

# **History, Memory, and Bad Memories**

**A Book Review Essay of**

***White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education.* Author: Noliwe M. Rooks**

**by**

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If Professor Rooks's book were entitled "A Report of the Ford Foundation's Attempts to Influence the Development of African American Studies in the Early Years of Its Formation and New Constructions of Race in America," it would be a fair description of what she has contributed. However, it is impossible to assess, much less appreciate the saliency of that message unless it is unpacked and decoupled from a series of distorted and misleading constructions that begin on the book cover itself. The title, "White Money/ Black Power" is provocative to the point of being salacious, intimating some startling or sensational revelation to come. This notion is reinforced in the subtitle, "The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in American Higher Education." However, what the book reveals -- that the Ford Foundation, under the leadership of former cold war-era National Security Director McGeorge Bundy (!), has tried to influence the character and development of the Black Studies project -- is certainly not surprising, and largely not even news, neither to those in the field who received Ford funds over the years, nor to the much larger number who did not. And whatever it is a "history" of it certainly is not a history of the Black Studies movement,

out of which the field of African American studies – under various names – has developed.

Moving from the cover and title, the first line of the first chapter states: “In 1968...the Ford Foundation began to craft and then fund a strategy aimed at ensuring a complication-free birth and life for African American Studies on college campuses.”<sup>1</sup> Molefi K. Asante – often a subject of my criticisms – would say, quite correctly here, that the statement is badly “de-centered.” In the neighborhoods where I grew up in Detroit they would say, “You KNOW you wrong!” Not only does this narrative of what the author refers to as the “creation story” of Black Studies start at a chronological point when its far from complication-free birth was well underway, but also far away from the environs – social, political, cultural – where it actually happened.

It matters little that the author sandwiches in a chapter containing a curiously reconstructed account of major student strikes, focusing on San Francisco State and Cornell universities, that are associated with Black Studies’ origin. (Her account of these episodes account suggests significant misunderstanding, or revision, as to the nature of the multi-faceted student movements out of which Black Studies emerged; however, giving that account close critical scrutiny here would be tantamount to pursuing a *red herring*, since the main issues calling for such scrutiny are elsewhere. Suffice, for the moment, to say, nothing in this account changes the essential script – that Black Studies was a legacy of the Black Power movement, as those sensibilities were acted out in the broader context of late 1960s student activism.) The chapter ends with the suggestion that the objectives of these campus movements were quickly undermined, and that it was the Ford Foundation’s intervention that enabled the field to develop.

At San Francisco State, Black Studies was seen as a means of reforming higher education, but that idea got hopelessly lost as colleges and universities rushed to implement Black Studies programs. Administrators turned a blind eye to the underlying issues in which the students were interested, and went in another direction entirely. The next chapter argues that, if McGeorge Bundy and The Ford Foundation had not crafted a strategy to address such concerns and offer solutions to the problems of campus administrators, the field might never have survived beyond that initial rush.<sup>2</sup>

In that next chapter Rooks returns to her account of Bundy's initiatives that, in her argument, resulted in the institutionalization of Black Studies. The social, political, and intellectual thrusts represented in the many student strikes and protests that framed the formational period of Black Studies were apparently rendered inoperative, as Rooks reports that after their intervention, "the model most replicated from one institution to the next, and the model most often emulated today, was crafted in the late 1960s and funded by the Ford foundation at the behest of McGeorge Bundy."<sup>3</sup>

The author's characterization of Ford's model is not entirely consistent through the course of the book. Generally, the Foundation's objectives are framed in terms of a program concept that subordinated black studies to established academic disciplines, favoring "program" rather than "department" as the prescribed structural unit. However, even more regularly, throughout the book, emphasis is placed on Ford's intention to use black studies as a vehicle for drawing black students and faculty to predominantly white universities; functioning in effect as an affirmative action mechanism. That rationale is presented as one (or both together) of the previous statements at various points in the book. The most extensive description is on page 22, and is quoted here in its full context:

Despite the various factions jockeying for position, only one rationale would come to dominate the field of Black Studies as it assumed its position in academic institutions. Although it clearly did not pioneer the

approach, the Ford Foundation wholeheartedly supported an integrationist rationale and refused to fund programs and groups that couched their request for assistance within the rhetoric of Black Power...the foundation came to fully believe that the implementation of Black Studies on college campuses should serve as a tool to solve both widely acknowledged historical problems of racial exclusion and contemporary problems of racial integration. Black Studies was not to become a base of power from which nontraditional or experimental solutions for addressing racial conflict could be tried out. As a result of its funding practices, the Ford Foundation helped to craft a rationale for Black Studies that allowed most universities to retain much of what they believed to be inviolate in terms of their organization and autonomy, while simultaneously responding to requests for change coming from within and outside of the university proper.<sup>4</sup>

Still in the opening paragraphs, Rooks frames a major premise of the book thusly: “Those early strategies around institutionalizing Black Studies, funded by Bundy and the Ford Foundation, currently threaten the very viability of African American Studies.”<sup>5</sup> In reference to this particular, Ford-funded conception of Black Studies, she seems to want to argue that today, institutions’ perceptions of the role of black studies is limited to this “diversity” function in lieu of embracing a real academic mission, and that this diversity/affirmative action function itself is victim to “shifting grounds” in a period where affirmative action programs have become less viable, and the black student constituencies which black studies ostensibly serves themselves become more diversified, with the increased presence of Caribbean, Latin American, and continental Africans. The former point is argued in chapter 5, framed in context with a description of the author’s first job experience in the field of African American Studies. The second point is discussed in that same chapter and in the last chapter where the issue of different, specifically non-African American, black students is discussed.

There are some areas, especially related to the last issue, where there may be useful discussion to be derived from the issues presented; but such discussion will require a much more clearly defined and historically informed framework than is made available. As to clarity around these issues, from the point where Rooks has taken this reader, detached from meaningful historiographies, economic analyses, and globalized analytical frameworks, my thought is simply, “You can’t get there from here.”

A basic problem with the book is this. As a reader, I’m constantly trying to clarify: Whose (or what) perspective is she supposed to be representing? and, who is her audience supposed to be? While she is somewhat inconsistent on both these issues of standpoint and perspective, overall I am left with the impression that a) the perspective is of the “history” of black studies from the outside, and b) the audience is also “outsiders.” That Dr. Rooks evinces limited interest or knowledge regarding the development of the field from the perspective of those actually in the field, nor, at most times, does she appear interested in addressing her message to those of us who have comprised that history.

The section of chapter three devoted to the important 1968 Yale Symposium opens with one of the many constructions in the book that just jars the souls of those who saw those struggles unfold in their own lives. Using momentous language references, Rook’s asserts that:

One event functions as *ground zero* for the Ford Foundation’s commitment to *initiating* Black Studies as a step toward finally and fully addressing the “Negro Problem” in America. The beginning of the public association between the Foundation and African American Studies came at the behest of Bundy in 1968. That year, in a speech at Yale University, the former dean of Harvard University (sic) began to shape the feel, focus, and future of African American Studies as it entered the academic universe. (emphasis added)<sup>6</sup>

A somewhat careful reconstruction of Rooks's rather fragmented description of this event is required to realize that the conference at which Bundy made his earth-shaking remarks occurred "at the behest" of student organizers in the course of their year-long, heretofore unsuccessful, campaign to convince the Yale faculty to institute a Black Studies program there. Moreover, the Yale student campaign was happening at the height of the wave of related demonstrations, strikes, and protest on campuses across the nation. The stage onto which Bundy walked, and where he "declared his intentions to institutionalize the [Black Studies] field"<sup>7</sup> was hardly one he had created, as the author's introduction might have suggested. Indeed, whatever Bundy may have shaped, declared, or initiated at that conference, he was reacting, in the context of a concerted radical student movement, raging in that very moment in San Francisco, Columbia, Cornell, and other campuses across the entire nation.

Rooks largely adopts the categorizations that Ford officials and other opponents have used to characterize the activist faction – the true Black Studies "Movement" – that waged these campaigns. Indeed, the author's description of the views of what she terms the "black nationalist" faction are often taken from Ford Foundation documents, not from statements and documents of those who represented views opposing the "integrationists." Rooks's account of the internal discourse among civil rights leaders and academics who represented the spectrum of supportive and opposing views regarding the emergence and efficacy of black studies occupies little over seven pages of that chapter, after which it is seldom mentioned or acknowledged. When the author does refer directly to some of the participants in the radical faction, the result is a summary that is superficial, clumsy,

oversimplified, and not attached to any particularly clear analytical frame. (See pp. 72-73). The dynamism and complexity of that discourse is ill-served with observations such as the following:

“..there were two divergent political-ideological perspectives on Black studies in the first years of its implementation. One was politically moderate and composed of African American intellectuals trained in traditional disciplines such as history, English, and sociology; the other was composed of those radicalized during the period and claiming Black nationalism as their guiding principle.”<sup>8</sup>

In this construction the author wrongly implies that credentialed scholars in the radical faction were not also trained in history, English, sociology; and oversimplifies the reality that many ideologies other than nationalism, notably socialism and Marxism (and even integrationism and capitalism), were at play in this activist mix.

More than ideological complexity and richness, however, the author misses a crucial point regarding the fundamental nature of the confrontation and discourse into which Bundy inserted himself, bodily and symbolically, at the Yale conference. As this reviewer has already noted, “the political struggles over structure, departmental control, tenure, academic credit and other tools of academic legitimacy actually had a strong, epistemological basis,”<sup>9</sup> that was obscured in Ford advocates’ clumsy characterization of activists as “separatists” (who, therefore, should not be given the autonomy and authority of university departments). Thus, although

the discourse around African American Studies was often framed in terms of political ideology and/or organizational structure, it was, in fact, a set of underlying epistemological issues-- issues of determining what (and who), in fact, constitutes valid knowledge about black people and black communities--that united the various groups of the Black Studies movement who opposed the integrated, inclusionist model, based on

traditional disciplines and the epistemological framework they embodied.<sup>10</sup>

For activists, the principal line of struggle on the epistemological front was against the Academy's fundamental insistence that established disciplines represented "universal" truth and knowledge. Coupled with this insistence was the Academy's concerted rejection of the notion that there could be something like a "black perspective." As Yale historian David Brion Davis acknowledged, during the 1968 conference, students were "understandably suspicious of trite claims to universality which have demonstrably been used to justify slavery, enforced segregation, exploitation, and effacement of non-white, non-Western identities."<sup>11</sup> Some in the radical faction were indeed "separatist" in the political sense (actually, of course, in the modern and post-modern contexts, this term requires extensive parsing before it can have any real meaning). But the principal "separatism" that united the activist element was epistemological. They were "separatist" in the same sense that early sociologists were separatists when they endeavored to create a new discipline in order to address the issues and concerns they shared.

In Rooks's account, the activities and production of this part of the Black Studies tradition disappears after Yale when Bundy "set the terms of [Black Studies's] entrance into those hallowed halls."<sup>12</sup> Rooks adopts the perspective of Nathan Huggins's arguably flawed 1985 study to report that "few that started out as interdepartmental programs have achieved departmental status and, with it, the power and stability of departments."<sup>13</sup> With regard to Huggins's report – where Huggins was essentially "mouthing" the Ford Foundation "line"—my earlier study addresses, among other things, the fact that

Huggins's assessments do not anticipate how the view of Black Studies as a distinct field of study, and the view that the department comprises the most appropriate structure, have endured and actually grown in the most recent period. Programs which, whatever the circumstances of their origins, managed to survive through these periods of shakeout and transition have increasingly aspired to departmental status as the field continues to develop.<sup>14</sup>

This trend toward disciplinary concepts and departmental structures, including an accelerating trend of graduate level studies, endures, apparently in spite of the early efforts of Ford, that Rooks recounts, to impose its conception of Black Studies, through selective funding to universities moving to implement changes in the wake of the campus movements, which were peaking in those years. In making her argument Rooks ignored important sources that document the history of these efforts to organize, discipline-ize, and departmentalize the field (including the involvement of Ford Foundation funds in some of these efforts). One such source, not found in Rooks's bibliography, is the anthology *Out of the Revolution: The Development Of Africana Studies*, edited by Delores Aldridge and Carlene Young, both past presidents of the National Council for Black Studies.<sup>15</sup> An example of a single-authored work that endeavors, as does Rooks, to incorporate personal experience and reflection in an examination of the field's development is this reviewer's own, previously referenced work, *In The Vineyard: Working in African American Studies*.

As a result, an entire strain of the field's history is missing from this text. Two questions then arise: Which strain "matters" most in understanding and constructing the past, present, and future of African American Studies? And; to what degree do the book's arguments, regarding the present condition of the Black Studies project, apply to the strain it does not acknowledge or address?

Rooks's approach to the former issue is quantitative. While Ford funded requests from only two dozen out of more than 300 programs that came into existence in the 1968-71 period,<sup>16</sup> the foundation felt that it could "make an important contribution to the orderly development of this hitherto-neglected field of studies by helping a few strategic institutions," with the expectation that "some of the courses developed under these grants may set some standards of quality by which other institutions can measure and eventually revise their on offerings."<sup>17</sup> Thus, argues Rooks, "The foundation's choices regarding the types of programs and institutional structures it would support had far-ranging consequences for the future of Black Studies" with the apparent result that today, "the vast majority of the over 450 academic entities on college campuses are programs" and not academic departments (even though no direct evidence is presented that Ford's money, half of which was stretched over the period between 1971 and the late nineties<sup>18</sup>, was the proximate cause of this distribution).

On the other hand, the author reports that an African American Studies major is available in "*only* in 27 percent of colleges and universities" (emphasis added). (Not all majors are housed in departments, but most tend to be. And often the existence of a major is intended to be a step toward departmental status. Also, a list that includes information on 330 program, kept by the National Council for Black Studies, suggests that as many as a quarter of them may be departments.) In perspective, that actually seems like a large proportion (and certainly a large absolute number of all the colleges and universities in the country) since sociology, for example, had departments in only a few American universities at a comparable stage of its history as an academic discipline.

It also remains true that programs continue to seek departmental status, so the proportion is still growing.

More important than quantitative interpretation is a qualitative assessment as to what the activity in the field has been, and where it has come from. In 2006, a great body of work exists, forty years in its history, in Black Studies journals, monographs, books, and anthologies, that addresses issues in the community and the field, conditions of the past and present, cultural issues from various perspectives, and other topics that share the collective concern of active African American Studies scholars. All of this work is produced within a larger project to study black people in their collectivities and in their communities (i.e., “Black Studies”), and much of it comes from scholars working in Black Studies departmental or disciplinary frameworks. To give just two examples, the Institute of the Black World, formed out the efforts of activist scholars from the Black universities in Atlanta, did work, through scholarship, networking, and conferences, that was incredibly important to the development of the field, from the late 1960s until at least the 1980s, before its activities ceased (because of loss of funding). And the National Council for Black Studies, formed essentially from activist scholars in the mid-70s, (and completely committed to the concept of Black Studies as a stand-alone field of study) actually did receive funding from Ford in the early 1990s as it has endeavored to give definition and professional leadership to the field. None of the influential work done under the auspices of these formations (or a number of other important professional organizations, societies, and networks) is acknowledged or referenced in this narrative.

It is easy to make the judgment that this body of work “matters” more, when it comes to defining the development of African American Studies as a field of study,

especially if, as Rooks says, "...the success of the Ford Foundation's strategy of funding Black Studies programs has created a complex situation wherein institutions continue to use the field in order to diversify their institutions, but... [the program] is rarely viewed as the vibrant site of intellectual activity that it is..."<sup>19</sup> Apparently this was the situation Rooks found at her first job, where the university's professed commitment to building an African American Studies program apparently turned out to be too thin to hold her requests for support to develop an expanded curriculum. According to the author, the experience "illustrates the ways that Bundy's and Ford's strategy was a success yet simultaneously created a situation [where]... If I envisioned the program in terms of its academic and intellectual significance, the institution envisioned it as part and parcel of their two-pronged affirmative action effort to ensure a diverse faculty and student body" and apparently nothing more.<sup>20</sup>

Since this Ford-backed model is the only one that this book historicizes, it can be inferred that the early premise – that the early strategies funded by Bundy and the Ford Foundation currently threaten the very viability of African American Studies because it privileges a diversity function over an intellectual one – does not necessarily apply, or, at the very least, has to be considered separately in terms of its applicability to efforts that, despite not being supported by Ford funds, have survived, and often thrived, as independent departments and degree programs. On that score, although all programs are concerned with their role in increasing diversity in their institutional environment – and may even use those concerns strategically to parlay resources – it would seem that departments and independent programs have the purview, the stature, indeed the responsibility, to constitute themselves in terms of their true moral and intellectual

missions, and not become constrained by some non-academic, utilitarian function. In other words, while survival may be a struggle for such programs, they have more tools – other than the idea that they bring more black bodies – to build, or fight for if necessary, an efficacious place as part of an institution’s core mission.

Throughout this book there are numerous other sections and statements, large and small in significance, which appear flawed to this writer, who – starting as an undergraduate – has now spent nearly forty years as part of the Black Studies project. Neither me nor my readers’ energy and attention would likely endure a recitation of all of them. (For example, the last chapter contains a discussion of the increasing presence of Caribbean, Latin American, and continental Africans that could be useful, were it not thoroughly entangled with the basic structural and logical flaws of the book.) One final issue, however, that must be addressed concerns the presentation of the book’s main protagonist, McGeorge Bundy.

Like other sections of the book, the author’s contextualization of Bundy’s role during and before the Black Studies movement is clumsy and incomplete. After describing details of Bundy’s background as a bona fide, Brahman-born member of the Eastern Intellectual Establishment she acknowledges that

It is impossible to study the war in Vietnam without encountering McGeorge Bundy and his brother, William, who was the director of the CIA during the Johnson administration...The Bundy brothers were part of the intellectual establishment...of young white men who shaped and carried out America’s foreign policy during the 1960s. Both were instrumental in managing the Bay of Pigs incident and...the Cuban Missile Crisis.

She then concludes this introduction with this awkward transition sentence: “Although he had clearly been exposed to and immersed in political power for a great deal of his

life, it was his relationship with Black Power that would attract so much attention in his later years.”<sup>21</sup>

What is necessary to complete the picture is to understand that carrying out America’s Cold War foreign policy entailed systematic subversion (from deceptive diplomacy to coups and assassinations) of nationalist struggles for self-determination all over the black world and among colonized peoples of color in general. This is the context in which the section of the text that followed must be understood, in which the author recounts a short period at the beginning of Bundy’s leadership of the Ford Foundation when he appeared to support projects deemed as “militant” or “black power oriented,” before diametrically reversing his position by 1968, when he entered the Black Studies universe. Those who struggled for black power, liberation, and Black Studies surely came to link their perspectives with those struggles in the oppressed world, and it seems unlikely that Bundy, from his vantage point, did not do the same. In other words, administering policies that were essentially neo-colonialist, his consistent interest, whatever his outward presentation, would be in controlling, limiting, and directing the output of these struggles for self-determination, be they external or domestic. If Dr. Rooks is aware of this critical dimension of the “creation story” she tells, it does not show clearly. Her presentation of Bundy seems to verge on the heroic. She often uses forms of the verb “craft” to characterize the operations by which, she reports, he shaped the contour and focus of the field, seeming to connotatively imbue him with qualities and sensibilities of an artist or a sculptor. Sometimes the author appears to distort the narrative to give him more agency than his activities would appear to merit.

Making this presentation, the author creates problems of disinformation and extra work for younger and older generations of scholars respectfully. Disinformation is less a problem for those “of a certain age” who understand the context in which Bundy and other figures of the Cold War establishment operated; but they will have to do the extra work of apprising those younger students and scholars coming along who may be misled by presentations such as this. I assume that Dr. Rooks is both earnest and honest in her efforts as a scholar in African American Studies. There are, as indicated, ideas within her text that could bear fruitful discussion. However, in the form they have been presented – buried and entangled in flaws in logic and structure, and gaps in perspective – they are largely unusable.

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<sup>1</sup> Noliwe Rooks, *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 22

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 75

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> Perry A. Hall. *In The Vineyard: Working in African American Studies* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1999) 34.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Armstead L. Robinson, Craig C. Foster, and Donald H. Ogilvie, eds., *Black Studies in the University: A Symposium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 222.

<sup>12</sup> *Rooks*, 78

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Hall*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> *Out Of The Revolution: The Development Of Africana Studies*. Delores P. Aldridge and Carlene Young, eds. Lanham, MD : Lexington Books, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> *Rooks*, 58

<sup>17</sup> Roger Wilkins, “Inter-Office Memorandum from Roger Wilkins to McGeorge Bundy, Box 1 Folder 5; quoted in *Rooks*, 98.

<sup>18</sup> 10 million between 1968-72 *Ibid.* (77) and 20 million total by the late 1990s (131)

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.