

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.