

BLACK STUDIES: CORNELL

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I would like to talk about the situation at Cornell and some of the kinds of problems that emerged there, not only in terms of defining what Black Studies is, but also in terms of the real problems of control when trying to establish black programs within white contexts. I would like to do that by talking about another situation at Northwestern, where I was also involved. I think the two situations offer valuable contrasts. In 1967 I was a graduate student at Northwestern University. At that time Black students there were raising the questions of black studies in a very abstract and nebulous fashion. They weren't clear at all about what they meant when they said "black studies." They really didn't mean studies as such. At least, what they talked about most were course offerings. They were mostly concerned that something be done to introduce blackness into Northwestern's completely white "scholarship." In many ways their concern was simply an extension of the black is beautiful kind of concept. All over the country, black people were talking about being beautiful, being proud, and that we had done something in history. Motivated largely by this surge of pride in blackness, the students were not thinking about the institutional problems and questions

that they would have to confront; all they knew was that Northwestern was a white situation and that that was inexcusable.

So the attack on the University was not essentially a confrontation over Black Studies; it had more to do with the academic situation of black students and their social existence. They said, "Well, we don't like the way we live in dormitories...No soul food is ever served at this place, yet the dining halls make provisions for Catholic people and for Jewish people...We should have more black teachers..." (What kind of black teachers and why they were wanted was not very clear, nor was the question of accountability: would black teachers be accountable to the white university or to black people?) It was pretty much the way black people proceeded during the Civil Rights Movement: "We don't see any black people in that store...we want some black people working in there...you have discriminatory hiring practices." In discussing the things that they wanted to deal with, the question of Black Studies just came up.

The major thrust of their argument was the question of how white people justify the fact that they teach American history, and include no blacks in that history at all. Black omission was so glaring and so blatant that we had to raise it as illustrative of their oppression and racism. The students were also concerned about the way they were treated on campus,

the rampant racism. All this came up spontaneously over the negotiating table. The only thing they had half-way together was their line on Black Studies. They said they wanted some black teachers and black instructors, and some courses with black content.

The first time that the black students had to deal with what precisely was wrong with the content of courses was when whitey said, "Well, we have a course on race relations."

And the black kids said, "No, no, that ain't what we mean." Professor Frederickson deals with the Southern History of America. "We want a black person teaching that because Frederickson really doesn't deal with the significant role of black people. He does talk about black people but from a slave perspective, from a white racist perspective." Whitey was still very cool and very calm, and asked, "Well, what is it that he does, exactly?"

Fortunately, Sterling Stuckey, John Bracey, and another brother by the name of Sundiatta were there and they pointed out the things he was leaving out of his course. So subsequently, the white people said, "All right, you draw us up a course offering." What we did then, was to take some course titles, and interject some things that were kind of black into them, you know, the blacks were here too, type of thing; and we said we wanted a black person to teach that. Then, some of the white liberal cats asked, "Who can we get."

We argued at that time that credentials had to be determined by black people, but again, that still was not a very defined concept. Somebody suggested Brother Lerone, and the white people said, "Oh yes! We would be glad to have Lerone Bennett; he's tremendous!" So white people, thinking again about what would add luster to their own situation, brought in Brother Lerone and said they would put him in the history department. Another left-wing kind of radical dude, who had been out in the West Indies for some time, said, "I know C.L.R. James; we will bring him into the sociology department and let him do a lecture series". And we said, "Right on, things are moving." Still not to be outdone, the whites said they would bring in another Negro, a certain novelist. Now we had some questions about this brother because we had tried to deal with him before and he hadn't wanted to respond to us. We told whitey not to bring him in. Whitey said, "Oh no, we have made a commitment and it is unethical for us to go back on it." That was the first confrontation with the way white people move to keep their power prerogatives intact. They had defined their "commitment" based on an ethical structure that doesn't even recognize us. In fact, it was only a design to bring this brother in over the opposition of the rest of the blacks and thereby create tensions among us.

The whites began to accuse us of pushing Black Studies in an unreasonable and unethical way, and of being opposed to the novelist because he has a white wife. They concluded that they could not allow "this kind of discrimination in an educational institution." This is a very dangerous tactic that whites use to control Black Studies. They wanted to hire this brother despite the fact that he has no traditional credentials, has not attended college on any level. Previously the whites had been raising questions of credentials: "We can't sacrifice content." The fact that this brother had not finished high school didn't matter to them, however. They took a determined stand to have him there, knowing that his presence created a sense of imbalance, that it kept black students off balance trying to determine how to relate to a brother who was apparently more partial to the university's interest than to theirs. They said, "Well, maybe we aren't being fair to the brother." Given that kind of situation, it was very difficult for black students to know the proper course and to carry it through.

Another strategem of the whites was to create a student structure which was to indicate to a faculty group the names of the persons that the students wanted to be hired. The faculty group, in turn, would invite these persons to Northwestern. Black people said, "Well, there ain't nothing wrong

with that; we still calling the shots. We hand them the letter, we tell them who we want, and they write the people." The important point, of course, was the legitimacy of white people doing the inviting and the hiring. Margaret Walker Alexander was invited to the university and never knew that she was coming at the invitation of black students. In fact, she was there for six weeks without knowing. She had been told that the class had been boycotted and that James Turner was behind it. So for six weeks, Mrs. Alexander was trying to get in touch with this young brother and let him know that she was all right, not realizing that this young brother knew who she was and where she was coming from. Whitey had, of course, established that he alone was responsible for bringing her in. Whereas, in truth, the head of the English department knew nothing about Margaret Walker, even that she was a product of Northwestern. And of course he wasn't familiar with anything she had written.

In fact at one of our first meetings with the English department this same man said, that he didn't know if there was enough black poetry to teach a complete quarter course (not a semester, but a quarter!). The brothers, of course, were so infuriated and outraged that they got up and left. But it was those kinds of situations that black students were in a very difficult position to deal with. Given the confusion

of internal debates, and the inexperience in sophisticated negotiations, the vagueness of concrete goals, plus outside pressures from blacks screaming about separatism, the situation was chronic.

Other frustrations ensued. Lerone was brought in and students felt the course should be kept black. Whitey said no. So the class wound up being largely white. At the same time the black kids who came to class were very unsure of themselves and didn't know why they were coming, other than to hear some black history. It was a problem, because people were dealing with the question of values at a very superficial level. That is, they were just coming to hear blacks included in history. Some of them said they could read the books on their own and relate to Lerone's course in the very same way they related to other courses. Thus they denied their own claim that there is a special need and a special course required to fill it. Lots of others said, "there's all them honkies in the course, man. Honkies is all over the place." This was supposed to put constraints on what blacks could say; not only could they not be "soulful," but the fact that those white kids were there, meant that a brother could not be objective in class. He could not get "down into it." Northwestern created a very interesting situation, a situation in which black students, even those in graduate school, came off second best against the university's machinations.

Most of the courses that were put out there were premature, and wound up being supermarket courses. Ones we simply put some titles to in order to justify our arguments about the need to have them. They were the great books kind of courses: DuBois did this, and so and so did that...Here is some black poetry; it is as good as Shelley or Keats...There was still no coherence to our perspective, no real notion as to whether or in what way the traditional disciplines needed to be questioned. It was defensive and reflexive.

Now to the Cornell situation, which is an interesting contrast. The black students there were not much further along than those at Northwestern in defining solutions to their problems. But the nature of the environment at Cornell caused more group solidarity and more political consciousness. The whole question of the guns was not raised over Black Studies, but over the question of whether white people had the right to adjudicate the affairs of black folk. The students said, "You cannot judge us. You're not a jury of our peers. You've structured the court to preside over your interests. We're not going to recognize it, and the brothers are not going to show up."

At first they gave elaborate arguments as to why the judicial system was illegitimate. They said that where two parties are in conflict, one party that is involved in the conflict cannot judge the other--which is what universities

do. We get involved in a dispute with the university, and the university says, "All right my board will judge." They said, "No, man, no good. That doesn't work. You can't be both judge and litigant. You've got to have a third board." The faculty at that time was saying, "That's right, that is a profound argument. We should have a separate kind of judicial body. In fact, it is very important." (One of the leading honkies who agreed with that position became one of the most reactionary when it came to the Blacks really pushing the logic of their argument about who should judge whom.) The blacks were functioning at another level entirely.

Concerning Black Studies, the students said that they were about defining instruments for Black people that would help achieve self-determination, and that that could not be done under white people's structures. One sister said, "If Black people are going to thoroughly get themselves together and if Black is Beautiful and is really going to be real, we cannot live in the dormitories." Another sister asked a very profound question: "Can we ever really believe that Black is Beautiful, when we have been so fundamentally socialized toward believing that it is not?" Living in a black dormitory was not just to be away from whites, but to deal with the real question of who we are and how we feel. For example, what does it mean and how does one go about having an on-going, sustained

and fraternal relationship in Blackness?

People began to talk about the question of nation-building. That was a new concept. They were still not very articulate, but they were dealing with the question of nation-building. (All that we do must be related to that kind of question, and Black Studies must, in fact, be about turning black students to the struggle that black people across the country are involved in.) When this came up, the white faculty began to take a different position. They began to argue quite differently than had the faculty at Northwestern. They attacked the program as a breeding ground for Black militants, e.g., "They're creating revolutionaries over there." And the argument they used was that ideology and education do not mix; that you cannot put ideology and education together without compromising intellectual quality. Blacks weren't quite able to deal with that nor were many of the brothers whom they interviewed for the job as black studies director. Their response tended to be: "Well, no, we are dealing with an academic situation; we are not involved in ideology."

I submit that the real problem, one of the fundamental contradictions of our search for black education is that we are trying to define ourselves out of a colonial education which has given us most of the concepts and values that shape our perspective. Much of our conceptual structure has been given to us, even the words we use. Realizing that, the brothers began to say that they didn't give a damn about the questions

whites were raising. They wanted to deal with the question of nation building and that was all. The white folks said, "All right, the blacks are frustrated. They can't deal with the sudden introduction into a white environment. It shocks the hell out of them. We'll give them something to allow that to be eased." But they still argued that there was no reason why the faculty could not review all the people who were to be hired since "there are certain objective criteria which determine the nature of academic and scholarly work that have nothing to do with race." The notion there was that white academe can transcend all differences--even where its own interests are involved.

But that is obviously not so. A confidential document on the Yale Symposium (liberated from the Office of the Dean of Academic Affairs) came into our possession. It was written by a professor named David Davidson, who had been at Yale. He was talking about all the people who had spoken at Yale: Ron Karenga, Brother Abdul, everybody. The interesting thing he said was that very fortunately, the most profound things that were said on Africa were said by a white anthropologist who "demonstrated", even to the acceptance of the black militants there, that race is not important. According to Davidson, this man had gone into a Yoruba thing and "obliterated" race. Davidson did admit, however, that the white boy said you've

got to become a little bit black in order to do a black studies thing.

The white argument at Cornell insisted that you cannot, you need not, have racial differentials. But we argued out of the experience of the Northwestern situation that there could be no judgement by whites, and no review mechanism of the hiring of blacks at all. Our definition of the program was that autonomy meant, in the first instance, that black people must hire each other. And that a review board of the faculty senate was simply irrelevant. We argued that we wanted a black college, an autonomous college. Whitey, said we would have to go to the state legislature to get that; he didn't have the authority to grant that. We should take a program instead. We argued that we didn't want a program. Programs are nothing. They turn out to be a coordination or confederation of courses strung out all over the place without any intrinsic relationship.

Black feeling at Cornell was to consider a Black Studies Center.

A center in the organizational structure of Cornell is a little more than a department but not quite a school. It would be outside normal administrative structures of the college, allowing blacks to construct their own course offerings, define the philosophical base of their program and hire their own people. The important thing is that it has to be okayed by the President. So black students decided that their

major leverage had to be on the President. Most of them became confused in dealing with the personalities of the President. The one thing that the President was very sensitive to was trying to maintain some stability on that campus so the black students would not in fact tear it apart, because there were black students who had by then moved outside of the traditional definition of structure and rules. They would not operate within those rules. In fact, they got the Center by saying, "We are tired of you telling us there can't be any Center. We are telling the Psychological Experimentation Center that they have until five o'clock to vacate the building, that's all." They just chose that building. Whitey said, "You can't tell us to get out of our own building." They said, "You will be gone by Friday at noon." Friday at noon, whitey left, arguing that they were going to come back, and the black people simply moved in and have been there ever since.

Then the President said he could only give us so much money. Black students felt that if white people say they can give you so much it means that they have more. So the students said they had to have more than that. The white man said "We don't know where there is more money." The black students said "We're sure you'll find some more!" Whitey was still trying to deal with the fact that black students were capable of taking him on. Moreover he didn't know quite what they would do but felt that they were capable of anything. Those were a

different breed of students. One was a six-year Ph.D. student; another's father works on missile systems; a third was one of the brightest engineer students that they had had. The school couldn't figure out what had happened to these people. They had become erratic, irrational, irresponsible and capable of very serious damaging actions. As a tactic to settle the situation down so that they could analyze what was going on, they said, "O.K. we will permit this program." That decision does not mean at all, however, that black people at Cornell have solved the problems of institutional constraints. This is very very important, because a lot of people have pointed to the brothers at Cornell as having done a very beautiful job. Even some of them began to say, yes, we have. But white people began to counterattack arguing that academic freedom had been violated, that black people had completely destroyed the academic process and were disrupting life on the campus. Black students said, "We ain't dealing with that. What you mean by academic freedom is simply domination, and white professional domination at that."

Whitey's next offer was to make appointments on a departmental level. The blacks continued to insist that they would not deal with traditional discipline and departmental structures. "We are talking about new structures that have nothing to do with the kind of discipline you all are talking about. We are talking about something, given your view, quite unorthodox."

Whitey said, "All right, we understand that Black Studies has to be autonomous and that it also has to have a non-traditional structure." Where then comes the problem that Black Studies is confronted with at Cornell?

White people started to say, "You are right, you have to do a job that's different from anything we know about, different from anything we can do, and we are committed to funding it...We've got to fund it. We have already made that commitment. We've got people up here and we would look pretty ridiculous not funding it." And we said that that commitment had to be a three year commitment to each black person coming in, a legally binding contract with the university for three years. So the university is now stuck with a situation in which it is committed for three years to the people we select, people who can sue it, if necessary for not holding to that agreement.

They then began to ask when we would be able to broaden our offerings to include all the campus. This is part of the pressure that develops to move people back towards the whole integration set-up. We understand that it really means, when would we be able to broaden our offerings to bring in more of the white students and everybody on campus. One of the things we fought for was that registration for the black courses must take place in the Black Center. So we register all the people who will be in a course, which means that there are no white

people in the course. The next attack was presented as a concern of the government. The government sent a representative to say that black students could not live in Warren house, since that would create de facto segregation. And they send down a Negro from the Office of Education to do that. The brother came down and ranted and raved about how this can't go on. And another brother from the State Task Force of Rockefeller's came down ranting and raving. Any attempt to tell them what we were about failed. So we said all right we do have white students who are doing independent study. (They go up and talk to a brother or a brother meets them in the library and gives them independent guidance.) Whites asked how many white kids were in the course.. And we said ten or fifteen. In fact, they are on independent study. These are the kinds of things that people have had to go through in order to maintain themselves. We also said that given the isolated setting of Cornell we wanted to work on a three year experiment in black urban centers of education and that an institution should be built in the black community in Harlem or Roxbury that would have to be staffed by black people, "Because obviously you all can't go into Harlem." They agreed that they didn't want to go down there.

My notion in talking about the kinds of things that brothers at a place like Cornell have to deal with is to suggest that you do not talk to white people on their terms, nor do you go

in and try to argue the legitimacy or the validity of their arguments. You don't sit down and argue whether ideology and education mix, or whether our definitions are valid and theirs invalid--no argument. You go in and say, "Yes, you are right. These black students do have a problem. They have shock problems, and the solution to their problem is that they got to have a relief from Cornell; that means they have to go into the black community. And that means that there is a need for a new institution to provide a kind of ...junior year abroad. The students need to have a semester or a year abroad in black communities, and this will help them to be productive members of the society. Still not quite sure that this is true, the white folks said they would give us the money for our experiment, then they mentioned Bob Browne, whom they know. We agreed that Bob is a good brother and that we would ask him to help develop that situation.

The real problem in trying to deal with even these marginal gains is to find brothers who not only know some black history and have some understanding of the fact that black people are engaged in confrontation, but know also that black people are fighting a war for self-determination and that that means there are two systems of legitimacy, and that blacks cannot be authenticating the values and objectives of the power structure. The real problem is not simply personnel but

personnel who are inclined towards a black orientation and who won't blow the whole thing. That's really the problem. People who can sit down in class and understand that you are not talking about Crispus Attucks doing this or black cowboys doing that or that black people fought in the war of 1812 (all of these meaning only that black people were involved in white people's crimes). That is not what we are dealing with. Nor should we simply sit down and tell white people that Langston Hughes was equal to Whitman or Kelly to Steinbeck or some of the other cats. That is not the question. The issue is knowing that learning to read and write is not education, but only the means to an education; that education is always fundamentally political in any system. It defines people's relationship to society, their value structure, and their ideas of who they are. Black people must understand that education is fundamentally political and that the universalism of white people is based simply on their particularism. The whole notion of Western science being objective is a farce. The problem we have found is finding black people who can understand that their whole notion of scholarship has been so shaped by white people that they can't see and think for themselves. Too many of them really believe that the stuff we are talking about is a compromise of intellectual integrity. They look at us and say, "I think you cats really

want to discourage doing academic work."

My very last point is the question of student ambivalence. Many black students really feel that they cannot understand what the value of intellectual work is. What they mean is whether people in Black Studies are simply talking about intellectual processes in the abstract or talking about somehow bridging the gap between blacks in the community and blacks who have been formally educated. Students are also concerned about those blacks who feel they are primarily trying to give white academia a justification for what they are doing--to really prove that Black Studies can be equal to white studies.

Lerone talks about George Washington's slave operating in a different time and a different space than George Washington. And that is what we are dealing with. The real question is this: Can blacks exist to any degree of permanency in white institutions? That's a real question. The challenge for those of us who want to fight that battle of confrontation is to put up the most stable and permanent of structures.

So I think that we are dealing with through Black Studies a fundamental nationalist imperative. If we are merely talking about black education being the salvation to white education, we are not solving the contradiction. There is a very real nationalist imperative that has to deal with the question of political self-determination of black people. How do we

define self-determination? Some of us have said that Black Studies is a very temporary situation. You must address yourself to this because of the fact that there is an increasing number of blacks at white schools and you are trying to do something about pruning their consciousness. But there is another question: Should they be at schools where there are only half a dozen or three dozen black students? In fact, maybe there should not be Black Studies programs at those places. We should be talking about whether there are sufficient numbers to sustain the kind of game we are trying to play. If there are only half a dozen, or fifteen, or twenty or thirty black students, maybe we shouldn't have black studies there. Maybe our thing should be an independent, organized, non-accredited study session among those black people with that kind of orientation.