

# The Black Campus Movement: An Interview with Ibram H. Rogers

by

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**Ibram H. Rogers** (www.ibram.org) is an assistant professor of Africana Studies at the University at Albany, SUNY. He is the author of the award-winning national study of black student activism entitled, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972*. He has forthcoming or published twelve essays on the Black Campus Movement, black power, intellectual history, and Africana Studies in books and leading journals, including the *Journal of Black Studies*, *Journal of Social History*, *Journal of African American Studies*, *The Journal of African American History*, and *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*. He has resided as a research fellow at the Library of Congress, the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, the Lyndon B. Johnson Library & Museum, and in Chicago through the Black Metropolis Research Consortium. He earned his doctorate in African American Studies at Temple University. Currently, he is working on two book projects: *The White Studies Saga: Scientific Racism Before Black Studies* (monograph) and *Malcolm's Children: A History of Black power in New York* (edited collection).

**Karanja Keita Carroll (KKC):** Thank you very much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to participate in this interview. As a new scholarly voice on the social and intellectual history of Africana/Black Studies, it is an honor to have you participate in this interview with the *Journal of Pan African Studies (JPAS)* on your recent publication *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972* (2012).

**Ibram H. Rogers (IHR):** It is truly an honor to be interviewed by *JPAS*. I know that a host of thoughtful, dedicated, progressive scholars read this journal and I am excited about the chance to engage them. I hope I am able to shed some more light on the book, my labor of love the last five years.

**KKC:** This text is a much-needed contribution in the areas of the social history of Black students and the intellectual history of Africana/Black Studies. Can you explain to our readers why you wrote this text and what is/was your intended contribution to literature within Africana history and more broadly, Africana Studies?

**IHR:** I wrote this text to fill a glaring hole in the literature. Despite a growing number of campus studies of black student activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, no one had produced a national study. It was a gargantuan task incorporating hundreds of campus stories into a national picture. But I felt it was vitally needed for a number of different reasons. First, I felt black student activism in the late 1960s had been overshadowed in the literature by black student activism in the early 1960s, and in the late 1960s by anti-war student activism and black power off-campus activism. Second, I felt it was necessary to share the complex context for the rise of Africana Studies in the late 1960s. Africana Studies rose on the backs of students, student activists who pressed for a series of demands to make their education politically and culturally relevant to them as students and their communities. Third, I wanted to share the sheer breadth of this social movement, of black student activism in the late 1960s. We know about San Francisco State, Cornell, Columbia, UC Berkeley, Howard. But this is only scratching the surface of the movement. I found records of black student activism in every state in the union, except Alaska. And black students may have organized, demanded, and/or protested there. I just have not found any record of it. I estimate that tens of thousands of students and potentially hundreds of thousands of students participated in the Black Campus Movement (BCM).

In terms of its literary contribution, *The Black Campus Movement* continues the recent scholarly revelation of the array of radicalism at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the multitude of women black power activists, the preponderance of “moderate” black power workers, and black power organizing with whites; all the while presenting the range and attainments of black power, negotiating local with national activism, and connecting and disconnecting black power to civil rights. It complicates the more celebrated story of campus activism at historically white colleges and universities (HWCUs) and expounds on this emergent literature through elucidating the largely unknown black student struggles at rural liberal arts colleges, remote institutions in the Great Plains, Northwest, and New England, and recently desegregated southern HWCUs.

*The Black Campus Movement* situates each campus struggle in a national movement and delivers a national assessment to serve as a basis for the growing literary body of campus studies.

**KKC:** As a graduate of Temple University's Department of African American Studies can you discuss the way(s) in which your graduate school experience shaped this project?

**IHR:** When I was a graduate student at Temple, I helped revive both the Black Student Union (BSU) and the graduate student organization in the department. In both groups, I had the opportunity to engage in the type of campus organizing and activism I studied in *The Black Campus Movement*. In addition, I first learned about the nation's first BSU at San Francisco State from a fellow graduate student, Weckea Lilly. While his principal research interest became Nathan Hare, who the BSU brought to San Francisco State to be the first faculty chair of a Black Studies program in 1968, I became interested in studying the BSU and student activism more broadly.

At Temple, I also looked up to a host of my peers in the department, who shaped me intellectually and thus this project (and any future research), including you Dr. Carroll, Monica Rhodes, and Professors Yaba Blay of Drexel, Louisville's Kaila Story, Pittsburgh's Michael Tillotson, Serie McDougal of San Francisco State, Danielle Wallace of William Patterson, and Marquita Pellerin of CSU Northridge, just to name a few of the many. The Temple School, as it was affectionately called then, certainly schooled me on how to produce serious, grounded, socially responsible scholarship, and I hope *The Black Campus Movement* is a reflection of that schooling.

But the lifeblood of any department is its faculty. I had the pleasure of being advised by Professor Ama Mazama, one of the world's leading Afrocentric theorists. Serious, compassionate, dedicated, and available, Professor Mazama effectively guided me towards smoothly completing my dissertation on the Black Campus Movement. Moreover, my grounding in Afrocentric theory, largely taught to me by Professor Mazama and the venerable Professor Molefi Kete Asante, gave me an understanding of the importance of the black student demand for the black perspective in their classes and in scholarship on black people. I must also mention that Professors Muhammad Ahmad (Maxwell Stanford, Jr.), Anthony Monteiro, and Kathy Walker (History) were central in building my knowledge of political economy.

**KKC:** In your opinion, what role should intellectual history play within Africana/Black Studies?

**IHR:** Intellectual history should be at the doorstep of Africana Studies. In other words, introductory courses in Africana Studies courses should spend the bulk of the time on intellectual history. I am happy you asked this insightful question because the rise of Africana Studies must be understood within the historical context of Pan-African, American, and Western intellectual history. You cannot introduce Africana Studies without introducing the intellectual argument that led to its birth, an intellectual rationale largely crafted by students during the Black Campus Movement.

Furthermore, we cannot introduce Africana Studies without introducing the intellectual ideas that dominated the academy in the 1960s. We cannot truly understand the rise of Africana Studies without truly understanding the scientific racism that it confronted--a scientific racism in the book I called the normalized mask of whiteness and now I simply term White Studies. I am currently working on my second book on this subject, as it will provide us with an intellectual history of scientific racism from the modern era until the 1960s. It is tentatively titled, *The White Studies Saga: Scientific Racism Before Black Studies*.

**KKC:** Can you describe for our readers what you mean by the Black Campus Movement and its relationship to the Black Power Movement, Black Arts Movement and Black Studies Movement?

**IHR:** In the book and in previous scholarship, I have argued that the black student activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s that led most prominently to the institutionalization of Africana Studies was a *social movement*. Some have titled this struggle the Black Studies Movement. But to me this title does not totally reflect the majority of black student demands, which had nothing to do with Black Studies. For instance, at rural and suburban HWCUs with small black student populations distant from black population centers, students were more likely to passionately demand and protest for Black Cultural Centers to serve as homes away from home.

Scholars have been more likely to title this struggle the Black Student Movement. And I agree. It was a part of the *Long Black Student Movement*, which began in 1919. I cover these decades of activism in chapters two to four in the book. I show there were separate but interlocking social movements, waged by the New Negro on campuses in the 1920s, civil rights student activists from the 1930s to the early 1960s, and finally black power student activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s during the Black Campus Movement. I show in the book how black students of the late 1960s at the same time departed ideologically and built on the gains of New Negroes and civil rights activists.

I must also mention a historical framework for the Black Power Movement I think answers your question and provides further insight into how I conceive the Black Campus Movement. I consider the Black Power Movement to be a social movement of social *movements*. A few of those social movements include the Black Arts Movement, Black Feminist Movement, Black Theology Movement, Black Capitalist Movement, the Black Studies Movement (if you include K-12 and the community), and of course the Black Campus Movement.

**KKC:** All too many times women of African descent are left out of intellectual history discussions within the many moments of Africana history. However, your text works to go against this trend. Can you share for our readers those women of African descent that played pivotal roles in the Black Campus Movement and the development of Black Studies?

**IHR:** Black women intellectuals are not only too often left out of intellectual history, black women activists are too often left out of stories on black power. I am glad my work goes against this sexist trend. I want to point out that I did not actively and aggressively try to find black women who played pivotal roles. They were everywhere, and I simply had to share the gendered truth of the movement. They were centrally involved in the Black Campus Movement and the development of Black Studies. That is not to say sexism did not pervade the BCM. That is to say, in spite of sexism, black women were agents of campus change.

There were countless voices and leaders I showcase in the book. It is hard to even narrow down to a few women, but of course I must to answer your question. "White America...has plainly demonstrated that the only tactics that can move its violent heart is violence. Force only responds to force and power to power. Pretty soon this nation will be shuddering in a paroxysm of black power." This scorching statement was issued by a group of black women at Vassar College (NY) after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. As one of the most powerful statements of the movement, I titled chapter four after it. I must also mention that the first president of the nation's first BSU at San Francisco State was the African-garb wearing, walking powerhouse, Marianna Waddy. "We will now strive to incorporate the eminent and profound concept of blackness into a new and position image of black students on this campus," she said after claiming the presidency in 1966. Finally, I must mention the Alabama legend, Gwen Patton, who I had a chance to interview for the book. After being electing president of Tuskegee's student government in the spring of 1965, Patton became one of the pioneers of the Black Campus Movement at HBCUs, and thus one of the pioneers of the BCM since it began at HBCUs in 1965. Patton also founded and became the first president of the National Association of Black Students in 1969, the principal national black student organization during the BCM.

**KKC:** Can you share with our readers why you believe "Malcolm X is the ideological father of the Black Campus Movement," along with his impact upon the sociohistorical development of Black Studies?

**IHR:** The Malcolm X posters, speeches, and books were everywhere during the Black Campus Movement. Dozens of student groups took over campus spaces during protests and renamed those spaces after Malcolm X. But ideologically, his presence was even more profound. Black student decisions to organize, make what they called "demands," make their demands "non-negotiable," their boldness, their courage, their willingness to stridently and relentlessly attack white supremacy, I think was influenced by their marathon reading of Malcolm and listening to his speeches. I use the term father because, like in the Black Power Movement more generally, students were constantly asking themselves and their peers whether they were living up to Malcolm's mission, whether they were making their father proud.

In terms of Black Studies, Malcolm was constantly calling on black people to learn about themselves from their perspective for their development. Malcolm was constantly challenging racist intellectual ideas. Malcolm was constantly speaking on college campus, like a traveling Black Studies professor. He never used the term Black Studies. But his message was everything about Black Studies.

**KKC:** How does this text depart from and/or align itself with recent publications on Black student activism in the 1960s (Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s* and Biondi, *The Black Campus Revolution*) and the history of Black Studies (Rooks, *White Money/Black Power* and Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies*)?

**IHR:** Stefan Bradley's exceptional book on the movement at Columbia and his research more generally on black student activism in the Ivy League has been a model of scholarship for me. As one of the recent pioneers of this field of research, I (and I'm sure many other new scholars) have tried to build on the base he has laid, along with Joy Ann Williamson-Lott, who has two books on the subject. Martha Biondi's recently published book was similar to mine in that she gave us a national picture of the movement. I think her carefully well written and researched book complements my text well. And I would encourage any serious student of this movement to read Biondi, and undoubtedly Bradley and Williamson-Lott.

While my book aligns with Bradley's and Biondi's, it departs from the books on the history of Black Studies by Rooks and Rojas. I gave a very critical review of *White Money/Black Power* in 2008 in *JPAS*. I still agree with my position four years ago that Rooks "centers the book on the flawed arguments that the Ford Foundation, as an organization, and Bundy were the discipline's saviors." Black students were the discipline's founders and saviors, which I proved in *The Black Campus Movement*. One of Rojas's central findings was that the more violent and disruptive the protest, the less likely black students had their demands actualized. In my book, I write in opposition to his conclusion when I say that "usually the more violent and longer the student protest, the more successful" in winning action on demands. I did not arrive at this through anecdotal case study data, like Rojas. This is what Alan Bayer and Alexander Astin found in their empirical study published in the *Educational Record* in 1969, entitled "Violence and Disruption on the U.S. Campus, 1968-1969." Despite this divergence, I like and use Rojas profound notion of Black Studies as "oppositional space."

**KKC:** Can you compare the historical and current role that Black students and other students of color play within predominately white institutions of higher education? From your teaching and academic experience, are students of color relying upon the history of the Black Campus Movement to guide their actions and movement as social consciousness students and producers of social change?

**IHR:** Most students are totally unaware of the Black Campus Movement. They are more knowledgeable of the black student protests off campus in the early 1960s. I end my book imploring this generation of students and scholars to build on the movement. Unfortunately, students of color tend to wage what I call defensive protests, defending the gains of the Black Campus Movement or the black campus community. In other words, when there is a fatal threat to a well-liked black program or office or a public act of campus racism, like hanging a noose or the public use of the n-word, students tend to rise up in protest. In contrast, during the Black Campus Movement, students waged offensive protests to create *new* programs, *new* offices, *new* Black Studies departments, and a higher number of black students and faculty. They were institution building, not merely defending what had already been built.

**KKC:** What is your position on the current state of Africana/Black Studies? In what ways can the discipline build upon its institutionalization and at the same rate stay true to the goals/intentions of the founding mothers and fathers of the discipline?

**IHR:** I am actually quite encouraged about the current state of Africana Studies. Despite some of the attacks on some of the flagship departments, I am encouraged by the fact that at least twelve colleges and universities--Temple, UMASS, Northwestern, UC Berkeley, Louisville, Michigan State, Brown, UPENN, UW Milwaukee, Harvard, Yale, and Indiana--now have doctoral programs in Africana Studies. However, in the midst of encouragement, I am extremely worried about the continued institutionalization of the discipline. It is important for the development of the discipline that Africana Studies departments only hire scholars with Africana Studies degrees or to a lesser extent a demonstrated commitment to the discipline. It seems to be trending in that direction, but we are far from there yet. If our doctoral degree recipients can't receive preference in our departments, then where will they find jobs? They not only don't receive preference in non-Africana Studies departments. Some won't even consider them.

There is no way to ensure our scholars and students will stay true to the goals of the discipline from the founders. However, we can ensure we teach them those goals by teaching them about the Black Campus Movement and some of the early Black Studies thinkers. We can make sure we do not graduate students or hire professors who fail to show competency in those goals. We can also require service learning of our students and expect progressive community and campus service from our faculty.

**KKC:** Given the current administrative and teaching concerns at Temple University in the Department of African American Studies, what lessons can be learned from the historical account of the Black Campus Movement as outlined in your text?

**IHR:** Like too many African American Studies departments across the nation, Temple's department is under attack. As politically and culturally in opposition to the white liberalism that dominates academe, Africana Studies is constantly battling ideologically and administratively. The founders recognized the pervasiveness of racism in academe, and attempted to build Black Studies within this racist house.

They turned their back on civil rights methods of moral persuasion and forced Black Studies onto higher education from a position of power. Students were willing and able to play power politics. It appears student activism will be necessary to maintain the department at Temple since unilateral decisions continue to be made by the dean against the wishes of the department. Recently, the graduate students stood up with some activism. Unless the dean reverses course, this will be essential moving forward.

**KKC:** How would you like this text to be used within Africana/Black Studies courses?

**IHR:** As I said earlier, I would like for my book to be used in introductory courses in Africana Studies, and courses on the history of Africana Studies. I think it provides a rich context for origin of Black Studies, and I believe it is accessible for freshmen and sophomores. At the same time, I think it can be used in senior seminars to really interrogate the Black Campus Movement that gave birth to Black Studies.

**KKC:** Asante sana Brother Rogers for participating in this interview. We look forward to engaging your future work. A luta continua!

**IHR:** Thank you Brother! I enjoyed it!