

The Counterrevolution on Campus

Why Was Black Studies So Controversial?

The incorporation of Black studies in American higher education was a major goal of the Black student movement, but as we have seen from San Francisco State College, City College of New York, Northwestern University, and many other campuses, the promise to implement it was typically followed by another period of struggle. Whether it was because of hostility, clashing visions, budget cuts, indifference, or other challenges, the effort to institutionalize Black studies was long and difficult. To the extent that there was a “black revolution on campus,” it was followed, in many instances, by a “counterrevolution,” a determined effort to contain the more ambitious desires of students and intellectuals. This chapter explores critical challenges and points of contention during the early Black studies movement, with a particular focus on events at Harvard University. The struggle at Harvard concerned issues common to virtually every effort to institutionalize Black studies, although not all were as contentious or politicized as in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the early 1970s. As St. Clair Drake dryly noted, “The 1968–73 period was a unique one in American academia.”¹

This chapter also examines the controversy and conflicts surrounding the meaning and mission of Black studies. Black studies was controversial among many, both inside and outside academe, for its intellectual ideas, shaped as they were by the swirling ideological currents of Black nationalism. Black studies was seen by many as an academically suspect, antiwhite, emotional intrusion into a landscape of rigor and reason. But rather than a movement of narrow nationalism and anti-intellectualism, as some critics charged, the early Black studies movement advanced ideas that have had significant influence in American and African American intellectual life. It emphasized interdisciplinary study, questioned notions of objectivity, destabilized metanarratives, and interrogated prevailing methodologies. Indeed, the capacious vision of most architects of Black studies is striking: they viewed it as an opportunity to create Black-controlled institutions and to assume greater authority over research in Black culture and history. At the same time, they saw African American studies as a means to transform American intellectual life more generally and, ultimately, some hoped, the status of Black people in society as a whole. While the early Black studies movement broke new ground, it was not, by any means, of one voice: there were spirited debates about the direction ahead and, indeed, the very definition and mission of the new discipline.

Because Black studies arrived like an explosion on the American scene, and because students brought it into being and then graduated, Black scholars had to move quickly to give it definition and shape. Many stressed the innovation and legitimacy of a “Black perspective” as

a unifying principle—almost a methodology—for this new multidisciplinary academic formation. A “Black perspective” not only answered critics who questioned the rationale for Black studies, but it also aimed to unmask the pretense of universalism in Euro-American intellectual thought and teaching. It is vital to underscore the overwhelmingly Eurocentric nature of the American college curricula and the extent to which white scholars argued that their theories and research had “universal” application. The Black studies movement forcefully pushed back against this claim and began a process that would open up space for other marginalized experiences, perspectives, and identities to find their own space in higher education.

Some critics of a “Black perspective” tended to see it as little more than racial essentialism. “There is no white truth or black truth or Aryan physics or Bolshevik biology,” retorted white scholar Sidney Hook. For other skeptics, the notion of a Black perspective connoted a didactic mission aimed at molding Black minds into one view or a monolithic conception, which risked disguising the ideological heterogeneity among Black people. This was the objection voiced by historian Eugene Genovese. “There is no such thing as a black ideology or a black point of view,” he declared. “Rather there are various black nationalist biases,” and conservative and integrationist views too.²

Proponents of a Black perspective, however, anticipated these criticisms. Black intellectual production, from the nineteenth century through its professionalization in historically Black colleges, has been part of a cosmopolitan, humanist tradition,³ but African American political and intellectual thought of the late 1960s and early 1970s is often flattened, caricatured and squeezed into a narrowly nationalist box. Indeed, there is much that belongs in that box, especially the pervasive patriarchy and homophobia. Yet the various articulations of a “Black perspective” that arose in these years of radical political struggle and upheaval were transnational, critical, and expansive. The foundational moment of modern Black studies bears out historian Manning Marable’s assertion that “pluralism and diversity” are “at the heart of the Black intellectual tradition.”⁴ And this is true in spite of powerful countervailing pressures coming not only from political ferment but also from many people’s perception of what a new academic enterprise entailed—the widespread sense that discipline-building required an authoritative move, that it demanded a unified theory of Black reality to justify the creation of Black studies.

The early Black studies movement produced a rich and voluminous outpouring of writings seeking to define its mission—many first appeared in the *Black Scholar*, the *Journal of Negro Education*, or the *Journal of Black Studies*. A sampling of these has since been anthologized, but many were also presented at the multitude of conferences, workshops, and gatherings and remain unpublished. At a California workshop, Lawrence Crouchett’s presentation, “The ‘Black Perspective’: From A Black’s Perspective” underscored the idea that an assertion of commonality did not preclude difference and individuality. A “‘black perspective’ simply means a way of perceiving an object, a situation, an issue or a problem as a black person—because of his unique experiences in the United States—would perceive it,” he argued. This notion of “positionality” would in fact powerfully influence ethnic studies in the ensuing decades. Hardly rigid and essentialist, a Black perspective was in this view necessarily

improvisational and creative: “These unique experiences cause black people to weigh things differently from the way others do. You must understand that black people are involved in a struggle to cause ‘mainstream America’ to relate to us as equal human beings. Therefore, black people must be defensive, sensitive, militant, suspicious, cautious, and committed to democracy. All this is part of our ‘survival kit.’ Conventional education has ignored the ‘black perspective’; it was too anxious and committed to justifying the ‘white perspective.’”⁵

According to its proponents, Black studies exposed not only the racial bias in Euro-American scholarship but also destabilized notions of scholarly objectivity, detachment, and universality that were the hallmarks of professional academic culture in the United States. Historian Vincent Harding wrote, “No longer is the black view accepted as one which is narrow compared to the white—or the universal—but it is considered a view far richer and humane, pressing us beyond the constructions of the white, conquering, west, moving us out into the true universe. . . . Blackness is perhaps a door to a far larger view of the world than white America has ever known.” Black students, in Harding’s view, were “no longer fooled by the special claims of the great universities to be the sources of wisdom, objectivity and truth.”⁶ In an essay exploring the distinction between *Black Studies* and *the Study of Black People*, Cedric Clark defined the former as “the research, practice, and teaching of a social science whose repertoire of concepts include as fundamental and essential those derived directly from the Black American cultural experience.” He emphasized that Black studies challenged the epistemology and methodology of the social sciences. It “raises fundamental questions with regard to the ‘objectivity’ of social knowledge,” and “despite efforts by [Peter] Berger, [Robert] Merton, and others, the relevance of epistemology . . . remains a relatively undeveloped area of American social science.” Now, with the rise of Black studies, a social scientist’s “unquestioned assumptions” will be “held up to a closer, more critical scrutiny than ever before.”⁷

The Trinidadian scholar Basil Matthews, a professor at Talladega College, saw a Black perspective as part of the search for a new humanity. “Western social theory is assumed to be universal. But its applicability to black people and black experience is open to serious question,” he asserted. He clarified, however, that the task of Black studies was not simply corrective. “It might appear,” he wrote, “that the primary purpose of the new discipline is to correct and remedy the shortcomings of Western science. But such a view would reflect less than half the truth. The approach corrects and remedies precisely because it is different and regenerative in approach. The new approach is essentially a promise and an effort to positively and creatively advance the knowledge of the specifics of the black experience.” The answer to white studies is not a narrow reaction “but black wisdom within the wider context of total humanity.”⁸

Many scholars emphasized academe’s omission of the experience of Black people and the transformative potential it thus carried. “The black perspective,” wrote one scholar, “is desperately needed because American intellectualism has failed to deal adequately with the realities of the black presence in America.” As education activist Preston Wilcox put it, “The old perspectives have assigned inhuman status to Blacks.” The demand for a Black perspective represents a “broad condemnation of the integrity, adequacy and honesty of the US educational

establishment.” Common to this discourse was the idea that the affirmation of a racial particularity served as a springboard to a broader intellectual insurgency, or humanism. In a speech later published in book form as the *Challenge of Blackness*, Lerone Bennett defined *Blackness* as the search for universal truth. “We cannot think now because we have no intellectual instruments,” he argued, “save those which were designed expressly to keep us from seeing. It is necessary for us to develop a new frame of reference, which transcends the limits of white concepts. We must abandon the partial frame of reference of our oppressors and create new concepts which will release our reality, which is also the reality of the overwhelming majority of men and women on this globe.”⁹

For many, the idea of a Black perspective meant reclaiming scholarly debates about Black people from scholars who appeared disparaging and dismissive of Black life. There are white sociologists, Harvard’s Ewart Guinier observed, “who examine the black experience with a concept that black people are a problem, that black culture does not exist or if it exists is a distorted and inferior imitation of American culture.” In contrast, a Black point of view “says Black culture has been a viable means of survival for Black people. Black culture expresses the Black experience,” and is neither “inferior nor superior to another culture.”¹⁰ Historian Vincent Harding saw the need to claim control as an assertion of Black people’s dignity: “Black history is refusal to give over our lives, our creativity, our history, our future into the hands of white America, for they proved themselves totally inadequate and ultimately dangerous. So we demand hegemony over our institutions. We seek control of the telling of our story.”¹¹ This “we” may appear monolithic, but many and divergent Black perspectives on the telling of the history of the African diaspora asserted themselves in these years.

Many theorists of a Black perspective were careful to articulate an expansive and critical vision. After visiting more than a hundred campuses in 1969, one scholar defined Black studies as “an attempt to create a humane and viable intellectual and ideological alternative to Western cultural imperialism. By widening the narrow perspective of ‘white studies,’ black studies will force American intellectualism toward, not away from, attainment of the intellectual idea of encompassing the totality of human perspectives and experiences.” In fact, Black studies would enable the academy to actually begin to do the comprehensive universal work that it had long claimed to do. This same scholar wrote, “Black studies is an attempt to return American intellectualism to its proper mission, namely, to conserve, to examine, to expand, and to communicate the scope of human experience as it exists and has existed.” Moreover, acceptance of a Black perspective would legitimize other marginalized perspectives. This researcher wrote, “If interpreting reality from the Black perspective is a legitimate extension of intellectual endeavors, then so too must other long ignored perspectives be capable of shedding new light on the human experience. . . . For example, American intellectualism has a masculine bias which is as entrenched as its bias against non-Western people. At this moment we know far too little about the feminine perspective to be able to assess its potential impact. The best guess is that it will have a profound balancing effect on what has been an almost exclusively male-oriented vision of human reality.” Imagine, too, “how the Native American perspective would alter the dominant view of the American West.”¹²

Proponents of Black studies did not conceptualize it as an insular area of inquiry only of

interest to black people, but as the opening salvo in major changes in the American academy. Armstead Robinson called Black studies “the cutting edge of a revolution in American education.” “American intellectualism is on the verge of a new age,” another scholar declared, “and Black studies is the forerunner of that new age.” And doubtless in all seriousness, the sociologist Andrew Billingsley, who helped set up Black studies at Berkeley, called it “an instrument for the redemption of western society as we know it.” In his view, “Black studies provides us with an opportunity to dream of things that never were and to ask why not. Black people have never controlled anything on these shores,” he noted, and the new discipline offers a unique opportunity for African Americans to build something new.¹³

The young historian Armstead Robinson, who had organized an important symposium on Black studies at Yale University in 1968 as a graduate student, and who then went on to help develop several Black studies programs, conducted a survey of the field in 1969. In his view, Black studies provoked a crisis because it was exposing the fact that the education system in the United States upheld Western cultural imperialism. Black studies revealed that the rest of the curriculum constituted “white studies.” With its mask of objectivity pulled off, what would “white studies” do now? “Black studies cannot be understood outside the context of a black revolution,” he argued, because it “should involve you from the cradle to the grave. We have to create a totality of learning experiences for Black people which will make blackness automatic and avoid for the next generation of black children the kind of agonizing appraisals, anxieties and doubts that upset black people today.”¹⁴

A dominant theme among Black studies proponents was its transformative potential and ability to illuminate larger truths about the United States. “Black history can give the American society unparalleled insights into the deficiencies of its own value system as carried out in practice,” two white historians wrote. “Americans have, in a sense, built a nation upon the deception that they are a community of co-equal individuals participating co-equally in community affairs. Solid studies in Black history will put that illusion into perspective.”¹⁵ Darwin Turner echoed this view that Black studies could generate a more faithful alternative to the core myths of American life. “Reality and the official ideology of Americanism could not and cannot be reconciled,” he argued, seeing in Black studies the potential to develop a new, more honest national narrative.¹⁶ The historian Benjamin Quarles was of a generation of Black academicians who were more skeptical of the new idiom, but he still found much to approve. “The newer black history has a revolutionary potential,” Quarles declared. “For blacks it is a new way to see themselves. For whites it furnishes a new version of American history, one that especially challenges our national sense of smugness and self-righteousness and our avowal of fair play. Beyond this the newer black history summons the entire historical guild—writers, teachers and learners—to higher levels of expectation and performance.”¹⁷

In many respects, these idealistic visions for the new discipline of African American studies seem at a far remove from the rough-and-tumble political battles that propelled its birth. Black student activism may have won Black studies, but to many white academic elites, Black studies remained an oxymoron. Could a Black perspective produce valuable knowledge? Was there a Black intellectual tradition? Was there sufficient scholarship and imagination to justify a department of African American studies? For many white American

intellectuals, the answer to all these questions was an unblinking no. Establishing the discipline in such an intellectual and political environment was a profound challenge, even with the many opportunities and concessions won in the late 1960s.

As at many other schools, the assassination of Dr. King propelled the creation of Black studies at Harvard. As a result of Black student agitation, a student-faculty committee under the chairmanship of economics professor Henry Rosovsky issued a report in January 1969 recommending the creation of a degree-granting program in Afro-American studies, a research center in Afro-American studies, a Black cultural center, improvement of the program in African studies, and a sharp increase in the number of Black graduate students. It was a strong affirmation of change that validated the many grievances of Black students at Harvard and endorsed their ideas for change. But it did make two recommendations that would become points of contention. The Rosovsky Report recommended that majors (or concentrators, at Harvard) in Afro-American studies also complete a second major, and that faculty in Black studies also hold appointments in other departments. Thus, decisions over faculty hiring and promotion would be made in concert with another department—and since every other department at Harvard was virtually all white, this granted those with a poor record in hiring African Americans, and little experience in Black subject matter, authority over faculty in Black studies. The rule requiring double majors also suggested that Black studies was not sufficiently developed or academically rigorous to stand alone as a major. But for the members of the Rosovsky Committee, this model was in many respects ideal because it brought a new, politicized area of study into the broader curriculum in a way that tethered it to the preexisting culture and norms of the college. It was the responsible, sensible choice, designed to affirm the high standards of the institution.¹⁸

Between January and April 1969, students in the Association of African and Afro-American Students at Harvard and Radcliffe (AFRO) conducted their own investigation into the best way to establish Black studies at Harvard, and came to a different conclusion. They concluded that a traditional department was the best means of ensuring stature, permanence, and greater autonomy over faculty selection. (Of course, there is no such thing as complete departmental autonomy in hiring and promotion, since the college and university must ratify such decisions.) Michael Thelwell, a founding member of the Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, summed up this view when he noted that traditional departments “have, over the years, displayed no interest in incorporating the black experience, a black perspective, or even Negro faculty-members into their operations. What should now dispose us to trust them? And even if we should, how will they, after centuries of indifference, suddenly develop the competence and sensitivity which would enable them to do an acceptable job?”¹⁹ Similarly, AFRO came to view the requirement for a double major as onerous and a result of a double standard.

Of course there were other issues roiling Harvard in the spring of 1969, and the struggle for Black studies got bound up with the antiwar movement, specifically the effort to abolish the Reserve Officer Training Corps program. Students for a Democratic Society led a takeover in April of University Hall, and when the administration called in the police to forcibly evict the students, it inflamed the campus and caused a majority of the student body to go on strike. The

call for a Black studies department became one the demands. April was filled with intense, heated debates among students and faculty over the form and nature of Black studies.²⁰ Students Jeff Howard and Wesley Profit spoke at the April 17 meeting of the faculty, seeking to persuade them to support AFRO's vision for Black studies. "We're not here to intimidate you, to accuse you, or hopefully, to argue with you" Howard began in his remarks to the assembly, but in "a spirit of cooperation." He called their proposal "not a repudiation of the Rosovsky Report" but "a friendly amendment." That spring a standing committee comprised exclusively of faculty had begun to design an Afro-American studies program, and troubled by some of their decisions, AFRO proposed a formal role for students. Process, or the role of students, became an additional point of divergence between AFRO and the committee, although the students argued that their participation was faithful to the original intent of the Rosovsky Report. At the faculty meeting, Jeff Howard quoted the report's endorsement of students' participation, in light of their "high degree of interest, knowledge, and competence in this emerging and in some ways unique field of studies."

Henry Rosovsky spoke next, defended the current plan and process, and reminded the faculty that a double concentration was part of the original Rosovsky Report. But in a seeming concession, he noted, "It is possible that Afro-American studies will be a major on its own in the future." And then, in apparent contradiction to what the standing committee was in the midst of doing, he added that it was "best to let the incoming chairman set the lasting guidelines of the program." But he rejected student membership in the standing committee, because it would grant students a voice in the hiring of tenured faculty members. At a follow-up meeting on April 22, the faculty voted in favor of AFRO's proposal, giving Afro-American studies departmental status, "offering a standard field of concentration," and adding six students to the standing committee, three to be chosen by AFRO and three by potential concentrators.²¹ Clyde Lindsay, a student, hailed the faculty resolution. "I consider this a great victory for black students and for American education." But Rosovsky immediately resigned from the standing committee, saying such a major change in educational policy "should be studied carefully and considered in a calm atmosphere." Richard Musgrave, another economist, took his place as chair.²²

Two points need to be added to this account of the department's origins. First, in his remarks to the faculty on April 17, Professor Rosovsky noted that the standing committee had already offered a tenured position to three distinguished scholars: two had declined and one was still weighing the offer; and it had offered visiting faculty positions to two other individuals, who had each turned them down. "To our knowledge," Rosovsky stated, "no one declined because he found fault with our program." After students had acquired voting rights on the standing committee, opponents of this development contended that it would obstruct hiring, since, in their view, no self-respecting scholar would submit to a review by undergraduates. Similarly, many faculty and administrators at Harvard and elsewhere came to believe that the departmental structure also thwarted hiring in Black studies, since in their view most scholars would naturally prefer affiliation with an established discipline. But it is important to note that the difficulty in hiring faculty at Harvard preceded both the addition of students to the standing committee and the turn to departmental status. As we have already seen

and will examine further, there were numerous challenges in recruiting faculty to teach Black studies, regardless of its structure.²³

Second, critics of the AFRO proposal subsequently promoted the notion that professors had voted for it under duress, in a pressure-filled atmosphere of student upheaval and rebellion. Exemplifying this portrayal, a story circulated that a Black student had come to the faculty meeting carrying a large knife. (It is perhaps relevant to recall that earlier that same month, an Associated Press photograph of Black student protesters at Cornell University carrying rifles and ammunition appeared on the covers of magazines and newspapers around the country.) The *Crimson* actually ran a photo of an unidentified Black male student walking on campus carrying a meat cleaver on the day of the faculty vote. But according to Wesley Profit, this student never spoke at the meeting, and faculty members never saw the knife. The young man—who hoped to speak at the faculty meeting—had a dramatic, preacher-like style and thought that, for better effect, in the middle of his remarks he would take out the hatchetlike knife and slam it into podium. But Profit, fellow leader Skip Griffin, and other students refused to allow him to bring the knife into the faculty meeting. Profit said they all understood the historic nature of the day—it was evidently the first time students ever addressed the faculty, and the meeting was being broadcast on the college radio station. There was no need for a hatchet! The disappointed student departed and was later photographed walking with his girlfriend on campus, still carrying the knife. The *Crimson* photo likely helped to convince many at Harvard that a student had actually come to the faculty meeting with a knife, presumably with a threatening intent.²⁴

Still, despite the student strike and atmosphere of protest, faculty supporters of the resolution defended their vote, and the professors who worked with students on the standing committee expressed satisfaction with the process.²⁵ When Martin Kilson, an African American political scientist and member of the Rosovsky Committee, blamed the “political threats of the militant extremists” in AFRO for intimidating the faculty to allow a student role in organizing the department, Professor Jack Stein disagreed. He defended his vote, believing students had a legitimate concern over pedagogy and deserved the right to have a voice. In Kilson’s view, “only persons of tested scholarly abilities and training should be involved in the organization and administration of black studies curricula.” He found it galling that Harvard had allowed students to “*exercise scholarly authority*” over a “complex interdisciplinary field.”²⁶ However, the new chair of the standing committee, Richard Musgrave, denied the rumor that people were spurning their job offers because of the presence of students on the committee. The heavy competition for the few specialists in the field accounted for their difficulties, he reported.²⁷ Nevertheless, the faculty’s rejection of the Rosovsky plan in favor of AFRO’s was deeply resented by many at Harvard, some of whom would continue to fight for their vision of Afro-American studies notwithstanding the 1969 defeat.

The demand for greater student rights and voice was in fact widespread on American campuses in these years—students were even demanding voting rights in the U.S. Department of Education.²⁸ So Harvard was hardly unique. Still, student leadership was particularly associated with Black studies for a simple reason. Students—not scholars—were responsible

for the creation of Black studies programs. It is absolutely vital to appreciate this distinction if one wants to truly understand the contentious early years of Black studies. “Black studies programs came into existence not because of the efforts of scholars who detected the cavernous lacunae in the curriculum vis-à-vis the Afro-American experience,” observed Tobe Johnson, a professor at Morehouse. “They came into existence primarily because of the pressures of black students and their white allies for a curriculum more relevant to that experience.”²⁹ This is not to downplay the paramount significance of sympathetic faculty and administrators. But the fact remains that, at most places, a petition drive, sit-in, demonstration, or strike, or the threat of these, led to the creation of new courses.

Indeed, on many campuses, the faculty initially rebuffed student entreaties for Black-content courses. “The bedrock foundation for the emergence of contemporary Black studies was laid by Black urban, lower-class students as they tried to get better Black studies courses from traditional departments,” noted education scholar Carlos Brossard.³⁰ Sadly, this group garnered very little credit for their founding role and faced a lot of criticism and scorn. As Carlene Young, a director of Black studies at UCLA, observed, “Black studies has been available to scholars for several generations.” But “it was not until the Black consciousness movement of the 1960s forced the issue that Afro-Americans began to be afforded their rightful place in the annals of the history and development of American society.”³¹

Harvard faced a question every campus faced. If students had demanded and won Black studies, who would give it form? Who would actually build the new departments and programs? The white faculty and administrators who had heretofore failed to integrate their faculties and curriculum? The one or two Black scholars who were on the faculty of the university, and who may or may not have been involved in the student push for Black studies? Or, would the Black students who had fought for it play a leading role in its implementation? Some people anticipated the student desire for involvement. “Since the black studies movement was initiated by black students rather than by teachers and educators,” one scholar predicted, “it can be assumed that the former will try to exercise a quasi-proprietary influence on the future development of black studies programs.”³²

Students did not demand the same degree of involvement everywhere, and it was not controversial everywhere—but the students’ sense of ownership over Black studies and their desire to be involved in forging it was common. At Stanford, for example, a committee of four Black students, three Black professors, and two white professors oversaw the first year in Afro-American studies.³³ Students at Wesleyan formed a committee to review all candidates applying for Afro-American studies positions.³⁴ In the prospectus for the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell, James Turner wrote that “students will participate significantly in the direction and development of the Center” and “will be involved in matters of policy, curriculum and faculty recruitment.”³⁵

But there was hardly consensus on student involvement. As at Harvard, some people saw student involvement in faculty affairs as a sign of academic weakness. Many scholars suspected that the student activists demanding Black studies were driven more by emotional and political considerations than intellectual interest, and worried that their commitment to the new units would prove ephemeral or that universities would use Black studies to reinvent

“separate but equal” and thus shortchange Black students just as they were entering white universities in large numbers. The young historian John Blassingame applauded Black students for shining a light on discriminatory hiring practices, but worried that student preference for Black teachers would overlook knowledgeable whites and lead to the hiring of unqualified personnel. “Negro students ignore the possible crippling effects of hiring simply *any* black man,” he asserted, although, to be fair, the evidence does not indicate that most students had such a simple yardstick of evaluation when rejecting whites and demanding Black professors. When Columbia University hired white historian Eric Foner to teach a course in Black history, for example, some Black students took the course and also picketed it, recognizing the white professor’s qualifications, but viewing this as an advantageous opportunity to press Columbia to integrate the history department. And sure enough their protest contributed to the hiring of Nathan Huggins.³⁶

Blassingame’s biggest concern was what he saw as the immense political pressure emanating from students. “The threat to black intellectuals is real,” he wrote. “Not only do the black students demand that the teachers in black studies be Negroes, they also want them to have the right shade of ‘blackness.’ In essence, this means that the black scholar must have the right ideological leanings. As some of us succumb to the persuasive arguments to hop on the treadmill and try to keep up with the mercurial changes in the black ‘party line,’ ” he wrote, “serious scholarship is likely to suffer.”³⁷ As the Black studies department at San Francisco State in 1969–1970 illustrates, students who were well organized and possessed of a clear political agenda for Black studies could be dogmatic and intimidating toward Black faculty. But in most schools, students did not seek to exert that level of ideological control.

One area of student participation in departmental governance that troubled many scholars was the questioning of job applicants about the race of their spouses. In their view, this illustrated the risk of students assuming professional roles without the appropriate professionalization. Fairly or not, with the ascendancy of Black nationalism, students often interpreted the marital affiliations of Black scholars (men, in the main) as a sign of their larger communal affiliation and orientation. An interracial couple did not exemplify the idea of Black people coming together that animated much of the Black Power movement, and some felt that marriages of Black men to white women, in particular, constituted a race-based rejection of African American women. But the introduction of this issue in the hiring process signaled, for many scholars, an inappropriate entry of ideology into a professional context. During an interview for a job in the Black studies department at Lehman College in the Bronx, a committee of students asked the historian William Seraille about the racial identity of his wife. He happens to be married to a Black woman, and he got the job, but he remembers his surprise at the question. Blassingame described a friend’s different experience. “After being approved by the faculty, he went before the black students to prove his ideological fitness,” Blassingame wrote. “When he opened up his remarks to them by pointing out that he had a white wife, the students rejected him. In spite of his qualifications he was not hired.”³⁸ Mary Jane Hewitt, an administrator at UCLA in the late 1960s, recalls the hostility encountered by African American scholar Sylvester Whittaker, who served very briefly as the director of the Center for African American Studies. “His ex-wife was white,” she says. “And all the ladies he dated were

white, and this is why he marvels today at Claudia Mitchell-Kernan having been a successful director of that center for all those years with a white husband, when he thinks about how they crucified him because of his white wife and white girlfriends.” Ron Karenga’s “guys” she recalls, gave Whittaker a hard time.³⁹

St. Clair Drake said that until 1967 the criticism he received for being married interracially came from whites, but then Black women began to question him. “At Roosevelt last year the Black Student Association wasn’t having much to do with me,” he noted, summing up the students’ view of him this way: “The thing that is wrong with [Drake] is that he is a nigger that talks black and sleeps white.” But Drake criticized others for concealing from public knowledge the fact that they were sleeping with white women. In his view, he was at least honest and got married. Fifty-eight years old and a distinguished social scientist, Drake was one of the scholars that Harvard tried to hire to chair Afro-American studies, but he had already said yes to Stanford’s same offer. When Harvard called, he said, “I felt like telling them, why didn’t you ask me 20 years ago, when I really could have used the research facilities and support. But they wait until the kids are ready to burn the place down before they ask me.”⁴⁰

This leads to another major challenge and point of contestation in the early Black studies movement—who was qualified and willing to teach Black studies? It was not easy to staff the scores of new Black studies programs, centers, and departments that sprang up across the country in 1969 and the early 1970s. A couple of hundred campuses launched search committees for specialists in Black studies—all at the same time. After Martin Luther King’s assassination, Charles Hamilton discovered, “black professors (preferably with PhDs) became one of the most sought after commodities on the market.”⁴¹ Black PhDs were the most in demand, but they were few in number. Of the thirteen thousand professional sociologists in 1970, for example, only eighty-five were Black.⁴² According to a survey in 1970, fewer than 1 percent of PhD holders in the United States were Black, and most in this group were over age fifty-five.⁴³ Spelman historian Vincent Harding was committed to staying in the South and teaching Black students. “I have received in the past several years, you have no idea how many offers to come teach in the North. This is a time that schools that were not interested in black teachers five years ago will do anything to get them.” He made a passionate attempt to convince Black students and scholars to resist the brain drain of HBCUs and stay in or move to the South.⁴⁴

While still a graduate student at Northwestern in the late 1960s, John Bracey was flooded with job offers. Both he and James Turner, another Northwestern graduate student, joined African American studies programs before completing their doctorates, and their stories further illustrate the unusual or unconventional circumstances that often shaped hiring in the field. Turner became the first director of the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University. A Black nationalist, he sought to recruit scholars of like mind and argued against “white-defined” academic qualifications. “They call them objective criteria, but these reflect colonial education,” he felt. At Cornell, he argued for a hiring process where “there could be no judgment by whites, and no review mechanism of the hiring of Blacks at all. Our definition of the program meant, in the first instance, that Black people must hire each other.”⁴⁵ John

Bracey's hiring in the Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts in 1972 was the ironic result of an even more unpopular political philosophy. W.E.B. Du Bois had instructed that the executor of his estate, Herbert Aptheker, also an historian and member of the Communist Party, accompany the gift of his personal papers to the University of Massachusetts. But the state legislature balked at the prospect of hiring this openly communist scholar, though they remained interested in acquiring Du Bois's massive and highly valuable personal archive. Aptheker decided to take advantage of whatever leverage he might have and proposed that, in his place, the university add five additional faculty positions in Afro-American studies, one of which became Bracey's position.⁴⁶

To be sure, not every young Black scholar who worked on African American subjects wanted to join a Black studies program. It is vital to remember that even though universities were designing new courses and programs, most academics did not regard the field as academically legitimate. Plus, many did not share the Black nationalist project of some of the field's founders. James Turner encountered this dilemma in hiring at Cornell. "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," he declared. "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.'" In Turner's opinion, "the real problem is not simply personnel, but personnel who are inclined towards a Black orientation and who won't blow the whole thing."⁴⁷

Many young Black scholars likely questioned whether Black studies would even last, and may have viewed launching a career in the field as risky. On this reluctance by Black scholars, St. Clair Drake observed, "They want the security and prestige of being in a traditional department. Black studies might be a fad, and they'd be left out in the cold."⁴⁸ Norvel Smith, the Black president of Merritt College in Oakland, alma mater of Huey P. Newton and home of one of the first Black studies departments, saw a significant tension between the career aspirations of many Black scholars and the political sensibilities of radical Black youth. "A black faculty member," in his view, "likes to feel that his professional position is justified on a basis other than race, and he resents the encumbrances of black students. . . . In addition, many faculty members are turned off by the student rhetoric."⁴⁹ Charles Hamilton was inundated with job offers in the late 1960s; he chose not to join a Black studies program, deciding instead to join the political science faculty at Columbia University. While still a graduate student, Sterling Stuckey was invited to chair the new Department of African American Studies at Northwestern, but he declined and subsequently began his career in the history department. Jim Pitts, who also did his graduate work at Northwestern and later joined their sociology department, remembers the atmosphere in African American studies at Northwestern as "poisoned" and found the idea of working there unappealing.⁵⁰

Sometimes, this scenario was reversed, and a Black scholar on the faculty regardless of scholarly expertise was tapped to teach African American studies. Robert Singleton, an assistant professor of industrial relations at the University of California, Los Angeles, was asked by students to head the new Center for Afro-American Studies. He thinks his efforts to

restrain police—who were rounding up all Black males after the shooting deaths of two students who were leaders in the Black Panther Party on campus in January 1969—made the students like him. At the time, he felt he was not qualified—he had not yet completed his PhD—but he agreed to serve on an interim basis because he felt that the job needed to be done.⁵¹

As for the prospect of hiring whites, the general view in the early years, especially, is summed up by the white chairman of a Black studies planning committee at a large, urban university: “Our students do not say that no white professor can teach any aspect of Black studies, but that few are competent to do so, few have the right attitudes or knowledge, and most importantly, the typical ‘liberal’ professor” allows the interracial class to become a rap session. Our black students do *not* want to be in the position of finding either that they are guinea-pigs for class discussion or that they know more of the subject at hand than the instructor.”⁵² Overall, Black students voiced a strong preference for Black professors in Black studies courses, while Black scholars expressed more openness to the participation of qualified non-Black professors. An all-Black search committee at Fordham University in the Bronx hired the white historian Mark Naison in 1970. Naison felt he had been hired “not only because of my research on black history but because the program’s founders saw teaching whites about African American history and culture as complementary to their mission of promoting black unity and empowerment.” He became “an evangelist for black studies among white and Latino students,” and found that “some black students resented what I was doing.” But with the passage of time and large course enrollments, “the hostility dissipated” and Naison became integrated into the life of the program.⁵³

Historian Clayborne Carson attributes his quick ascent from computer programmer to professor to, in part, the significance of race in the early Black studies movement and the desire by Black students to have Black professors in this burgeoning field. As an auditor of a “new course” at UCLA on the history of race in the United States, taught by white historian Gary Nash, he ended up leading a discussion section. This propelled Carson to enter graduate school in 1969, and two years later he became an acting assistant professor. “The professors who engineered my recruitment were responding to forceful Black student demands for an African American history course taught by a Black professor. My hiring followed an interview session with leaders of the Black Student Union and was made possible by an expedient decision to deny tenure to a non-Black professor, Ronald Takaki, the superb historian who taught UCLA’s first African American history course.” Carson regretted the racial politics in the hiring process and the denial of tenure to Takaki, a Hawaiian of Japanese descent, who went on to a distinguished career in Asian American studies at Berkeley, where he helped to launch the ethnic studies department. For his part, Carson was relieved to leave the political hothouse of UCLA for a position at Stanford, where he built a career as one of the nation’s leading scholars of the civil rights movement.⁵⁴

As Harvard’s early attempts to hire in Afro-American studies show, the fact that many universities were competing for the same scholars, and that many Black PhDs shunned Black studies, made hiring difficult. Universities often turned to nontraditional sources of recruitment, which in turn served to reinforce the notion that Black studies was not a serious academic venture. John Blassingame, ever the gadfly, expressed sharp criticism of early Black studies

instructors. Because of “their lack of commitment and the urgent demand,” Blassingame wrote, “many colleges are hiring all manner of people to teach black-oriented courses, especially if they are black. Social workers, graduate students who have just embarked on their graduate careers, high school teachers, principals, and practically anyone who looks black or has mentioned Negroes in an article, book or seminar paper are hired to teach Afro-American courses.” While clearly hyperbole, this statement does capture the sense of improvisation and scrambling by an unprepared academic establishment in the wake of a major nationwide movement victory. Sterling Stuckey, who assisted in recruiting candidates for the African American studies department at Northwestern, concedes that it was difficult to find qualified people and thinks they made a few inappropriate hires. And ultimately, there were instances where inappropriate instructors either intimidated administrators into promoting them, or preserved their jobs as a result of the low opinion or misunderstanding of the field held by many in academia. These early hiring decisions adversely affected some departments for decades and certainly influenced the broader image of the field.⁵⁵ Michael Thelwell offered a broader perspective. He noted the concern of many that colleges would set up “hastily manufactured and meaningless programs” taught by “semi-literate dashiki-clad demagogues with nothing to offer but a ‘militant black rap.’ ” He had seen very few of these, although he acknowledged the risk. “It would be pointless to pretend that this danger does not exist in some small degree,” he wrote, “but my impression of the basic good sense of this student generation, and their serious commitment and sense of responsibility to themselves and their community, reassures me that this tendency will be a short-lived one.”⁵⁶

As much as faculty supporters of Black studies wanted to be responsive to student demands, they also wanted quality programs, and many worried that an insufficient faculty supply would lead to a pattern of weak, understaffed programs that might cast the whole discipline in a bad light and put it in actual jeopardy. A few scholars proposed models to consolidate talent and guide the creation of the field in a more purposeful, coherent fashion. Vincent Harding called for a Commission for Black Education to plan and organize higher education for African Americans.⁵⁷ Expressing a popular idea, Melvin Drimmer argued for the development of a dozen or so centers for the teaching and study of Black history, and he envisioned Black colleges as the logical starting point.⁵⁸ Darwin Turner, the dean of the graduate school at North Carolina A&T, wanted both respectability and innovation in Black studies: “I am sufficiently traditional and black that I want to be certain that Afro-American studies programs are respectably staffed with a core of Ph.Ds. Otherwise the intellectual snobs of our campuses will cite the sparsity of them in the program to support their suspicion that Afro-American studies are designed for the dumb and disadvantaged, and good students may fear to become identified with a program stigmatized as intellectually inferior.” But at the same time, Turner defended the view that a broader range of talent should be tapped for the college classroom. “I warn against the pompous pretense that a teacher cannot be used unless he has a master’s or doctor’s degree,” he declared, figuring that “an organizer with ten years experience in the black ghetto could teach a course in sociology maybe better than someone whose research only came from libraries.” He urged three solutions: finance and encourage Black students to attend graduate school; develop regional, cooperative Black studies centers; and utilize “those individuals

who have a lot of practical experience but lack an advanced degree.” This was already happening for creative writers and artists. “Ralph Ellison and Gwendolyn Brooks would be hired at almost any institution in the country,” Turner noted.⁵⁹

After losing St. Clair Drake to Stanford and being turned down by John Hope Franklin, who held a distinguished professorship at the University of Chicago and moreover had no interest in joining a department of Black studies, Harvard hired Ewart Guinier, a lawyer, former trade unionist, and longtime Black community leader, to chair the new Department of Afro-American Studies. As a nonacademic operating in an elite academic environment, Guinier called upon prominent scholars for counsel and advice, notably Charles Hamilton, Hollis Lynch, and especially Sterling Stuckey. But Guinier encountered enormous challenges in getting Harvard to fulfill its commitments to the department. As Hollis Lynch later observed, “The Harvard administration did not share Professor Guinier’s grand ambition and design for his Department and certainly put many obstacles in the way of actualizing them.”⁶⁰ The university succeeded in undermining or reversing key victories of 1969, including the student role in hiring, full faculty appointments, inclusion of African studies, and development of a research institute. Faculty and student leaders in Afro-American studies managed to preserve its departmental character, but the toll in demoralization and shrinkage was high.

A review of the department by internal and external scholars in 1972 provided the first occasion to trim its sails. By this point, the department had graduated its first class of fourteen concentrators—who were headed to law, business, and graduate schools. It had ten instructors, although Guinier remained the sole tenured professor, and offered a wide range of courses each semester in African and African American studies. Guinier had a global conception of Black studies, believing that it “should cover the history and culture of Black people from ancient times to the present,” including “experiences in Africa and North America and the Caribbean.”⁶¹ The students, course offerings, and faculty were diverse, with white students generally comprising 40 to 60 percent of course enrollments. But nonetheless a portrait of a racially exclusive and philosophically separatist department was widely promoted. Political scientist Martin Kilson—the first tenured Black faculty member at Harvard—had served on the Rosovsky Committee and was a firm believer in the benefits of joint appointments, program status, and traditional faculty control for African American studies. He was severely disappointed in the April 1969 faculty decision and became a vocal critic of the department in the 1970s. He portrayed departmental status as “tragic” and argued that it made Black studies “academically and technically diffuse and disoriented,” and put this generation of Black students at a disadvantage. “They will be dilettantes at best, and charlatans at worst,” he warned.⁶²



FIGURE 17. Lerone Bennett and Ewart Guinier, the first chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Harvard, converse at a conference of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History.

During the 1972 review of the department, Kilson circulated his “Memorandum on Direction of Reforms in Afro-American Studies Curriculum at Harvard University,” which expressed his objections, especially the idea that students should not be able to major exclusively in Afro-American studies. Aggressively seeking to shape the review, Kilson characterized the department as a hostile Black island in the erudite sea of Harvard. He assailed the inclusion of students on the executive committee, describing them as “black racist—if not black racist—in outlook” and blaming them for the lack of white teachers, who in his view had a kind of right to be there. (And there actually had been white instructors in the department.) Kilson wanted “the rich talent of white scholars at Harvard” to be brought to bear on the struggling department, even suggesting, remarkably, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whose *Beyond the Melting Pot*, had questioned the vitality and contribution of Black American culture. Glazer and Moynihan were part of a generation of white “experts” whose scant encounter with Black history and culture had given rise to the Black studies movement.⁶³ Contacted by Harvard for his view of the Afro-American studies department’s status, political scientist Ron Walters expressed concern about Martin Kilson’s characterization of the department. Black studies did not politicize the university, he argued, “it was already politicized by a thousand issues more volatile than black studies.” Moreover, in forming the department, “Harvard recognized that any legitimate black effort is controlled and developed by black people.” Walters expressed frustration that Kilson would reduce this quest

to “the dictates of a bunch of ‘militants.’ ” It is “the desire of *those involved* in black studies whether they be militants or moderates,” he declared, “to have an authentically black educational experience.”⁶⁴

Ewart Guinier felt that many influential people at Harvard wished to undo the faculty vote of April 1969, so the department produced its own self-evaluation as a means of ensuring that their perspective—many accomplishments despite weak university support—would get a public airing. Harvard graduate students Andrea Rushing and Wesley Profit helped put together “The First Three Years.” It was released two days before the official review, and in Profit’s view, it saved the department. “The report prevented the university from dismantling the department,” he believes. He credits Guinier’s seasoned organizing skills and willingness to fight back as essential to the survival of Afro-American studies as a department.⁶⁵

The review committee, headed by federal judge Wade H. McCree Jr., found a middle ground between the department and its critics. The committee’s report praised the dedication of the department’s chair and concentrators, yet many of its recommendations undercut the department’s vision. It urged Harvard to reaffirm its commitment to the department and to immediately hire at least two more senior faculty; recommended but did not require joint majors; suggested greater focus on Afro-Americans and less attention to African studies; dissolved the standing committee—which had been the vehicle for including students in faculty recruitment—but kept students on all other departmental committees; created a new interdepartmental faculty search committee; and urged creation of the delayed W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research. It also recommended (but did not require) that joint appointments with other departments be used to facilitate faculty recruitment. The committee found that “one of the problems of attracting eminent black and white scholars to the Department is the fact that they have earned acceptance in ‘conventional’ disciplines at other institutions which they would not want to forsake by going into a department which appears to be ‘on trial’ and/or accorded second-class status by Harvard.”⁶⁶

In the aftermath of the review, the marginalization and isolation of the department intensified. The effort to assemble a stable tenure-track faculty remained a challenge, and it took several more years to hire the second tenured faculty member, the music scholar Eileen Southern, who was jointly appointed to the music department. The sociologist Orlando Patterson had joined the department as an assistant professor but later moved to sociology after an acrimonious falling out with Guinier. The department’s first internal tenure candidate, Ephraim Issac, a specialist in African languages and a Harvard PhD, was denied tenure but won a settlement after it was discovered that the college had wrongfully instructed an external review committee that Issac had to be jointly appointed in order to get tenure.⁶⁷

In the meantime, Professor Kilson escalated his criticism of the department and aimed his guns at Harvard’s use of affirmative action in undergraduate admissions, which, like Afro-American studies, he saw as leading to an inferior Black presence at Harvard. Kilson used the words *militant* and *militancy* repeatedly in diagnosing this apparent problem. The effects of the “separatism and militancy” of the late 1960s, he insisted, “were having a disastrous impact on the academic achievement and intellectual growth of Negro students.”⁶⁸ Kilson spent much of 1973 publicly disparaging the qualities and abilities of Black Harvard students and even

took it upon himself to lobby for shift in admissions policy. In a lengthy memo to the university president and deans of the college, Kilson complained that many Black students admitted in the past six years lack a “*desire or capacity to acculturate to competitive academic and intellectual lifestyles*” and urged a reconsideration of admissions criteria.⁶⁹ In yet another letter to Harvard administrators, he complained that “there are still too many black girls recruited into Radcliffe who are simply marginal intellectually; they are not really capable of or not really interested in superior intellectual and academic performance at an elite institution like Harvard.”⁷⁰

A series of articles in the *Harvard Bulletin* launched the public phase of his attack. He reiterated his concern that “the future quality of the Afro-American elites or professional classes is at stake” and alleged that the Afro-American studies department, “like others around the country, was created with scant concern for academic or intellectual standards.” He questioned the competence of Black faculty and staff hired as a result of student protest—which included most Black faculty and staff at Harvard. He urged a move away from admitting “ghetto-type blacks” and toward favoring those possessed “of a strong preference for individualistic acculturation.” Like some other traditionalist critics of the Black campus movement, Kilson sought to portray himself as its truest friend through his unabashed and fearless, and evidently lone, insistence on rigor. But the *Harvard Bulletin* researched some of Kilson’s claims and reported that between 75 and 80 percent of Black students admitted in recent years “would not be categorized as disadvantaged,” and found as well that “Black students from disadvantaged backgrounds do equivalent work to that done by middle-class blacks, in terms of rank list and grade-point averages.”⁷¹

The *Bulletin* provided space for rebuttals, and a group of students answered with aplomb. They assailed the collective portrait of Black incompetence that Kilson had put forward. It is apparent, they argued, “that by making his generalizations, Kilson denies to Harvard blacks the very individuality which he accuses them of rejecting and which for himself he holds so dear. Blacks at Harvard are such a heterogeneous lot that only someone with the professor’s lively imagination could even conceive of the kinds of collective attitudes with which he associates us.” The students debunked his claims of lower Black qualifications by pointing to the (comparatively high) SAT scores of Black admits in the preceding five years. Much of their dispute mirrored larger debates about the meaning of Blackness in the aftermath of Black Power. For Kilson, “‘black solidarity behavior’ is a problem—an obstruction to high academic achievement and upward social mobility that must be eliminated before blacks can approach the nirvana of middle-class American society.” The students rejected this view, saying, “He genuinely believes, it seems, that there is no significance in cultural blackness unless it apes or imitates white cultural norms every step of the way.” They offered a strong defense of cultural pluralism and the mutually constituted nature of Black and American identities. But their chief intervention was in vigorously questioning the portrait he had painted of them—as provincial, anti-intellectual, and victims and purveyors of groupthink.⁷²

Law professor Derrick Bell, too, offered a rebuttal, noting that Kilson had been sounding this alarm for several years. “Like a bawdy tune with lyrics one would dare not repeat in public,” Bell wrote, clearly fed up, “‘Martin’s Melodies’ sing almost gleefully of black

intellectual unreadiness in terms so broadly indicting the race that no sophisticated white would dare repeat them, however much he might agree with their expressions. It is no surprise that University publications have given Kilson's statements so much space. One can almost see the advocates of meritocracy rejoicing each time Kilson takes aim at the shortcomings of blacks in academe. . . . It may be that Professor Kilson is trying to help black students by his repeated public attacks. But as every social scientist should know, oppressed minorities are burdened by doubts of self-worth. Public criticism by a member of that group (particularly one as eminent as Professor Kilson) that focuses on shortcomings and ignores positive values will be used by the majority to justify continuance rather than cessation of oppressive behavior."⁷³

On another occasion when Bell rose to the defense of Black students after a series of public criticism by Kilson, he noted that the Black community at Harvard had tried for a long time to ignore "Kilson's vicious slanders." But Bell had come to worry that administrators might mistake their silence for support.⁷⁴ Kilson was persistent. He reprised the essays as "The Black Experience at Harvard," for the *New York Times Magazine* a few months later, and in the first sentence declared that Black students "have reached a crisis" created "in large measure by black separatism and militancy." The essay is filled with lament for the glory days of his college years, and alarm and despair over what he sees as Black intolerance and failure on campus. "Since 1971," he claimed without an illustration, "the pressures for conformity to black-solidarity behavior have been well-nigh overwhelming at Harvard." But more damaging was his assertion that "black-solidarity forces are distinctly anti-intellectual and antiachievement in orientation," citing as evidence student pride in participating in "community affairs" and "posturing 'Black power' in relation to political issues like Harvard's Gulf Oil investments in Africa."

After the *Times* essay, Ewart Guinier offered a series of forceful responses in various media. "What has made the situation at Harvard so sadly disturbing is that, while white antagonists of Afro-American studies have remained almost completely silent, one or two Negro professors . . . have engaged in an orgy of rage against us." He regretted waiting so long to answer the attacks and contended that it had interfered with faculty recruitment.⁷⁵ Subsequently, in what became a final public embarrassment and major campus conflict, and in defiance of the recommendations by several committees, the administration excluded the department and Guinier from the planning and creation of the Du Bois Institute, sparking an outpouring of criticism by Professor Guinier on the eve of his retirement. Henry Rosovsky was dean of the college, and Derek Bok was president. Guinier released a strongly worded nineteen-page statement in which he accused Bok and Rosovsky of undermining the department, and surrendering to "forces supporting white supremacy within Harvard." There had been no success in making joint appointments ever since the McCree committee had recommended it as a recruitment tool. Guinier had long opposed this strategy, saying it deterred those interested in African American studies, and noted that he found it "absurd" to grant such a leading role to departments with histories of racist scholarship and all-white hiring practices. Still, they had tried to hire John Blassingame jointly, but the history department had rejected him; and according to Guinier, when they tried to hire him exclusively in Afro-American studies the university failed to provide sufficient research funds. Bok and

Rosovsky termed Guinier's words "intemperate" and countered that they were seeking to strengthen the department. Bok appointed Andrew Brimmer, a Black former member of the Federal Reserve, to head a panel charged with developing the Du Bois Institute.⁷⁶

But the exclusion of the department from the planning process for the institute also galvanized students, leading the Du Bois Institute Student Coalition to conduct a sit-in at Massachusetts Hall. For his part, Guinier accused administrators of abandoning "any pretense of manners, of courtesy, or civility in relating the Afro-American Studies Department." Their intent, he insisted, was "to hold black people up to ridicule and humiliation and, finally, to isolate and pistol whip us into submission as the entire Harvard community watches. Once and for all," he declared, "they want to teach us a lesson, to show us our place."⁷⁷ As a result of these heated and widely publicized conflicts, lack of administrative support, and divergent views of how to develop African American studies, the department at Harvard remained very small until the early 1990s. Given that the positive media attention paid to Black studies at Harvard in later years helped to raise the profile of the department and likely enhanced the stature of the discipline in academe more generally, one can imagine that the spate of negative stories penned by Kilson and others in the 1970s fueled a broader skepticism of, if not contempt for, African American studies in general.⁷⁸

The Harvard story seemed to confirm a discourse of crisis in, even failure of, Black studies that permeated discussions and representations of the field in the 1970s. A headline in the *Wall Street Journal* blared: "Black Studies Founder as Student Interest Declines and Faculties Grow More Skeptical." The *Washington Post* announced: "Once Popular Black Studies Now Attracting Only a Handful of Students."⁷⁹ Black studies "is in deep trouble," declared the *Black Scholar* under the headline "Politics of the Attack on Black Studies," which at least reframed the character of the crisis. In that article, Robert Allen found that three hundred programs had closed in the early 1970s, a dramatic but inflated figure.⁸⁰ As the fate of open admissions at the City University of New York demonstrated, widespread budget cuts during the recession of the mid-1970s had a devastating effect on new programs. At a 1975 conference titled "The Future of Black Studies," with more than a hundred program directors in attendance, all but one reported financial cutbacks.⁸¹ "To survive and succeed," one critic noted, "Black programs required the support of the very structures they were designed to counterpose. This basic contradiction was not properly analyzed, understood or confronted." As a result, the new units were underfunded, given low status, and marginalized, and predictably this negatively affected student perceptions.⁸²

Challenges to the discipline's academic legitimacy were common throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Leaders in Black studies regularly complained about the lack of support and acceptance from administrators and colleagues and the seemingly unending quest to "prove" its legitimacy. Carlene Young wrote, "Afro-American studies have been forced to struggle against continual assaults on their limited resources and structural integrity while maintaining strong academic programs, highly qualified faculty, and good enrollments." Moreover, she lamented, "there are still too many in the Academy who resent the 'intrusion' and, as a consequence, agitate for the demise of Afro-American Studies."⁸³

The Ford Foundation's relationship to African American studies illustrates how the desire

for self-determination and African American intellectual leadership profoundly shaped the early Black studies movement. Ford began an association with Black studies in 1968 when it funded a high-profile conference at Yale University. The young radicals Nathan Hare, Ron Karenga, and Gerald McWorter debated professors David Brion Davis, Robert Ferris Thompson, and Martin Kilson, showcasing the generational and political cleavages and challenges in the early Black studies movement. Most people at Ford held a conservative or traditionalist view of Black studies' best path—much like Rosovsky's at Harvard—and urged this view in grant making. “I would not favor support for the notion that only Blacks can teach or understand this subject, and that therefore the Department of Black studies must be separately organized,” a top official informed foundation president McGeorge Bundy. “I fear it will become a cultural war camp, marked by myth-making and collective self-deception.”⁸⁴ As we have seen, many liberal leaders of this era conflated departmental status with a commitment to racial separatism and, as the quote further suggests, had deep reservations about the intellectual legitimacy of African American studies. Roger Wilkins, a young African American program officer, urged Bundy to include the “younger and angrier Black scholars” in the advisory process. But as Farah Griffin has shown, Bundy instead heeded the advice of Sir Arthur Lewis, a Princeton-trained, Caribbean-born economist, who urged support for programs that aspired to the same standards as the established disciplines, as well as support for the production of more Black PhDs.⁸⁵

In 1969 Ford disbursed more than one million dollars to fourteen colleges, as well as to the Institute of the Black World, in order to help launch Black studies. A Ford-sponsored conference in Aspen, Colorado, in July 1970 dramatically illustrated the desire by Black scholars to assert control over the burgeoning field and to convey this stance to white philanthropists and scholars. Ford sponsored the Aspen conference in order to take stock of the new programs and examine, as one Ford official put it, “the intellectual underpinnings of black studies.” To the Ford official's dismay, however, much of the discussion at Aspen focused instead on “questions of control and the political and ideological performance of black studies.”⁸⁶ The conflict started before the conference had even begun, when Vincent Harding objected to the list of invitees—noting the absence of several key leaders in the Black studies movement and objecting to the inclusion of white scholars as “resource” people. “I thought the list of non-directors was a strange one,” he wrote to historian Edgar Toppin, whom Ford had asked to chair the event. “In light of the current intellectual and political mood among black people, I did not understand why there was a need to have any white scholars present to participate in a discussion on the future of Black studies,” Harding wrote. “And it seemed very insensitive to include two who had publicly expressed serious questions about whether black scholars ought to control the definition of the black experience.”⁸⁷

On the first day of the conference, Harding, Roscoe Brown, Andrew Billingsley, St. Clair Drake, and others issued a statement as the “Black Caucus of the Aspen Black Studies Seminar.” “Of major concern to us is the fact that Black expertise and leadership did not have the major role in conceptualizing and organizing the conference,” they wrote, calling Ford's approach “reminiscent of the paternalistic ways in which White America has habitually treated Blacks throughout American history.” Billingsley followed with his own stinging statement to

the Ford officials, whom he lauded for supporting Black education, but criticized in this case for adopting “American white ways of doing things.” “We do not mean to impugn the motives of anybody associated with it, but we do mean to say, as strongly as we can, that the effect was damaging.” He “recommended very strongly that this mistake not be repeated again.”⁸⁸

Ford interpreted the professors’ protest as either political posturing or a rejection of integration. James Armsey, who as Ford’s director of higher education in the 1960s had barred grants to segregated universities, prompting several private southern schools, like Duke, Emory, and Vanderbilt, to desegregate, answered with a speech defending the foundation. “You spent the first morning censuring the Ford Foundation in connection with this seminar,” he began. The whole point of the conference, in his view, was for Ford grantees “to get together, compare notes, swap experiences, review problems, exchange learnings and consider plans for the future.” Its success or failure, he claimed, depended on the participants. In his view, Ford organized the conference in response to the needs and desires of Black studies directors, although he conceded that they should have hired a Black-owned agency to organize the gathering. But then Armsey switched to offense. Referring to criticism of his opening night welcome, he said, “It was inevitable, I suppose, that my remarks would be considered either paternalistic or patronizing. . . . In the scheme of things today, there appears to be no way in which the conduct of a white person in my position can be considered open, above board, and honest.” He accused the Black caucus of engaging in “repetitive catharsis,” of going “through these rituals in part to remind the white man of his guilt.” “That may be a useful purpose at times,” he declared, “but through overuse it can become self-defeating. By these tactics, you are driving your real white allies into isolation and opposition.” His final jab was the statement that the “only guilt” he felt in connection with Black studies was in relaxing “the normal standards of intellectual rigor in recommending grants.”⁸⁹

A program officer chimed in that he was “deeply disturbed at the separatist philosophy” of several participants at Aspen, singling out Harding and Billingsley. There was certainly a problem of translation at Aspen—as Ford officials took literally Armstead Robinson’s statement that the Black studies movement “represents the death of integration as a vital political imperative for Blacks in this country.” Ford was obviously not going to fund “the death of integration,” but Robinson’s longer comments make clear that he was referring to a redefinition of Black identity, not an abandonment of desegregation.⁹⁰

The directors of Black studies programs at Aspen voiced support for Harding’s and Billingsley’s critiques—although Ford officials hinted that some among the old guard, notably George Kelsey and Benjamin Quarles, had misgivings. Nevertheless, they all expressed surprise and dismay to discover that Ford had no intention of continuing to fund collegiate Black studies programs. Ford claimed to have always viewed its grants to Black studies programs as temporary, but their loss had a significant, often unanticipated, impact.⁹¹ Ford believed that universities should assume the role of funding their own academic programs, but it is also plausible that Ford was disinclined to renew robust support in the immediate aftermath of Aspen. In any event, Ford continued to offer funding to Black students in PhD programs, which it had begun in 1969. Ford’s support for Black studies resumed and expanded in the 1980s and beyond, benefiting not only major research universities such as Berkeley,

Cornell, Harvard, UCLA, and Madison but also the field's two major professional organizations: the National Council of Black Studies, and the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History (formerly the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History). Importantly, in the 1980s, Ford also expanded fellowships for underrepresented minorities, which have played a significant part in funding young Black scholars.⁹²

In addition to external skepticism about the academic rigor or legitimacy of Black studies, internal debates arose about the role of political ideology and activism in Black studies. Would Black studies follow the political inspiration and aspirations of its student founders, or would it move in a more traditional academic direction? Could it meet the expectation of some of its student founders and advance the Black revolution? Some professors pushed back, even when they often supported the larger thrust of the Black student struggle. A student in one of St. Clair Drake's classes at Stanford once asked him why they were sitting around talking about problems instead of being out there solving them. Drake answered, "There are intellectual tasks and there are street tasks for the black revolution, and my temperament and the university environment are more suited for the intellectual tasks."⁹³ During a visit to the University of Illinois in Urbana, Charles Hamilton witnessed an exchange that captured the chasm between militant students and traditionally trained scholars. A student asked, "Is the purpose of this program to help the student really change the society? Are we going to use the technology of the society to overthrow it?" Another student chimed in: "Are we going to have a program that teaches us how to make a buck, or turn this society upside down?" The Black professor responded, "We are not going to set up a separate university. After all, we are Americans."⁹⁴

Education scholar Reginald Wilson endorsed the political mission of Black studies in a speech at Wayne State University in 1971. Black studies "must be seen" as a "direct attack against the cultural imperialism of white scholarship and the deliberate oppression by white educational institutions of Black youth," he declared. Anticipating the later critique of multiculturalism as depoliticizing, he declared, "*I do not*, therefore, perceive of Black studies like any other ethnic studies: that is, providing more background information, resurrecting the history of a neglected minority, making the educational experience more relevant to a particular subculture, and instilling pride in the members of that subculture. All of these things are fine *and* necessary, but they are not enough." In the end, Wilson saw "the real role of Black studies as nothing less than the revolutionizing of the American educational experience," and felt that "Black educators must see the school as the center for community action and a resource for effecting social change."⁹⁵

But as the incorporation of Black studies took root, many scholars developed a more nuanced view of the relation between academic work and politics and began to pull back from the intense battles between Black nationalists, Marxists, and integrationists that had roiled many campuses. Roscoe Brown, the first director of the Institute of African American Affairs at New York University, felt that the question of whether Black studies should have an ideological mission had been a "major stumbling block in the development and analysis of black studies programs." He rejected the notion that Black studies could exist outside politics, since Black studies itself had forced the recognition that intellectual production had ideological content. He argued instead that it should not "espouse a specific ideology" such as

integration or Black nationalism.⁹⁶

Carlos Brossard at the University of Pittsburgh reported “strong interpersonal warfare around ideological differences and national backgrounds of Blacks,” and identified the main binaries as Marxists versus Black nationalists, reformers versus revolutionaries, or academic-focused institution-builders versus community-oriented activist-types. In many respects, these differences were “healthy” and often productive for the growth of the discipline, but in some instances, he offered, they also “came with acrimony.” Some left-leaning scholars came to see the incidence of nonpublishing cultural nationalists serving long reigns as department chairs as a sign of the intentional marginalization of the field. Yet at the same time, Nathan Hare resigned from the *Black Scholar* in the mid-1970s, complaining that the journal had been taken over by “instant Marxists” and that Black nationalists were getting insufficient exposure.⁹⁷

These ideological conflicts intruded into the new journals and professional organizations for the field. At a meeting of the African Heritage Studies Association at Wayne State in the 1970s, Gerald McWorter, a Marxist sociologist and activist, presented “a sharp polemic against” Stokely Carmichael and poet Haki Madhubuti. He remembers the session as so heated and jam-packed that other sessions at the conference were cancelled. In the morning, McWorter debated Madhubuti, and in the afternoon, he debated Carmichael. It was “very intense,” McWorter, now Abdul Alkalimat, remembers, and “kept going all day long.” In his view, the key political question was: “Is the battle we face a fight against racism or is the battle a fight against imperialism?”⁹⁸ Alkalimat did not shy from ideological confrontation. A couple of years later, he organized a Chicago-based Illinois Council for Black Studies, and when in 1982 Illinois hosted the annual conference of the National Council of Black Studies, and Alkalimat won election to its board, the nationalist-dominated body challenged the tally and ultimately succeeded in keeping him off. To many this appeared unfair, and according to Rhett Jones, many scholars “abandoned organized Black Studies entirely, others left the national organization—now viewed as nationalist controlled—and concentrated their energies at the state level or on individual African-American Studies units.”⁹⁹ Many worried that instead of being enriched by this ideological fervor, the new discipline had been weakened.

Gradually, as the demands of incorporation into the academy became felt, and as the cohort who fought for Black studies either moved on or were pushed out, the sense that Black studies was serving broader Black communities and remained committed to a broader political mission began to fade. This was not true everywhere, and it was an uneven process. Public universities in California experienced this shift in the most wrenching and acute way, as student and scholar activists on so many campuses were barred from organizing Black and Third World studies units. An ex-student dramatized it this way: “When we left, Black studies lost its political edge. It was taken over by either poverty pimp-type hustlers, or straight traditional academic types. Either way, that’s not what we fought for.”¹⁰⁰

Several activists came to see Black studies units as structured to quell student militancy, with chairs caught in the cross fire between disappointed, militant students and the administration. Armstead Robinson, a leader of the struggle at Yale, felt the programs that were created were “the subverted products of what Black students were trying to produce after Martin Luther King died.”¹⁰¹ In the early 1970s, a journalist found “most black studies

programs in California have settled into an uneasy but working relationship in the academic world,” but “in the process, black studies lost most of its most strident supporters, many of whom now brand the programs as ‘meaningless.’ ” Former Howard and San Francisco State professor Nathan Hare became a leading proponent of the idea that Black studies had failed to fulfill its mission. “As it is typically taught, black studies is not particularly relevant,” he said. “It has to relate to everyday life, but instead it’s the same old abstract kind of learning.” He felt it should “express the ideology, goals and thought of the black struggle.”¹⁰² An assessment of the field in 1971 found that “many programs which grew out of struggles for ‘autonomy’ and ‘nation-building’ have already been sucked back fully into the dominating university structures.”¹⁰³

Student activist Jack Daniels had coauthored the widely circulated “Black Paper for Black Studies” a seventy-page prospectus for a School for Black Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, which advocated a unit deeply connected to the Black community, Black liberation, and nation building. But a few years later, after becoming a professor, he felt that “the great debate” between scholarship and activism was “stretching black studies’ internal fibers to the breaking point.” The political origins of Black studies were necessary, Professor Daniels now declared, but they had become an “albatross and must be removed from the neck of Black Studies.” He argued that the discipline would ultimately rise or fall based not on its activist merits or profile but on its ability to mark out new intellectual terrain and produce compelling scholarship. “Black studies is indeed one of the most significant challenges ever presented to American colleges and universities.” The critical need was not for a master plan, or new theories, or greater ideological warfare, but “basic research.” There “simply cannot be viable Black studies instruction or viable Black studies community programs until viable basic research furnishes the data for instruction and application.” He said the shortage of faculty was real, but that the only response was to develop more. “New trails must be blazed. . . . Intellectual and spiritual giants have preceded us,” he declared, “and we must heed their legacies.” He advocated abandoning the ever present reactive stance—we all know the limitations of white scholarship, he said; now we must become the agenda setters, forget Moynihan, Glazer, and the like, and make ourselves the new experts.¹⁰⁴

As they continued the effort to give meaning to Black studies, scholars also focused on institution building in order to ensure the field’s survival. Documenting the rise of the field was part of this impulse. An influential early effort was Nick Aaron Ford’s *Black Studies: Threat or Challenge*, published in 1973. His attention to white and Black campuses and selection of two-year community colleges, as well as elite four-year institutions, as case studies conveyed the breadth of the movement and its extensive national impact. He collected data on more than two hundred programs, identified seven major objectives for Black studies, and argued that it was a “threat” in that it challenged racist education and scholarship. Additionally, Ford’s insistence on the long history of Black scholarship and his discussion of such pioneering scholars as historian and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, historian Carter G. Woodson, sociologist Charles E. Johnson, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, historian Benjamin Quarles, philosopher Alain Locke, and others helped to raise awareness among a new generation that Black studies was by no means “new,” and that it in fact rested on a few generations of Black

scholarship.¹⁰⁵ Ford found that most instructors in Black studies programs were without rank or tenure, but another study ten years later found marked improvement in both indices.¹⁰⁶ Since its creation, there have been numerous efforts to measure the size of the emerging discipline, with varying estimates of the number of Black studies centers, programs, and departments. In 1974 *Black Scholar* editor and historian Robert L. Allen reported that the five hundred colleges that had provided full-scale Black studies programs three years earlier had dropped to two hundred. A survey of the field conducted in 1983 found that, “at its zenith, the number of programs and departments reached no more than 300 formally organized units.”¹⁰⁷ A 1995 article declared the existence of seven hundred ethnic studies programs in the United States. Numerous other tabulations and surveys have been done and continue to pour forth.

A professional structure for African American studies was emerging, exemplified by the formation of the National Council of Black Studies (NCBS) in 1975. The NCBS originated from the efforts of faculty in North Carolina, under the leadership of Bertha Maxwell, a rare female leader in the early Black studies movement. They endeavored to form a national body and had a series of organizational meetings in Atlanta, Boulder, Columbus, and Princeton. Another stream of activity that ultimately flowed into the NCBS emerged from a group of Black studies directors who first met at a conference Rosslyn, Virginia, in 1972 and subsequently formed their group into the National Africana Accreditation and Review Panel. The program for the first NCBS conference in 1977 showed the preoccupation in the early years with professionalization and gaining legitimacy, rather than scholarship, which was the focus of only one session at the weekend event. Other sessions at the conference were titled “The Case for and against the Standardization of Black Studies,” “Evaluating Black Studies Programs: Establishing the Critical Ground Rules,” and “Building a Black United Front: Black Studies and the Black Community.” Illustrating the continuing male face of the field, the program listed seventy-two male speakers and sixteen women. In line with an emerging consensus among scholars, the NCBS took the official position that departmental status was the preferred structure for African American studies and urged other units “to establish the long-range goal of achieving departmental status.” Indeed, more than twenty-five years later, the Afro-American studies program at Yale, which was often touted in the 1970s as a success compared to that of Harvard, achieved departmental status.¹⁰⁸

Reflecting the new ethos of self-determination and racial solidarity, this period in U.S. history saw a rapid proliferation of Black professional organizations, and academia helped lead the way. Black caucuses formed in the traditional disciplines would play a major role in opening up opportunities and visibility for scholars of color. The National Conference of Black Political Scientists was formed in 1969 at Southern University, the largest public HBCU in the country. The Association of Black Sociologists was founded in 1970 as the Caucus of Black Sociologists. The Association of Black Psychologists was founded in San Francisco in 1968 and consists of professionals rather than academics, but its goals and ethos very much reflect the era’s fusion of Black nationalist politics and professional commitments. The mission statement of the Association of Black Anthropologists, formed in 1970, continues to embody the transformative effects of Black studies movement. In 2010 the Association’s Web site declared that the Association “will achieve its mission by ensuring that people studied by

anthropologists are not only objects of study but active makers and/or participants in their own history. We intend to highlight situations of exploitation, oppression and discrimination. Further it is our objective to analyze and critique social science theories that misrepresent the reality of exploited groups while at the same time construct more adequate theories to interpret the dynamics of oppression.” This mission expresses a strong critique of the history of anthropology in the United States and a reformulation of its mission.¹⁰⁹

To be sure, the professional organization of Black scholars began well before the 1960s. The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History had been founded in 1915, and its *Journal of Negro History* and annual conferences greatly enhanced the development of scholarly collaboration and networking in the new discipline. Moreover, the College Language Association, an organization of Black college teachers of English and foreign languages, had been founded in 1937. A host of journals appeared in the 1970s to help anchor the field, including *The Black Scholar*, the *Western Journal of Black Studies*, and the *Journal of Black Studies*. These joined older journals from the long and thriving history of Black scholarship, such as the *Journal of Negro History*, *phylon*, and the *Journal of Negro Education*. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the *Journal of Negro Education* was indispensable to documenting the growth of Black studies and publishing a variety of perspectives on its organization and mission.

In sum, as the focus shifted from Black students to Black scholars in the making of African American studies, new styles, visions, and sensibilities took root. A cohort of Black faculty emerged after the building takeovers and sit-ins, and they fought to create Black studies in keeping with the vision, to some extent, of student activists. But it was not easy. These scholars faced administrative opposition, student pressure, and professional obligations. Unexpectedly, the seemingly never-ending battle of incorporation absorbed and drained the political energies of Black studies faculty, distracting attention from community leadership and other types of political engagement that Black student leaders had once envisioned as central to the project. As the years passed, new political tensions and debates emerged within the professional orbit of Black studies as scholars sought to figure out the best way to ease the battles, gain resources and personnel, and most important, win respect and recognition.