The Illinois Documentary History of Black Studies:  
Toward a new approach to the history of Black Studies

http://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/14912

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The history of Black Studies in the US has been on the research agenda ever since Black Studies became the most important result of the Black Power Movement. However, the history of Black Studies has been captured by a two part narrative, socially constructed by the national media around high profile, elite schools on both coasts. Part one is that a nationalist struggle emerged to create a Black Power initiative within educational institutions. Part two is that the nationalists were failing and the situation had to be rescued by an academic postmodern elite. This polarity is the usual dialectic imposed on Black history: nationalism versus integrationism. It has been socially constructed and defended, with limited empirical investigation. But it is an oversimplification of a very courageous process that took place in every setting of higher education in the United States. It negates the diversity of Black Studies. It silences a great deal of talent. And we are now developing a tool for solving this problem, the Illinois Documentary History of Black Studies (http://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/14912), and we invite you to join us.

Black Studies starts to study itself

Recent Black Studies scholarship has demonstrated the utility of case studies, for instance Bradley (2009) on Columbia University; comparative studies, such as Rojas (2007) on University of Chicago and University of Illinois at Chicago and Small (1999) on Harvard and Temple; and discipline-wide datasets such as Alkalimat (2006, 2007, 2007). We know a lot, but we do not have a sufficiently large enough sample of detailed case studies to firmly anchor this field of study in the kind of data required to sustain serious scholarship.

Part of our problem is that we have fallen victim to edutainment by the public intellectuals who launch from the elite bastions of higher education. Many have been led to believe that what these high profile individuals think about what happened in the history of Black Studies is more important than the facts of what happened in more than 500 institutions of higher education. So our focus today is on how to re-value the actual founders of Black Studies, campus by campus—the wise community elders and the campus warriors, intellectuals and diplomats among faculty and students. In order to liberate this history and construct a resource or tool that many others can use to do so, we go into the libraries and archives, we return to the source.

Constructing a tool for broad study of the history and sociology of our own field

In these times, when one thinks of a project one then thinks of where the funding is going to come from. In returning to the source we also have to reinvent how to do things, how to get things done without a grant, without asking for permission. So our overall strategy is to turn the classroom from a site of
intellectual consumption to a site of production. Thousands of hours of student labor can be used productively. Carrying out actual research is in fact a better pedagogical approach than aiming for the passive acceptance of existing knowledge.

We started this process at the University of Illinois, anticipating having our proposal approved for a new PhD degree program in Black Studies to launch in 2012. Our first results come from a small graduate seminar in Fall 2009 where four students produced four documentary case studies of the history of Black Studies:

1. Northwestern University
2. University of Illinois at Springfield
3. South Suburban Community College
4. Loyola University

For all four students this was an engaging, practical and realistic course project that woke them up to Black Studies and to scholarship generally. They also got published! Everyone liked seeing their name in print.

Research methods

Each student’s goal was to reproduce the basic documents that contain the empirical data needed to study the history of the academic program at the school they selected. In each instance, the student began by downloading and printing the existing web site of the program. Next, he or she examined the library website for information on campus archives. Following this the next stop was the media, on and off campus, to see what was available online and what might be found in hard copy archives. The goal was to gather as much as possible before making contact with people on campus and alumni, so that the students would be looking for specific information and not merely staying in the realm of the general.

We planned full day campus trips, mainly to photocopy material since the focus was to gather primary documents. Key to this were the current unit head (director or chair), the departmental secretary, the key archivist or Black Studies librarian, and any officials on campus with a past history connected to the program. The use of email was essential in making contact with people in advance, and giving people ample time to respond was critical as well.

When on campus collecting data, the first task was to copy the official college catalog material concerning Black Studies, covering the 1960s to the present. This is self-reported information by the campus, and is their official legal document. Next stop was the campus archives to find and copy the official documents of the founding of the program and all possible written communications: early demands and the official campus response from the faculty, administration, and board of trustees; course syllabi, all possible written communications. This gave key dates that could be used to search media archives for local reporting on and off campus. This process enabled us to get a list of the key actors in the origin and subsequent leadership of the program. Finding contact information and
soliciting help also proved to be useful as people were friendly and contributed information and material to the projects.

Research results

Once all of the material was sorted and organized into sections of a volume, with an introduction and other explanatory material, we photocopied it and simultaneously created a PDF file. This became a limited edition of a printed and bound volume and a digital ebook at the same time. Three official hard copies were produced, one for the school in question, one for the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature at Chicago Public Library, and one to the reference collection of the African American Research Center (AARC) of the History, Philosophy & Newspaper Library. The ebook is permanently available at IDEALS, a free and public digital repository such as many research universities are now building:

IDEALS collects, disseminates, and provides persistent and reliable access to the research and scholarship of faculty, staff, and students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Faculty, staff, and graduate students can deposit their research and scholarship - unpublished and, in many cases, published - directly into IDEALS. Departments can use IDEALS to distribute their working papers, technical reports, or other research material.
(http://www.ideals.illinois.edu/)

By using IDEALS as well as sharing hard copy with several institutions, these four volumes containing the campus-by-campus historical documentation of the history of Black Studies will be permanently available for research.

Next steps: Calling all scholars and students

We invite everyone to start to use these four volumes, since they are available locally and globally via the internet. But we are making a broader call because these four volumes are but a start, in four important ways:

1. Working together, we can assemble more documents from the four campuses where we began. Each program has had at least three generations of leadership and faculty and many syllabi and publications, so each campus deserves multiple volumes.

2. Working together, we can document many more Black Studies programs in the US and produce additional volumes. The formula we have worked out in this first go was a success, and we are sharing it here. Choose a campus, use our approach, get in touch with us, and your hard copy and online volume will materialize. Partners have already stepped forward from California, Georgia, New York, and elsewhere in Illinois.

3. We are also interested in documenting Black Studies programs outside the US—in Europe and the UK, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and Africa—that were inspired by the US Black Power movement.
4. The volumes are primary documents, our level 1 data, the raw stuff. One way to start using them is to produce level 2 data would include a coded database that shrinks things down into manageable information. Quantitative and factual information (e.g., names, dates, numbers, specific decisions, etc.) can be easily coded and placed in a commonly used database structure for general use. Qualitative analysis will require experimenting with computer assisted tools in order to have a tool to accompany the data that can be used by researchers at all levels. That level 2 data can be published as well, in hard copy and on IDEALS, with full authorship.

What we are seeing is that each volume immediately becomes required reading for people currently building each academic program. They will likely be among the first users and their use will make the Documentary History of Black Studies more valuable to everyone. Any weaknesses they find will guide future work. Alumni and former faculty are also taking notice and making their contributions as well.

If you are interested in creating or using a volume or contributing in any way, please get in touch.

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