

AN APPROACH TO BLACK STUDIES

STATEMENT OF THE PLANNING STAFF

INSTITUTE OF THE BLACK WORLD

Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center

May, 1969

Institute of the Black World: Introduction

This official Memorial Center will ... like Martin Luther King, emerge proudly out of the heart of the black experience in America, but it will address the experiences of all people, especially those who are broken and oppressed, those who desperately search for justice, liberation and peace. In all of its parts, the Memorial will attempt to meet with uncompromising insistence the problems and needs which face black people today....

Coretta Scott King
Announcement of the
Martin Luther King, Jr.
Memorial Center, January 15, 1969

The Institute of the Black World in Atlanta is the second element of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center to be brought into being. Its central thrust is towards the creation of an international center for Black Studies, with strong emphasis on research, broadly conceived.

Some persons have requested a statement from the Institute which would present its own rationale and its sense of direction in the creation of such a living institution. Fundamentally, of course, it is also a request for an apologia for our particular approach to a very thorny issue. A response to that appropriate request appears on the following pages.

Institute of the Black World: Basic Assumptions

The Institute of the Black World approaches the controversial and highly significant issue of Black Studies in America with five basic assumptions. They affect the character of all that we do and all that we plan to do in the arena of Black Studies. These are the assumptions:

1. That Black Studies is really a field still being born--in spite of all the discussion which seems to take for granted the existence of an agreed upon body of thought. This is not to deny the existence of significant, and often unappreciated work related to Black Studies which has already been done, but it does deny the fact that there is any clear understanding of the specific ways in which a profound mining of the black experience challenges and transforms the basic educational structures of the nation.
2. That the establishing and the defining of the field of Black Studies stands logically as a task and a challenge for black people in America and elsewhere. Others may be called upon for assistance, but the initiative must be ours.
3. That the Institute and its sister institutions of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center (and the Atlanta University Complex) are in an excellent position to play a central role in defining the field and creating some of the models so urgently required. In this task, of course, we must find ways of combining the thought and activities of those black persons throughout the nation who are working at the Black Studies task, often in scattered and isolated situations.
4. That a unified, rather than a conventionally understood academic, discipline-bound approach to the creation of Black Studies is not only desirable but absolutely necessary. Indeed, this unified approach is central to the demands of most thoughtful black student and faculty groups across the country.

5. That a serious building of this field is the task of years and not a make-shift program for a few persons to do in several weeks or months.

Institute of the Black World: Basic Program Elements

Against this background of assumptions, the planning staff of the Institute of the Black World has been working towards tentative models for more than a year (benefiting, of course, from the older hopes and dreams of such predecessors in Black Studies as W. E. B. DuBois, Charles S. Johnson, Ralph Bunche and Alain Locke--to mention only a few). Already it has become apparent to us that several elements must be a part of any creative, well-structured approach to Black Studies. We have understandably sought to include them in our own planning. Among these elements are:

1. Serious research in many areas of historical and contemporary black existence which have either been ignored, or only superficially explored (i.e., The Black Church and Its Theology, Comparative Black Urban Development in the New World, Comparative Slavery).
2. The encouragement of those creative artists who are searching for the meaning of a black aesthetic, who are now trying to define and build the basic ground out of which black creativity may flow in the arts. Encounter among these artists on the one hand, and scholars, activists, and students on the other must be constant, in both formal and informal settings.

3. Continuous research on those contemporary political, economic and social policies which now shape the life of the black community in America and which determine its future. It is clearly necessary to develop a "think tank" operation which will bring together the many varieties of black approaches to struggle and existence in America. This must be done, of course, in a non-polemical, unpublicized black setting.
4. Constant experimentation with the meaning of Black Studies for the surrounding black community, and openness to the possible input from that community into the creation of Black Studies. The two-wayness of the experience is essential and must be encouraged.
5. The development of new materials for and new approaches to the teaching of the black experience, which must grow out of laboratory situations at every grade level.
6. The training of a constantly expanded cadre of persons deeply immersed in the materials, methods and spirit of Black Studies who can help supply the tremendous demands for personnel in a variety of formal and informal teaching environments.
7. The creation of consortium models which will make possible the constant interaction of black students and faculty on northern and southern campuses around certain selected foci of Black Studies. This must also expand to the encouragement and development of contacts among black students, scholars, political leaders and artists from various parts of the world. For it is clear that Black Studies cannot really be developed unless we understand more fully both the unique and the common elements of our experiences in the black diaspora.

8. The gathering and consolidation of those library and archival resources which will facilitate the development of Black Studies as it proceeds towards definition.
9. The establishment of a publishing enterprise which will not only make available the results of the experimentation and study of the Institute, but which will also encourage that increasing number of authors and researchers who wish to present their work from the heart of a black matrix.
10. The gathering, cataloging and critical analysis of those black studies programs and personnel which have already developed across the nation, so that we may begin to gain a fuller sense of direction, possibilities and problems. This process will begin with a summer-long seminar in June, 1969 and will continue--with monthly seminars of Black Studies Directors and several larger working conferences--at least through the summer of 1971.

The Institute of the Black World sees all of these elements as crucial to the development of creative models for the kinds of Black Studies programs which will not be palliatives, but significant pathways to the redefinition of American education and of the Black Experience. These are, therefore, the elements which have guided us so far in the establishment of our own Institute.