

Contributions in Black Studies

Volume 3

1979

Article 5

A NEW BEGINNING TOWARDS A MORE PRODUCTIVE FUTURE FOR BLACK STUDIES

Bill Owens*

*Massachusetts State Senate

Copyright ©1979 by the authors. *Contributions in Black Studies* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs>

A NEW BEGINNING TOWARDS A MORE PRODUCTIVE FUTURE FOR BLACK STUDIES

Bill Owens

Abstract

Senator Owens was a member of the Executive Board of the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS). "A New Beginning Toward a More Productive Future for Black Studies" was his 1978 keynote address at the annual convention of the National Council that was held at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. This was the second annual meeting of the NCBS.

KEYWORDS: BLACK STUDIES

Bill Owens

A NEW BEGINNING TOWARDS A MORE PRODUCTIVE FUTURE FOR BLACK STUDIES

THERE ARE SOME THOUGHTS I would like to share with you today concerning the future of Black Studies on predominantly white college campuses. But before I give you my prognosis, I would like to pose what is now a question synonymous with reactionary academic forces. That question is, why do we need Black Studies? First, let me assure you that I am not a reactionary. Second, let me add an analogy. Just as we take words from the English language and with simple inflexion give them a wholly new meaning, we must use a more subtle intellectual inflexion to ask ourselves, why do we need Black Studies? Why? Ask yourselves this inquiringly, searchingly and not negatively and you will see that the former carries hope and the latter a vile and vicious insult.

For this is the problem as I see it today: we who first championed Black Studies more than a decade ago had our intellects and inspirations formed in the tumultuous crucible of the sixties. We were and are the products of a unique intellectual and social experience. We saw history unfold before our very eyes every time we brought down one of the walls of segregation. Every time we marched and picketed and sat-in, we made history. Every time we filled the jails with the righteousness of our cause as well as the presence of our bodies, we made history. When we lost Malcolm X, Medger Evers, Martin Luther King and Fred Hampton, we made history. When we claimed squatters' rights to depressed urban dwellings as well as the ivy covered halls of academia, we made history. Yes we made history. Those were exuberant, exhilarating times, unique times not likely to be duplicated any time soon.

In those times we learned to accept the image we saw in the mirror. Black was, is and shall always be beautiful. We learned to accept our history and our culture, not as some strange aberrations of white society, but as the movement and progress of a people who endured and

survived. And so I pose the question again, why do we need Black Studies?

The answer is not simple and it is not yet clear. Yes, we need Black Studies to focus on the uniqueness of our experiences. Yet there is something inherent in unique experiences that is non-transferable. To illustrate what I am saying look around you. How many people here were ten years old in 1968? How many were eleven or twelve, or even younger? Those of you who were pre-teenage children in 1968, are college students today. You should have vivid memories of "Romper Room," "Captain Kangaroo" and "Mighty Mouse" proclaiming that he was here to save the day. This is not to denigrate you in any way. But its purpose is to make clear the point, that the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Herring notwithstanding, the revolution was televised.

Marshall McLuen was correct in pointing out the children of the electronic age. Think about this. You are the first generation to reach maturity when even the poorest of American homes could afford a television set. Television is a powerful medium. It teaches values and structures thought. It represents American technology at its best. From the brilliance of its solid state circuitry we receive blandness and mediocrity, if not outright idiocy. It gave us "Saturday Night Live" and "Instant Replay." It gave us "Archie Bunker" and "The Jeffersons." It serialized our "Roots" and our "King" and interspersed them with anti-perspirants, Better Ideas from Ford and extra strength whiteners. It is the touchstone of commonality between ages, sexes, classes and races. It is pervasive and persuasive. Television kept you occupied while we burned the city around you. It is your unique experience. An experience so unique that it allowed for the first time in recorded history, people of the same race, economic class and household to occupy and share a physical space, but travel in different psychic worlds. This duality of relationships, this sharing of physical and separation of psychic worlds is more often than not the relationship between the rulers and the subjects. However, here we have it amongst ourselves and it makes it difficult for those of us who experienced the flamboyant sixties to communicate to you, the students coming of age in the seventies, the necessity of keeping alive the fledgling institutions we created within institutions. It is difficult for us to transfer to you the need to understand and be proud of your history, when not only age differences and social experiences conspire against us but also a deep, and seemingly bottomless, crevice of technologically affluent attitudes and morality.

If it is true, as I so often hear, that today's students are not supporting Black Studies Programs and classes, but choosing instead courses of study that they feel will allow them to enter a competitive job market, then we are traveling upon a treadmill. What sustains an individual? What allows him or her to step with confidence? What is it beyond a degree that gives an individual self-respect? Self-respect comes with knowledge of oneself and one's people. Why Black Studies? To bridge transfer points, to explain recent phenomena, to analyze the impact of technology on our minds and lives, to give us that sustaining knowledge and that positive image.

Academia has proven to be a viscous wall. As it continued to yield under the pressure we applied, we found ourselves sucked into the wall and a part of it. I say that to say this. Pass through this University, or any university, without a knowledge of who you are and your people are and you will become a make-believe imitation white boy. Nathan Hare's "Black Anglo-Saxon," or Franz Fanon's "Black Skin, White Mask." I ask you is that what you really want to be? If you choose earning a living without factoring in the purpose and cause of living, then all that we have done is for naught.

Ten years ago the floodgates of academia were opened and Blacks poured in. We were received as exotic voyagers on traditional seas of learning. That proved correct in a sense; we learned rather quickly that here was a repository of untapped intellectual wealth that we could use to examine our political, social, psychological, economical, educational, scientific and cultural relationships to this society. We discovered that here was knowledge about colonialism in the Caribbean and Africa. Here was wealth greater than gold, here was knowledge that, if we could put to our own uses, would bring us a new understanding and better our lives. We also discovered intellectual cowardice and institutional racism. We discovered that unless we said otherwise, former slave owners were great men. Vicious racists were great writers, and their most prized historians denied that we had even had a history. Thomas Jefferson, William Faulkner and Arnold Toynbee were racist. However, if we took an approach to their disciplines that simply said we were contributors, not only to the building of America but of the modern world, we easily destroy their teachings. Yet that in itself was not enough. It was a mere fleeting denouncement of dead men. We realized that our posture could not be continually reactive and angry, for that stirred up emotions that interrupted intellectual pursuits. We had to, for

our psychological survival, institutionalize the idea that our experience was of great depth and complexity. So great and so complex that it deserved to stand with the “traditional” disciplines as a course of study. But who would teach these classes and who would attend them after we left? We had to be responsible for properly nourishing a child of our creation. That meant acquiring the faculty and bringing more black students onto the campuses. Academia did not take all of this lying down. And lest you forget, we did not acquire any of this through gentlemanly conversation and agreement. What we have, we took. We ran the risk of losing our educational standing . . . of being kicked out of school, in other words. However, we knew we had to make a place for you just as the citizens of Detroit, Newark, Watts, and a hundred other cities across America gave us a place by exerting a fiery social pressure upon this system to yield, and let my people go. So when we have prepared a house for you, and none of us who come before you—nor should you—think that we got here on our innate ability to pass standardized tests, or on our individual intelligence. We felt we owed you the same opportunity that was given us. And now you should feel that you owe a responsibility to future generations to prepare a place for them.

There is a more serious and correlating debt that all of us must pay upon re-entry to the real world. When we leave academia with our degrees safely tucked under our arms, we should realize that our accumulated skills and our individual concern can change the lives of a community or a child. For we learn, upon re-entry, that academia is not only viscous but insular as well. This enforced seclusion allows us to immerse ourselves in our respective areas of concern. But when we get out, we must immerse ourselves in survival—personal as well as communal. If we do not apply at least the spirit of what we have learned here, we fail ourselves as well as our communities. The test we must pass if we wish to see Black Studies survive and prosper will be to influence those entering college on the desirability of Black Studies as a discipline and/or a supplementary avenue of academic concern. Each one of us should take on the responsibility of directing a young mind towards the goals we espouse here. Not one in your lifetime, but at least one a year.

We must give support to our academic children when our incomes increase. We must return periodically to give those who are still entrenched in study the benefit of our practical knowledge. We must do battle with college administrators who want to cut back on Black Studies because they view it as weak and vulnerable. And we must

preach its benefits as well as analyze its faults. If we do not embark on this course of action there will be no need for conferences like this. Remember the National Black Political Assembly. This month we should have marked the Fourth National Black Political Conference. However, those of us who believed in its merits can do little more than bemoan its passing. We must ask ourselves: How could a movement that in 1972 shocked the American political system, and came within a parliamentary ruling of forming a new National Black Political Party . . . how could such a movement now be defunct? We lost the National Assembly because we were not diligent in building and maintaining a truly great concept into a functional institution. We let it slip from our grasps and we have no one to blame but ourselves. We organized it, and we destroyed it with apathy. Let us learn from that experience. Let us learn to subject internal squabbles to air long-range goals. Let us not commit fratricide over a concept worthless without funds and a program. Let us mature organizationally. Let us go forward from this conference to a new beginning in Black Studies. To a new commitment to build institutions that will grow, and survive, and last.

Continue the struggle. Thank you.