CAAS ARCH PERSONS - FACULTY - PUBS - Sudarkasa, Nadia

THE CENTER FOR AFROAMERICAN AND AFRICAN STUDIES, 1970-75

by

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During the 1968-69 academic year, Dean Stephen Spurr of the Rackham School of Graduate Studies chaired a study committee on the feasibility of establishing a program in Afro-American studies at the University of Michigan. The committee was established at the impetus of Black students at the University of Michigan and in response to the general demand of Blacks across the nation that Black Studies Programs be made an integral part of university offerings. This demand represented a logical extension of both the Black Power movement and the earlier "sit-in" movement organized by college students. It also gave rise, during the late 1960's, to scholarly debates among American educators regarding the intellectual, educational, and social validity of such programs.

This debate created a crisis in American higher education. Factions representing progressive and "establishment" Blacks and those representing conservative and liberal non-Blacks, all articulated their points of view with great vehemence. The various types of Black Studies or Afro-American Studies programs that were fashioned as a result of this nation-wide debate are watered-down versions of the earlier, more radical demands.

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They are, in essence, compromises between the values of the conservatives and liberals, black and white. But they are compromises that have not satisfied any group. Radical critics of such programs are unhappy because they have no academic or political "clout". Few of them are tenure-granting units and most of them are denied the academic legitimacy they deserve. The conservative critics—non-Blacks and Blacks alike—refuse to take them seriously, in any case, believing firmly that they are unfortunate enclaves in academic communities, justified only because of the desire to stem the tide of Black militancy.

The Spurr study committee had joined this debate officially when it made its deliberations the topic of a conference held at the University of Michigan in May, 1969. By the summer of the same year, the plan to establish a Program in Afro-American Studies was inaugurated with its main feature being a year-long course on Afro-American History. Harold Cruse, whose Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (published in 1967) had made him one of the most widely read Black historians and social critics, was recruited to serve as the Program's first director.

The Black Action Movement (BAM), a coalition of Black student organizations, formed during the 1969-70 academic year for the purpose of lobbying on behalf of increased Black enrollment, recruitment of Black faculty, and increase of supportive academic services for Black students enrolled at the University of Michigan, included as one of its "Demands" the establishment at the University of a full-fledged Center for Afro-American Studies. The Proposal for this Center was drawn up by J. Frank Yates, Assistant to the Dean of L.S.A.

The Yates Proposal, adopted by BAM, called for a Center for Afro-American Studies with three basic components, namely, research, teaching, and service. Later, in response to arguments put forth by Gloria Marshall (Niara Sudarkasa), then Assistant Professor of Anthropology, a fourth component concerned specifically with African Studies was added to the Center's structure. The function of the Research component "would be to foster and to coordinate research at the University dealing with the black experience and black people within the United States, both from a historical and a modern perspective." Although the Center would be concerned with some "programmatic research" as well, it was conceived primarily as a research "clearing house" whose "publications would be a vehicle for the dissemination of information and research findings." The Teaching component "would serve as a coordinating body for instruction in Afroamerican topics both at the graduate and the undergraduate level(s)." The Service component "would be a mechanism by which the skills of individuals at the University could be devoted to special community concerns, and through which a certain number of students might gain internship experience, particularly in the social sciences, through work in the community." The Africa component "would be concerned with Africa and its relationship to the modern and historical American situation." Thus, the original idea was broadened into a proposal for a Center for Afroamerican and African Studies (henceforth, CAAS).

CAAS was to be run by "a Director assisted by Chairmen (who were officially appointed as 'Associate Directors') designated for the four major areas of activity: Research, Teaching, Service and African Studies." With the exception of the research staff and visiting lecturers who might

have their primary appointment in CAAS alone, the core faculty would hold joint appointments with existing departments. The Director was to be assisted also by an executive committee and would "report directly to the Dean of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts." The establishment of CAAS was formally approved by the Regents in the summer of 1970.

From CAAS' inception, the linkage of Afroamerican and African Studies within a single institutional framework precipitated considerable debate among the faculty. The view which prevailed was that the study of Africa, Afroamerica, and the Caribbean within a single intellectual framework was not only defensible but represented the future direction of Black Studies. Indeed, by the mid 1970's, Black Studies had become increasingly conceptualized as the study of Africa and the African Diaspora. CAAS is one of the few Black Studies programs in which the comparative emphasis was built into its structure from the beginning.

A major strength of CAAS has been the interdisciplinary character of its curriculum and the international character of its faculty. In the 1970-71 academic year, CAAS started with a core faculty of 13 teaching a large number of courses relative to its size. The faculty consisted of ten Black Americans, two West Indians, and one African who held appointments either solely in the Center or jointly with other units of the University. In addition, there were four faculty members who taught courses cross-listed with CAAS's offerings but who were not on its budget. These offerings encompassed courses in anthropology, art, education, history, literature, law, psychology, and political

science. The staff also included teaching fellows, research assistants, and student interns. From its inception, the Center had a Writer-in-Residence (or a Scholar-in-Residence) program as well as a visiting faculty program which brought distinguished Black faculty to the University.

By the 1975-76 academic year there had been a turn-over in the core faculty but their number remained at 13, of whom nine were Black Americans, three African, and one West Indian. Of these, eight held appointments only within CAAS and five held joint appointments with other units. Six other faculty members taught courses cross-listed with CAAS's offerings but they were not on its budget. Individuals of professorial rank still continued to hold joint appointments with University departments. There was only a slight growth in the number of teaching fellows, research assistants, visiting lecturers, and interns. Courses in sociology and economics were added to the Center's offerings.

As of 1975, the CAAS faculty had not grown in number in spite of the turnover in personnel, but the goal was professional prominence, not size. There is no doubt that CAAS has been very successful in this respect. Its faculty members and faculty associates serve on editorial boards of several professional journals, hold positions in several national and international organizations, serve as officers of specialized societies, and several are listed in various national and international Who's Who. Their collective publication record is impressive; and CAAS directors have always been generous in supporting faculty publications. It is no secret in the profession today that the CAAS faculty and associates are regarded as perhaps the very best in the country in Afroamerican and

African Studies. This success has been achieved at some cost, however, namely the gradual movement away from the original ideal of a community-oriented center, one socially relevant, politically virile, proudly Black, intellectually and academically iconoclastic, and triumphantly unique. Well-meaning critics regret CAAS' loss of innocence, so to speak, and fear that by moving it closer and closer to the mainstream of the University's life, it will lose its direction eventually and, consequently, the raison d' etre of its existence.

In 1970-71, a total number of 1,026 students enrolled at CAAS; another 424 who enrolled in other units took courses offered through CAAS. In 1975-76, the comparative figures were 1,658 and 2,262 respectively. (See Table II). CAAS' concentration plan requires 30 credit hours of courses, including two courses that focus on Black Americans and two on Blacks outside the United States. At least 18 hours included in the concentration plan must be selected from upper-division courses. CAAS is working toward the development of a Masters Degree Program in Afroamerican and African Studies.

The original home of CAAS was 715 Haven Street, which housed the Library until 1978. In the summer of 1972, the CAAS administrative offices moved to 1100 South University, second floor. Its present abode is Lorch Hall, located at 909 Monroe Street. The administrative/clerical staff numbered four in 1970-71. The figure has remained constant.

Over the years, CAAS has undertaken various activities designed to promote Afroamerican and African studies within the University community. The ongoing CAAS Colloquium Series, initiated in 1970, is as old as the Center itself. Its emphasis is on Comparative Black Studies, and it affords

the University community at large the opportunity to listen to, and exchange ideas with, national and international experts in that field of study. In the early years of CAAS' existence, a Speaker Series served as a useful vehicle for the presentation of a wide range of Black thought, opinion, and talent. Since 1970, the Library has developed a collection of basic as well as rare materials dealing with Comparative Black Studies. The CAAS Monograph and Report Series was initiated in 1971 to serve as a vehicle through which scholars in Black Studies could make available to the academic community the results of their original researches. CAAS' occasional publications also included Black Studies Abstracts and The Tide, a student magazine. The Study in the Black World Exchange Program, headed by Professor G.N. Uzoigwe, was begun in 1970. Between 1970 and 1976, at least a dozen Black American undergraduate students studied in African and Caribbean universities under its auspicies. A West Indian undergraduate student and an African graduate student also studied at the University of Michigan under its auspices. The Ujamaa Gathering, an informal bi-weekly program sponsored jointly with the William Monroe Trotter House, afforded the faculty, staff, and students the opportunity to interact with their African and Caribbean colleagues and members of the Ann Arbor communtiy.