enrolled during that one decade more than equaled the total number of students enrolled during the previous three centuries of American higher education."

This situation was based on the expansion of the economy in what turned out to be the last days of the reigning US global empire.

The dramatic increase in Blacks in higher education is clear. In 1947 Blacks were 3% of mainstream higher education, with only 200,000 Blacks in post secondary education in the early 1960's. This remained the pattern until 1971 when it was up to 8.4%, and 1976 when it rose to 10.6%, with over one million Black students in post secondary education. This expansion was mainly first generation college students coming out of

the working class and rural south. This was the social basis for Black studies.

There were two critical ideological struggles that defined the content of the Black Studies in its first decade. I would like to argue also that ideological struggle continues to be the overarching framework for Black Studies; in other words, a broad policy debate is setting the stage for virtually all important developments concerning Blacks within higher education.

1. The first struggle is the confrontation by Black power with the institutional racism of higher education;
2. The second struggle is within the Black community between different ideological tendencies.

The American campus was either hostile or indifferent, and certainly unprepared for the working class Black students who enrolled in large numbers after the murder of Martin Luther King in 1968. The first Black Studies program started in 1967 at San Francisco State University but by 1970

it has been estimated that 2/3 of all 4 year schools had some kind of program. The general pattern was for each program to begin with a student protest, some form of social disruption. This was followed by a clustering of local resources with external consultants and the quick fix design of a Black Studies program, then various redesign schemes for a process of social experimentation.

Two general points seem fair: first, the disciplines most exposed by this process remained somewhat protective and not open to self criticism and debate. What did happen is that both History and Literature turned inward and used this energy to reinvigorate their disciplines. Its only fair to admit that out of this have come some of the most important Black Studies texts and scholars. However, these disciplines did not embrace Black Studies any more than the militants embraced these disciplines. It was a standoff but one can hardly hold the youth responsible. This led to the second point which is that as a result of this

relative isolation Black studies was forced into a "lifting itself by its bootstraps" process by which we just barely managed to survive.

In relative isolation Black Studies kept absorbing the ideological trends of the Black power movement, both from the students and community, as well as the faculty who were drawn from these pools of relative outsiders of the academic scene rather than a standing ready corps of academic professionals. On the cutting edge of Black Studies a war erupted between what was then referred to as the cultural nationalists and the revolutionary nationalists. Nowhere was this more critical a division than at UCLA when in 1968 these forces clashed and two Panthers were shot dead in opposition to a cultural nationalist take over of the newly created Black Studies program.

In retrospect it is clear that the Panthers could not have sustained their bid for control of Black Studies at UCLA or anywhere else for that matter without a more institutionally viable theory and method, and cadre of professionally

oriented leadership. On the other hand, it is clear that cultural nationalist could advance only because they had support from campus administration as they found it mutually convenient, much like Elijah Muhammad found common cause with the KKK, they both wanted to keep apart and united to do so. When it looked like they were "dissing" the campus administration they were merely fulfilling their job description.

Today, this ideological struggle, though in different form, continues to define the contours of Black Studies. My thesis is that this is no longer an isolationist versus revolutionary ideological battle, but a struggle between a new form of isolationism versus a reformist accomodationism. The US campus is being forced to downsize like all US firms, hence there is a return to the antidemocratic meritocracy giving rise to an elitism in Black Studies, a reversal of the mass orientation of the past. This has led to refiguring Black Studies around a series of elites and "star" appointments to bolster the visibility

and prestige of a campus program or department. The racism of the campus is now cloaked in the veneer of quality.

The internal debate within Black Studies has changed because the revolutionary option has subsided, and the debate is now being publicized and waged between two groups of institutional elites. On the one hand there are the stars of Afrocentrism, and on the other hand there are the post modern Black elites of the humanities. These recent leaders of Black studies are no less polemical than the founders of Black studies. They write each other out of Black studies on a regular basis, though their punches tend to be more rhetorical than their more bloody history.

I am arguing that major ideological struggles continue to dominate the development of Black studies. But let me be clear about my position. These ideological differences are not a negative deviation in academic circles, but rather the norm for the development of academic fields of study, especially in the humanities and social sciences.

There are numerous examples of this, such as how nationalism has driven the writing of history, or how the fight against Marxism has dominated the development of the social sciences since Weber, or how even art movements get manipulated into prominence in a cold war or hot war context.

In this instance, within the ideological development of Black studies there has been the advancement of theory and research on which the field has prospered. Therefore rather than condemn the ideological wars it is my purpose to go deeper and see what else is being done. I would like to identify and discuss the content of five fundamental modes of thought or theoretical projects that define the intellectual work of Black Studies. I am of the position that we are in a very exciting period in which the ideological debate has given birth to a clustering of intellectual projects and theoretical models. It is essential that we discuss these developments and push forward from ideological polemics to a scholarship that rediscovers the methodology of

our predecessors, DuBois, Woodson, Frazier, and Hurston.

1. The Pan African Experience:

2. The National Black Experience

3. The Black Religious Experience

4. The Black Woman's Experience

5. The Experience of Black Workers and Poverty

Thus far I have argued that the origin of Black studies and its thirty year history has been shaped by two ideological debates grounded in the general social condition of Black people in US society (The fight against institutional and intellectual racism, and the fight between ideological tendencies among Blacks). Further, within this, I have tried to identify and discuss five major theoretical projects within the field that have advanced a scholarly foundation to be build upon. Now, in the remaining time, I would like to suggest where this approach leads us in terms of the future of Black Studies.

First it is clear that we live in revolutionary times. Not in the rhetorical or even naively hopeful sense that we "wanted" a revolution in the 1960's (but couldn't or didn't have one). No, the revolution today is a fundamental transformation of the objective conditions of life, of production and social existence for most people on the planet. My references for this include such important work

as Third Wave by Toefler, The End of Work by Rifkin, and Entering an Epoch of Social Revolution by Nelson Peery.

The main argument has three parts: this is era of technological revolution on the scale and importance of the industrial revolution. This is the era of electricity at its highest stage, the computer, and corresponding breakthroughs in the biochemistry of life. This new scientific and technological stage is transforming social life. Existing organizational forms are downsizing and being reengineered, while new forms are developing. The speed of communication and transportation are making the global experience instantaneous and available to everyone. Finally, there is an unprecedented economic polarization taking place such that rather than the hope of a rising standard of living more and more of the worlds population are being forced into a fight for survival. This is true in Africa, and this is true in Ohio.

My approach then leads us to consider how the above three key factors are impacting the **US** campus and create a context for the further development of Black Studies.

1. The new technology

(a) The wiring of Black studies

1. survive the downsizing
2. connect students to new economy

(b) create a nat'l community

1. info vs personality

2. equality of access

3. insterv. discussions (e.g. Number + Black Sociologists)

(c) New priorities

1. curriculum

2. research data bases

3. publication

- 4.

H-Africa

2. The global context

(a.) global access

(b.) create new opportunities

1. service to Africa + Caribbean

2. new instil → consortia
courses [last week, chronicle]
Rodney Coates

3. The new class polarization

- (a) Forbidden zones need access
our institutions need to be opened up
- (b) if not talented 10th — how about
a talented $\frac{1}{3}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$
- (c.) The Need for a New policy mix: the

In conclusion, it is possible to state that there is a great future for Black Studies. However, it is not a future that can be determined willy nilly from the wide expanse of someone's imagination or dictate. Rather, it is a future to be crafted through the collective collaboration of the scholars and students in the field, working in the concrete context of higher education. The future of Black Studies will be a microcosm of the survival of Black people in third wave society.

*Black Studies remains a great adventure—
stick with it!*