Reviewing the Revolt: Moving Toward a Historiography of the Black Campus Movement

by

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Abstract

A growing body of research examines the long black campus movement from various angles. In this article I discuss four recent volumes that critically frame the black campus movement, the institutions, and the people involved in pushing colleges and universities toward a more just space to live and study. Specifically, I review the recent work of Stephan Bradley, Wayne Glasker, Ibram X. Kendi, and Joy Ann Williamson to provide a window into this burgeoning research area. Although this discussion is not all-encompassing, I aim to provide a springboard for future research and discussion of how the black campus movement changed higher education, the Black Power Movement, and American society as a whole.

Stefan Bradley, Harlem Versus Columbia: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s, (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012)


This year the Department of Pan-African Studies at the University of Louisville (UL) celebrates its fortieth year of existence, which if one understands the history of the development of Black Studies programs and departments, is no small feat. Founded in 1973 as a response to the “pressure brought by black students and others who protested the distorted and Eurocentric social studies and humanities curriculum they [African American students] encountered” at the University of Louisville, the Department of Pan-African Studies (PAS) today stands as one of only twelve Black Studies programs in the nation to offer the doctoral degree in the discipline. Indeed, like many of its contemporaries, Louisville’s PAS Department was born out of the unrest of the what scholar Ibram X. Kendi (formerly Ibram H. Rogers) defines as the “Black Campus Movement” (BCM) that occurred “during the height of the black power movement.”

Locally, the push by campus and community activists for Black Studies courses that eventually led to the development and the institution of the Pan-African Studies Department at the University of Louisville, was led in part by student leader J. Blaine Hudson who later went on to earn a doctorate, and become chair of Louisville’s Pan-African Studies Department. He was instrumental in ushering the department through the period of transition from fledgling to one of the strongest Black Studies departments in the nation. Hudson went on to eventually serve as the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the university, solidifying his transition from student agitator to capable administrator. In her study of the civil rights movement in Louisville, Kentucky, historian Tracy K’Meyer characterizes the University of Louisville’s black student and campus movement as a truly grassroots effort spearheaded by students, like Hudson, who viewed their campus struggle as a larger part of the black revolution and the national student movement.

Despite its importance and centrality in the “reconstitution of higher education,” Kendi contends that the Black Campus Movement, which is a significant and in his estimation arguably the most important component of the Black Power movement, has been largely understudied and marginalized. Specifically, he argues that:

“The BCM should make up at least a chapter of any topically arranged examination, chronological narrative or study of the Black Power Movement, and (if applicable) an analysis of any person, organization or event of the Black Power Movement should show the full extent of that person, organization or event’s relationship to the BCM.”

Kendi defines the “Black Campus Movement,” as the battle black students and Black Student Unions instigated on college campuses throughout the nation in the late 1960s and 1970s in their efforts to transformation the American higher educational system. Many Black Power activists and icons, Kendi contends, “were groomed in the campus movements around the country,” and thus this connection warrants closer study and scrutiny of the Black Campus Movement than has been reflected in the larger body of literature that examines the black power movement to this date.
However, the Black Power Movement (BPM) itself has been vastly neglected until recently, if not altogether ignored in the historical record. At the root of the Black Power Movement, which lasted roughly from 1965 to 1975, were calls from black activists and Black Power ideologues for black people throughout the Diaspora to decide and determine their own social, cultural, and political destinies. Black Power activists did not ask for concessions, they demanded change, and rejected the gradualism that many of the young activists believed characterized the civil rights struggle. Because of the activists’ aggressive demands for change, and the less than conciliatory nature of the Black Power movement, which is often viewed as a stark departure from and in opposition to the perceived peaceful temperament of the civil rights movement, partially accounts for the dearth of critical scholarly analysis.

Yet, Peniel Joseph has asserted that the Black Power Movement’s iconography, in other words Black Power’s public persona – the clinched fist of the Black Power salute, the embrace of its cultural flourishes such as the donning of dashiki’s and natural hairstyles – has tended to obscure the complexity and efficacy of the movement. However, Joseph also suggests that while “the Black Power era was initially documented as part of the first wave of civil rights historiography,” it is in the “past fifteen years studies of the Black Power movement have grown in ambition, complexity, and breadth, culminating in a new subfield – Black Power Studies.” Black Power Studies, by definition, examines the movement within the larger context of “American and world history.”

Indeed, over the last fifteen years or so scholars have broadened our understanding of the Black Power movement by exploring its effect in local communities, on college campuses, in unions, in poverty programs, among black feminists, and in welfare rights struggles. By casting a wider net, historians have not only uncovered the movement’s depth and effectiveness, but also provided insightful analyses of its limitations and ineffectiveness. These works have helped historians move beyond presenting the movement as simply a “destructive, short-lived, and politically ineffective movement.” One thing that holds true in the new literature that attempts to redefine the era is that the Black Power movement, is despite its enigmatic nature, it was not a monolithic movement whose legacy can be categorized as having one particular effect or viewed through one specific lens.

Rather, Black Power Studies now encompass a more nuanced assessment of the successes, failures, and the legacy of the movement. Instead of juxtaposing the civil rights movement and Black Power movement against each other, scholars now embrace the “long Black Power movement” that traces the roots of the classical Black Power period (1966-1975) to postwar era activism and examines Black Power radicalism “side-by-side with nonviolent moderates.” Studies by Joseph, and other scholars such as: Komozi Woodard, Robert Self, Donna March, and Devin Fergus among others, have enhanced our understanding of how Black Power on the local, national, and international level.
With the increased volume of worthy scholarly analysis and examinations of the Black Power movement that now comprise the field of Black Power Studies, does Kendi’s observation of the Black Campus Movement and its relegation to the margins of Black Power Studies literature still hold true? While giving credence to Kendi’s original argument, the intent of this essay is not to address the issue of marginalization of the Black Campus Movement in Black Power Studies literature. Furthermore, since writing this article as a graduate student at Temple University, Kendi, now an Assistant Professor of Africana Studies at the University of Albany-SUNY, has helped to fill the void he once critiqued with his own monograph on the black campus movement entitled, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972*. With that said, several monographs on the Black Campus Movement and black campus activism have preceded and followed Kendi’s study. This essay is not intended to serve as a comprehensive analysis of the entire canon of black campus and black student activism literature. However, this essay focuses its examination on several research projects to try and understand how these studies approach the narrative of black student activism and how the Black Campus Movement has emerged in recent text. How do these texts engage the Black Campus Movement, black campus activism and the black campus revolt during the height of the Black Power movement and how do we begin to move toward a more comprehensive examination of the historiography of this movement?

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, several studies chronicling black students’ demands for black studies departments and institutional changes on campuses began to emerge in the immediate wake of the era of the black student revolt. The activists involved movement usually wrote these accounts or those close to it like Dikran Karagueuzian. Karagueuzian served as editor of San Francisco State College’s student newspaper, *The Gator*, during the explosive events that took place on the campus during the fall and winter of 1968-1969.14 In 1966 black students at San Francisco State College (SF State) organized the first black student organization to actually use the term, Black Student Union (BSU).15 Additionally, by 1967 black students at SF State were “operating and controlling the first ever Black Studies program in American history.”16 Karagueuzian chronicles his version of the events that led to the SF State campus becoming the “first to be occupied by police on a continuous basis over the course of several months,” in *Blow It Up: The Black Student Revolt at San Francisco State and the Emergence of Dr. Hayakawa*.17

Karagueuzian’s account is only one of several early studies of the movement: James McEvoy and Abraham Miller’s edited volume, *Black Power and Student Rebellion*, Floyd Barbour, ed., *The Black Power Revolt: A Collection of Essays*, Cushing Stout and David Grossvogel, *Divided We Stand: Reflections on the Crisis at Cornell*, George Napper’s *Blacker Than Thou: The Struggle for Campus Unity* are a few of these seminal text that provided foundational analysis of black student activism. Scholarship of the movement continued to emerge well into the 1980s and 1990s. This essay will focus on a several studies published in the 2000s that coincide with the development of the subfield of Black Power Studies.
Wayne Glasker’s analysis of black campus activism, *Black Students in the Ivory Tower: African American Activism at the University of Pennsylvania, 1967-1990*, is a narrative history that chronicles the black student movement the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) and the ways in which Black Power ideology influenced the campus activism initiated by African American students at Penn. Glasker argues that while African American students at Penn embraced Black Nationalism, they were not “genuine separatists,” instead they engaged a cultural pluralists ideology that allowed them to attempt to sustain their own cultural and ethnic identity while they sought out opportunities for upward mobility and economic advancement.18

Glasker’s study is influenced by his own experiences as an African American student at Penn during this period. He traces the way that black student activism took shape on campus, and how black students, particularly through their organization founded in 1967 the Society of African and Afro-American Students (SAAS), pushed back against notions of assimilation. The push back, headed by the SAAS (which changed its name to the Black Student League in 1971) came in the form of sit-in protests to force the administration to increase the enrollment of African American students and hire more black professors and administrators. Influenced like most black college activists during this period by campus activists at San Francisco State, black students at Penn also agitated for black studies curriculum taught by black professors and controlled by black students.

Although not separatists in the traditional sense, as Glasker argues black students at Penn insisted on having a cultural space of their own. They continued to reject any inclination to assimilate and out of all of their demands, the most radical that emerged was their petition for an all-black dormitory. While the administration rejected their mandate for separate living quarters for only black students, that demand did led to the creation of the W.E.B. Du Bois house in 1972 which though not exclusively black was “open to all freshmen and sophomores who have a particular interest in and commitment to black culture, and particular need for the educational opportunities and services which the Center and its environment will provide.”19

Glasker’s study provides a significant analysis of the “impact of the Black Power ideology, the Black Arts movement, and black pride on the African American student movement,” at an Ivy League institution.20 Connecting the nationwide black Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s with the activism of black students at Penn, Glasker suggestion that black students at Penn fit neither the traditional conception of Black Nationalism with their rejection of assimilation, yet they never fully embraced separatism expands our understanding of cultural pluralism and contestation within the context of the black student movement that emerged in Black Power era. Moreover, it forces scholars of the black student movement to consider to what degree were those particular ideologies more pronounced in the black student bodies at Ivy League institutions versus other colleges and universities?
Stephan Bradley’s monograph, *Harlem Versus Columbia: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s*, examines the rise of Black Student Power, student and community activism, and institutional power, privilege, and control at Columbia University in New York City. Bradley suggests that student activism in 1968-1969 at Columbia provided a template for the protests that took place at other Ivies – Harvard, Yale, Cornell, and Penn – in 1969. As a town-gown study of black student activism, Bradley’s work in contrast to Glasker’s study of black activism at an Ivy League institution, explores the issues of power, privilege, spatial control and the way in which Columbia University imposed “its will on the seemingly defenseless black communities of Morningside Heights and neighboring Harlem,” in its desire to construct a gymnasium in these nearby neighborhoods.21 Bradley, in a way that the Glasker study does not, engages the relationship between the student activists, the institution, and the community in which it inhabited.

Bradley begins his account by revealing the early relationship between Columbia University and the Morningside Heights and Harlem communities. The narrative then progresses into a recounting of the coalition between the white and black student organizations, particularly the Students’ Afro-American Society (SAS) and the Students for the a Democratic Society (SDS), and their struggle against what the activists term “gym crow.” Both groups, in line with their own agendas, focused their attention on stopping the construction of the gymnasium in Morningside Park to “draw attention of the world to what they felt were Columbia’s racist acts concerning the university’s expansion into the nearby community and its unfair policies regarding student participation in university affairs.”22

On April 23, 1968, white and black students took over Hamilton Hall, but once inside the SDS and the SAS dalliance eventually splintered over ideologically differences. Black students, influenced by Black Power ideology, and specifically visits by Black Power advocates Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, decided that it was in the best interest of SAS and the black community in which they were fighting on behalf of to work separate from SDS.23 Eventually the SAS was able to stop the university from encroaching on the Morningside Heights and Harlem communities. With their newly realized “black student power,” black student activists were able to demand cultural accountability on the part of the university for increased enrollment of African American students, black studies courses, and an ambitious goal of a black studies institute.

Bradley does several things well in *Harlem vs. Columbia* that is particularly important to our understanding of the student movement at Columbia in the late 1960s, and largely informs our perception of black student activism during the Black Power era. First it offers an exploration of the relationship between the black campus activists and the Harlem community. Black student activists, and in particular, black campus activists understood the importance of their accountability to the community. Also, Bradley’s analysis of how black students and community activists were able to successfully challenge and thwart the university’s plans for expansion is a clear example of the impact of black student power in the late 1960s.
Lastly, Bradley’s nuanced description of the interplay between black and white student protestors on Columbia’s campus highlights the manner in which “black people could use their race, the race of their allies, and the race of their opponent to advance goals such as the end to gym construction and the increased enrollment of black students.”

In *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965-1975* Joy Ann Williamson argues that “black students, bolstered by Black Power, demanded fundamental changes to campus curricula, polices, and structures.” Her study examines the ways in which black students used Black Power principles in their struggle for recognition and access at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her investigation is a case study of the rise and development of black cultural consciousness on a predominately white campus. While Williamson admits that identifying the black students’ demands at the University of Illinois during the late 1960s and early 1970s as an “outgrowth of Black Power is not surprising,” nor unique in an examination of black student activism during this period, she does however, offer a critical understanding of the ideological development of Black Power consciousness and how black students engaged the philosophy in their efforts to attack institutional racism at the university.

Though the black student movement at the University of Illinois was very similar to those that took place at other colleges and universities across the nation, Williamson acknowledges four essential factors that made the movement at Illinois unique. First, despite its Midwest location, the Champaign-Urbana area “was southern in its attitudes toward race.” Secondly, the majority of black students at the university were from Chicago’s west and south sides. Third, their experience growing up in Chicago, in a defacto segregated and highly racially charged environment had an impact on their activism. Fourth, black students had “an unusual amount of influence on the nature of reform at Illinois and were invited to participate in university recruitment efforts and sit on university committee.” Williamson suggests that this level of access and input on the decision-making process was unprecedented.

Williamson portrayal of black student protest at Illinois is not simply a survey of black student activism during the Black Power movement. Using extensive interviews from former administrators, faculty members, and most importantly the students, Williamson is able to trace the transformation in the consciousness of African American students as they shifted their orientation from “Negro to Black” as indicated in the title of one of the book’s six chapters. Before establishing the Black Student Association in 1967, black students’ primary vehicles for activism consisted of the campus chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE). In sync with the narrative of the national CORE organization’s transition from championing a strictly civil rights agenda to the organization’s embrace of Black Power activism, Williamson recounts the campus’s CORE chapter’s shift to “an exclusively black organization working for Black community concerns.”

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A flood of African American students arrived on campus in 1968, and a special program demanded by the black students who were already enrolled at the university which was created specifically with the intention to increase black student presence on campus helped with recruitment. That program, the Special Educational Opportunities Program (SEOP), and their arrival according to Williamson created an unintended consequence for the university’s administration – the amplification of Black Power on the campus. Williamson then suggest that increase “of five hundred black students” emboldened the ranks and with their newfound power “no longer hoped for anything; instead they demanded everything.” Those demands that resulted in the unprecedented access that Williamson alluded to eventually helped to bring about the institutional reform that black students at Illinois sought. The decline of the Black Power movement, as well as the fractionalization of the black student body impacted the black student movement, yet it left a tangible legacy at the University of Illinois in a way that demonstrated “the power of a social movement in an institution.” Through her examination of the students’ use of Black Power as an ideological instrument to institute change on campus, Williamson offers scholars of the black campus movement, Black Power movement, and social movements in general a way to examine how the Black Power movement and students influenced by the movement impacted “the nature of higher educational reform and the particular reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s.”

Similarly, Ibram X. Kendi’s study of black student revolt, The Black Campus Movement: The Radical Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972, is also an exploration of the ways in which black student activists were at the center of higher educational reform during the Black Power era. Specifically, Kendi posits that African American students were able to “succeed in pushing into higher education a profusion of racial reforms – in the form of people, programs, and literature,” and that while not “revolutionizing higher education,” the students did successfully alter the racial dynamics of higher education.

Kendi’s distinctive study of black campus activism serves as the first examination of the movement that attempts to assess the movement as whole, and not simply focus on individual campuses or particular regions. In fact, as previously discussed, by defining the activism of black students on college campuses as the “black campus movement,” Kendi seeks to frame their activism within the context of the campus. Black youth, and more precisely, black students had always engaged in activism. Yet in his analysis, Kendi attempts to disentangle the threads of black student activism and rather than focusing on students who were involved in off-campus community activism and organizing, instead he offers a fresh perspective of black campus activists by considering the ways in which the students applied their activism on the college campus.
Moreover, for so long studies of the Black Freedom Movement that have engaged student activism have centered on the activism and heroics of black students not as students, but as members of organizations, and as community organizers – all important themes of analyses – but in doing so they have neglected the duality of their role as “student” activists in the struggle. Rarely have those studies thoroughly examined or unpacked what it meant to be an activist-student engaged in struggles to transform higher education during the apex of the Black Power Movement on their respective campuses. He argues “this late 1960s Black Power campus struggle represented a profound ideological, tactical, and spatial shift from early 1960s off-campus civil rights student confrontations.” In focusing on “the struggle among black student nationalists at historically white and black institutions to reconstitute higher education” Kendi also suggest that similar to the Black Arts Movement and the Black Feminist Movement, the Black Campus Movement should be viewed in the same manner – as its own social movement.35

By 1965, Kendi argues, “there were at least four entrenched elements that had long undergirded the racial constitution of higher education.” He defines those elements as: the moralized contraption, the standardization of exclusion, normalized mask of whiteness, and ladder altruism. The “moralized contraption”, the standard at all historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) used rules and regulations to restrict the students’ freedom and to encourage assimilation. The “standardization of exclusion” barred blacks from positions of power in higher education, as well as marginalized and prohibited black studies curricula from historically white colleges and universities (HWCU) and HBCU’s. The “normalized mask of whiteness” maintained white superiority by disparaging non-European subjects of study and “racializing” European scholarship. Lastly, “ladder altruism” promoted individual educational advancement among African American students as the pathway for the advancement of the entire race. While black students had always waged war against these racial precepts as Kendi explains in his early chapters describing the “Long Black Student Movement,” by 1965 black students had begun to create “pressure groups” in the form black student unions and associations to formally and systematically attack these racial barriers in higher education.36

Throughout the rest of the narrative, Kendi paints a picture of a continuum of black campus activism beginning with a history of black higher education in America, and the New Negro and Civil Rights phases of the Long Black Student Movement. From there he chronicles the development of the Black Campus Movement and the emergence of the Black Power movement – the political, social, and cultural ideology that guided campus activists. Kendi chronicles the myriad of events that helped inform the consciousness of the students such as the assassinations of Malcolm X, the Watts Rebellion, and the activism, writings, and speeches of black radicals such as Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panther Party.37 He rounds out the study with a narrative of the Black Campus Movement on various campuses, organizing and protest on those campuses, as well as the hostility and barriers students faced in their organizing efforts. Lastly, Kendi offers some commentary on the 21st Century state of black studies, higher education, and the legacy of the Black Campus Movement.
What *The Black Campus Movement* offers in addition to being the first expansive historical analysis of black campus activists, is the inclusion of activists and activism at HBCU’s as well as providing an extended historical context for the activism that the other studies in this paper discuss. This activism that constitutes the Black Campus Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s though distinct and its own social movement, did not emerge out of a vacuum, and Kendi is successful in making that connection.

As newer historical studies chronicling this movement emerge, such as Martha Biondi’s *The Black Revolution on Campus*, which is similar to *The Black Campus Movement*, surveys the larger black student movement and its impact on institutional reform of the racist politics of higher education there is still, like any area of inquiry, room for growth and new studies chronicling black student rebellion and the Black Campus Movement. By examining a limited sampling of the corresponding text, I hope that this is the beginning of a larger discourse among historians of the movement. Hopefully as the works chronicling the black student revolt expand, scholars in the field will begin to craft an in depth historiography to show the trajectory of scholarship in the field and that will encourage and inspire other scholars to explore the new avenues, so that a movement that Ibram Kendi once described as understudied, will continue to reflect its importance in the future examinations of the Black Power movement and in Black Power Studies. Finally, we should not simply study this movement but discuss this growing scholarship and the changes brought about by these students with the current generation of college students so that they understand the importance of this history and the role that they may play to continue pushing higher education toward a more just campus.

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Endnotes


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.


9 Ibid.


Ibid.


Dikran Karagueuzian, Blow it Up! The Black Student Revolt at San Francisco State

Rogers, The Black Campus Movement, 77.

Ibid.


Ibid, 173.


22 Ibid, 5.

23 Ibid, 69-75.

24 Ibid, 188.


27 Ibid, 3.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid, 35.

30 Ibid, 41.

31 Ibid, 80.

32 Ibid, 143.

33 Ibid, 139.


36 Ibid.

37 Ibid, 73-87.