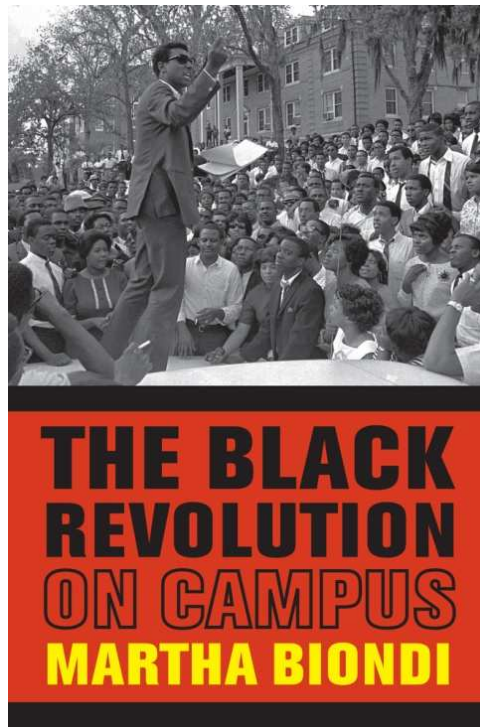


The Black Revolution on Campus: An Extended Book Review

by

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Historian Martha Biondi's 2012 book entitled *The Black Revolution on Campus* (University of California Press, 2012, 366 pp. ISBN 9780520296224) provides accounts of Black student activism on college and university campuses throughout the United States. The Associate Professor of African American Studies and History at Northwestern University explores selected college and university campuses as case studies, chronicling the power and impact of Black student activism in the late 60s. Using archival research and oral histories, Biondi's 278-page work provides insight into how Black students revolutionized higher education through their protests, strikes, and seizures of buildings towards the fulfillment of their demands.

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For Biondi, “This dramatic explosion of militant activism set in motion a period of conflict, crackdown, negotiation, and reform that profoundly transformed college life. At stake was the very mission of higher education”.¹ She concludes the book with a discursive analysis of “What Happened to Black Studies?” where she argues against the standardization of the curriculum in academic units in favor of the flexibility of curriculum, theories, and approaches.

The book divides into eight chapters sandwiched between an *Introduction* and *Conclusion*. After introducing the book, chapter one explores the socio-political and historical climate, giving rise to Black student activism on campus. Chapter’s two through five examine Black student activism at specific colleges and universities. Finally, chapters six, seven, and eight discuss the rise, successes, and challenges of Black Studies on and off campus. Biondi is sure to include external as well as internal challenges to Black Studies as a discipline and its departments and programs.

From the beginning, Biondi is clear on the inaccuracies of calling this period of activism a revolution. She illustrates how the Black student activist were referring to the moment as a revolution, even noting that *Ebony* magazine bought into the idea of a Black Revolution when they published a special issue in 1969 entitled “The Black Revolution”.² However, Biondi illustrates that neither the students’ aims nor achievements fulfilled the traditional sense of revolution. That is, seizing power and taking control facilitating socio-political shifts in society and/ or nation. For Biondi, the reference to a Black revolution on campus sheds light on the power to assert agency and reform higher education. She says, “The title of this book hopes to capture the sweeping nature of many of their demands”. She continues, “the audacity of the children of sharecroppers and factory workers in asserting a right to shape these institutions was in a sense revolutionary”.³ For Biondi, to varying degrees the “desegregation of institutions of higher education in the American North and West was won by the children of southern migrants and constitutes another legacy of the twentieth century’s massive internal migration”.⁴ Therefore, what was revolutionary was not the socio-political movement or historical moment on these campuses per se, but the new and different Black students and their politics and agenda’s separated them from previous generations. For Wayne Glasker, “this ‘revolution’ rejected the earlier sense of shame and stigma attached to blackness and to African ancestry, and it involved a rejection of the goal of assimilation (into the melting pot of Anglo-conformity). It also involved a rejection of the goal of ‘color-blindness’ or eradication of the consciousness of difference, in favor of pride in difference and positive consciousness of difference (hence the terms ‘black consciousness’ and ‘race consciousness’”.⁵

Ibram Rogers highlights that the Civil Rights Movement primarily affected “the moral conscious of white America to advance African Americans- or *white suasion*- gave way to *black suasion* to develop the moral, cultural, and political consciousness of African Americans toward the necessity of black unity, power, and agency through the Black Power Movement (BPM). Guided by the leading youth organization, SNCC, black students started hastily leaving civil rights in the mid- 1960s, entering the ideological orbit of black power. In effect, the failures (and successes) of the CRM prepared the stage for the BPM, and its arm in academia, the BCM”.⁶ The difference between the generations, then, is an emphasis on the internal growth and development of Black people both individually and collectively.

Evident in the rhetoric of Black Power is in an effort to improve the conditions of people of African descent in the United States. I have said elsewhere,

Black Power, then, was not a call for Black isolation, nor was it anti-White. Black Power was a response to the shared experience of racial oppression and discrimination, a movement to build a positive Black self- image and consciousness, and a motivating principle informing and energizing the Black struggle for access to resources to improve the quality of life for Black people. It was a quest for recognition and humanity, not only from White’s but also from Black people individually and collectively. Black Power energized a new generation of activists ready to fight injustice, and create cultural, political, economic, and academic space for Black people. With Black youth growing up in such a turbulent and politically charged nation, and witnessing revolutions around the world, they harnessed a power that would reshape the American academic landscape.⁷

It is important to note that Biondi recognizes that the Black Power and Civil Rights activist shared goals of increasing positive Black representation and inclusion saying, “Their call for self- determination was not antithetical to the quest for full inclusion and equal rights, but a strategy for achieving it in a nation deeply shaped by a history of white supremacy”.⁸ She demonstrates throughout the text that the struggles to increase Black student enrollment in colleges and universities, create and develop Black Studies, and the hiring of Black faculty and staff are goals towards inclusion in the institution.

Black Revolution on Campus also illustrates the desire to create and control entities on campus such as Black Studies.⁹ The point that Biondi is making implicitly, that Wayne Glasker makes more explicitly is that the creation of Black Student Unions (BSUs) and Black Studies “was not to withdraw from society altogether but to organize a power base from which to enter the mainstream as a self- conscious *group- for- itself* and compete from a position of group strength. In effect, they wanted *both* a communal space of their own and participation in the larger campus.

Again, this is not separatism, but rather biculturalism and group pluralism".¹⁰ Glasker is highlighting, here, the quest to preserve Black identity and culture, promote self-determination, while carving out space in higher education and the United States more broadly. A study of the Black Power era does illustrate dual albeit non-conflicting goals. Black students "sought to preserve their own distinctive ethnic cultural identity, heritage while pursuing economic upward mobility".¹¹ Biondi illustrates very well the struggle to be included in higher education. However, she frames her discussion of Black Nationalism and the promotion of self-determination as a starting point for these young Black student activists. She states,

The rising currents of Black nationalism galvanized this generation and inspired considerable grassroots organizing. Some were drawn to cultural nationalism, while others identified with a leftist analysis. Rather than remaining frozen in time, Black radicalism grew and evolved to incorporate new directions.¹²

She continues,

The students' evolving consciousness was shaped by experiences gained through alliances with Puerto Rican and Mexican American student struggles. Sometimes it was forged in study groups, where students read and debated a wide variety of texts. Moreover, as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, Black feminism arose to dramatically influence the Black studies movement and Black radicalism in general. Black nationalism, in short, was subject to critique and reappraisal, and out of this process African American activists went in a variety of directions, joining labor, human rights, reparations, educational, environmental, prisoner rights, antiwar, and other social justice movements.¹³

Biondi rightly recognizes and discusses the diversity of Black ideological and political thought. Black Liberalism, Black Nationalism, Black Conservatism, Black Feminism, Black Marxism to name a few are fluid and centralizes the racialized experiences of Black people. Biondi's treatment of Black Nationalism views it as rudimentary from which other positions and perspectives evolved.

It is clear that Biondi argues that Black student activism forever changed higher education. Focusing on a particular campus, many studies examining Black student activism on campus come to the same conclusion that Black student activism of the 60s and 70s reformed higher education. For example, Joy Ann Williamson's *Black Power on Campus* focusing on the University of Illinois between 1965- 1975, Wayne Glasker's *Black Student in the Ivory Tower* examines the University of Pennsylvania between 1967 through 1990, and Stefan M. Bradley's *Harlem vs. Columbia University* all illustrate the impact of Black student activism on higher education.

However, in his study of the Black Campus Movement, the “struggle among black student nationalists at historically white and black institutions to reconstitute higher education from 1965- 1972”¹⁴, Rogers provides a historical and geographical survey of Historically Black and White College and Universities around the United States. Furthermore, Rogers covers a vast amount of history and experiences on a host of campuses around the nation quickly, inhibiting a full understanding of the experiences of the different institutions examined. Biondi provides sampling from around the nation allowing for a fuller understanding of the challenges and successes at the institutions. Important to note here is that she has an emphasis on Black Studies.

Rogers, however, more broadly posits that Black student activism on campus changed the racial constitution of higher education by impacting four critical, but racist, elements: 1) the moralized contraption, 2) standardization of exclusion, 3) the normalized mask of whiteness, and 4) ladder altruism. The moralized contraption refers to the stringent rules of conduct at HBCUs rooted in racist, sexist, and paternalistic ideas of the inability of Black people acting responsibly. Standardization of exclusion raises issues of inadequate learning environments such as housing, library, and student center to name a few at HBCUs. HWCUs excluded Black students from admission to the university in large numbers, excluded from receiving necessary financial aid, etc. HWCUs as well as HBCUs used the curriculum, programs, and personnel to normalize whiteness. In addition, higher education was as a ladder, lifting Black students and removing them from the plight and struggles of their people.¹⁵ Rogers more vast discussion has also provided a more comprehensive assessment of the changes Black student activism brought higher education. Although Rogers is clear that the ideas of the racial constitutions have changed such as the verbal commitment to diversity, he is skeptical about the implementation of those ideals due to the refashioning of old values in new terms.¹⁶

Rogers domesticates Black student activism and does not fully engage the global and third world influence and contributions on Black students, where Biondi clearly makes these connections throughout the text. She says,

A global perspective by African American activists began to return as the civil rights movement intensified and radicalized, and as the war in Vietnam pulled increasing numbers of African Americans and other young men into the U.S. military. Not every Black student activist moved from campus Black Power to solidarity work in Angolan or Zimbabwean independence struggles. But many did, and when the antiapartheid movement arose in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s it built on this foundation and drew many African American students and intellectuals. The rise of African diaspora studies as part of the Black studies movement reflects this shift from the narrow Americanist thinking of the cold war to a much broader and more critical global consciousness”.¹⁷

Influenced by, concerned with, and making connections with freedom struggles in other parts of the world became critical for many Black students. Biondi appropriately includes the global influences and Third World solidarity among students on campus.

Biondi's examination of Black student activism leads her to illustrate the struggles resulting in the formation of Black Studies. She examines how Black student activism was the impetus for the formation of Black Studies at historically white colleges and universities such as San Francisco State University and Northwestern University. In addition, Biondi illustrates how Black students championed integrating Black Studies content throughout the curriculum using Malcolm X College and Howard University as case studies. Biondi is correct in her illustration of the diversity of Black experiences on campus. Furthermore, she shows that Black students at different institutions had similar goals but were mindful of the climate and context of that campus requiring different navigating and negotiating with that particular institution. However, Biondi only begins to scratch the proverbial surface of the complexities that go into the formation, growth, development, and maintenance of Black Studies.

Fabio Rojas' 2007 book *From Black Power to Black Studies* illustrates that while students, supportive faculty, and community allies may have been successful in their activism, it is the administration and other university officials who ultimately decide what and how and when change in the institution will occur.¹⁸ In other words, student activism may have been the catalyst, but the final decision to institutionalize Black Studies comes from the administration. The administration will make their decision according to what they believe is in the best interest of the college/ university. Rojas finds that the more disruptive the student protests, the less likely the administration were willing to concede to demands. This necessitated shifts in tactics by students. Rojas concludes that the framing of the proposal for Black Studies must benefit the institution for the administration. In other words, "movement inspired organizational forms are often hybrids combining new politics with old values."¹⁹ Furthermore, Rojas includes the role and influence of philanthropic groups such as the Ford Foundation. Ford selected, especially in the early years, selected campus such as Yale to fund because their proposal was consistent with the goals on integration. Ford did not support Black Nationalist oriented or community centered Black Studies proposals. Rojas contends,

While it would be wrong to portray to Ford Foundation as a conservative force that stopped social change or perpetuated class hierarchies, it is true that the foundation actively tried to moderate black studies' more radical tendencies, especially in the first wave of grants. One could also argue that it reinforced the hierarchy of American higher education by favoring the best- established universities. That is to say, the foundation indirectly 'chilled out' the field by helping programs survive in universities like Stanford and Yale while letting more radical programs wither.²⁰

Including such information into the analysis illustrates that nationalist and/ or community oriented departments limited success is not a condemnation of nationalism or community involvement. Revealed here is that Black Studies fate was in the hands and assumed good will of others. Campus politics and philanthropic support, i.e. the Ford Foundation, expands and nuances the discourse. It is important to note here that this point is beyond the scope of Biondi's work; however, the totality of Rogers, Rojas, and Biondi's contribution provides a more accurate assessment. Rogers and Rojas' work broadens and extends *The Black Revolution on Campus*, while Biondi provides more focused historical content and context.

Ultimately, Martha Biondi offers an important work for those interested in Black Power studies, Black student activism, or higher education reform. Students, faculty, and administration should read the book to gain a deeper appreciation for many of the contemporary resources and entities on many college and university campuses such as Black Student Unions, Office of Black Student Services, and Black Studies to name a few. Biondi reclaims, remembers, and respects their birth because their creation was not without complications. Recommended here, however, is to supplement Biondi, Rogers, and Rojas with each other. They complement each other well and provide a more comprehensive history and assessment of Black student activism of the late 60s and early 70s and its legacy.

Endnotes

¹ Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 201), 1.

² Ibid, pgs, 11-12.

³ Ibid, pgs, 11.

⁴ Ibid, pgs. 4.

⁵ Wayne Glasker, *Black Students in the Ivory Tower: African American Student Activism at the University of Pennsylvania, 1967- 1990*. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 5.

⁶ Ibram Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstruction of Higher Education, 1965- 1972*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 67.

⁷ M. Keith Claybrook, Jr., “Black Power, Black Students, and the Institutionalizing of Change: Loyola Marymount University, 1968- 1978”, *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.5, no.10, (June 2013): pgs. 3.

⁸ Biondi, *Ibid*, pgs. 4.

⁹ Biondi, *Ibid.*, pgs, 4.

¹⁰ Glasker, *Ibid*, pgs 14.

¹¹ Wayne Glasker, *Ibid*, Pgs, xii.

¹² Biondi, *Ibid*, pgs. 271.

¹³ *Ibid*, pgs. 272.

¹⁴ Rogers, *Ibid*, pgs. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pgs. 161- 169.

¹⁷ Biondi, *Ibid*, pgs. 271.

¹⁸ Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pgs. 164.