

# Teaching Black Studies At The University Of California, Berkeley: A Case Study Of Marvin X And The Afro-American Studies Program

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## *Abstract*

*This paper presents a case study of Marvin X and his experiences with teaching Black studies at the University of California, Berkeley during the 1970s. Using in-depth interviews and archival research, this paper focuses on the status and role of Marvin X as a member of the faculty in the Afro-American Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley. This paper also details some of the successes and problems encountered by Marvin X at the University of California, Berkeley. In addition, this paper addresses some implications of Marvin X's lecturer status at the University of California, Berkeley.*

## **Introduction**

During the 1960s, many programs and departments in Black Studies emerged within academia. Unlike the programs and departments in African Area Studies, the programs and departments in Black Studies came from below and not from above. On the one hand, African Area Studies entered the curricula primarily through the efforts of White faculty, White administrators, and White corporations. On the other hand, Black Studies entered the curricula primarily through the efforts of Black students, Black faculty, and concerned members of various Black communities (Cromartie, 1993).

The first Black Studies Program to emerge during the 1960s developed at Merritt College with Fritz Pointer as the first chairman. Among the students who led the struggle to establish the program at Merritt College were Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and their friend Marvin X. The first Black Studies Department to emerge during the 1960s at a four-year college or university took place at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) with Nathan Hare as the first chairman. Marvin X also played a role in the struggle for Black Studies at San Francisco State although he was out of the state during the landmark 1968 strike (X, 1998; Brown, 2004; Cromartie, 1993).

Eventually, Marvin X taught at a number of institutions with fledging programs or departments in Black Studies. Between 1969 and 1982, which was a crucial period in the institutionalization of Black Studies, he taught Black Studies courses at Fresno State College (now Fresno State University); University of California, Berkeley; San Francisco State; Mills College; University of Nevada, Reno; Laney College; and Kings River Community College (X, 1998).

The purpose of this paper is to present a case study of Marvin X and his experiences with teaching Black studies at the University of California, Berkeley during the 1970s. Making use of in-depth interviews and archival research, this paper will focus on the status and role of Marvin X as a member of the faculty in the Afro-American Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley. This paper will also detail some of the successes and problems encountered by Marvin X at the University of California, Berkeley. In addition, this paper will address some implications of Marvin X's lecturer status at the University of California, Berkeley.

## **Status and Role of Marvin X at the University of California, Berkeley**

During the early 1970s, Marvin X was contracted as a lecturer in the Afro-American Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley. At the time, the Afro-American Studies Program was one of several programs in

the Ethnic Studies Department. The other programs in the Ethnic Studies Department included Asian American Studies, Chicano Studies, and Native American Studies (Wang, 1997).<sup>1</sup>

Marvin X was hired to teach a course titled Afro-American Studies 168 Black Theatre. The *Supplementary Announcements to the Schedule and Directory and the General Catalogue Fall Quarter, 1971* (University of California, Berkeley, 1971) announced “Afro-American Studies 168 Black Theatre” as a new course and described it as follows:

Three hours lecture and two hours laboratory per week. Prerequisites—knowledge of black history, culture, and philosophy. Designed to give students practical and theoretical knowledge of black plays and rituals. Students will study and perform the works of black playwrights, and other black drama groups to do a comparative analysis. Black playwrights, actors, and directors will be invited to class for a discussion of their work. Students with original writings will be able to have their works read and discussed in class. (p. 1)

The *Supplementary Announcements to the Schedule and Directory and the General Catalogue Fall Quarter, 1971* indicated that the course would be taught by “Mr. Mahajir,” which was a non de plume of Marvin X.

As a lecturer in the Afro-American Studies Department, the role of Marvin X was to teach students who enrolled in the course. In an interview conducted with him on March 8, 2009, Marvin X informed the present writer that he taught the course partially on the campus and partially in San Francisco at a place he co-founded called Black Educational Theatre. Marvin X also reported to the present writer that he could not recall when he taught his first course at the University of California, Berkeley. He expressed that his first course may have been offered in the fall 1971 quarter, winter 1972 quarter, or the spring 1972 quarter. However, on May 28, 2009, Nisa Ra, one of his former students in the course, told the present writer that she took Marvin X’s class in the fall 1971 quarter. In addition, during the March 8, 2009 interview, Marvin X stated to the present writer that he was given a contract in the summer 1972 quarter to teach another course in the Afro-American Studies Program. According to Marvin X, he was hired to teach a course in place of Ken Moshesh. Marvin X stated that he received the contract that summer because Moshesh was not available and needed a substitute.

In his books *In the Crazy House Called America* and *Wish I Could Tell You the Truth*, Marvin X (2002, 2005) has listed 1972 as the year he taught at the University of California, Berkeley. David Hansen, a reference librarian at the Bancroft Library, informed the present writer on March 16, 2009 that the official records for the 1971 and 1972 schedules and directories for University of California, Berkeley in its Bancroft Library are incomplete. Close examination of the University of California, Berkeley’s (1971b, 1971c) schedules and directories for the winter 1972 quarter and the spring 1972 quarter indicates that Marvin X and his typical non de plume were not listed in either. It very well may be that the University of California, Berkeley listed his name and course on a supplementary list that could not be located by the present writer or the reference librarian. As mentioned above, the non de plume of Marvin X is mentioned in the *Supplementary Announcements to the Schedule and Directory and the General Catalogue Fall Quarter, 1971*.

Nevertheless, if Marvin X is correct, the summer appointment proved to be his final one at the University of California, Berkeley. Marvin X has maintained that he was let go at the University of California, Berkeley in an effort by the administrators to purge radicals from the Afro-American Studies Program and replace them with academicians deemed safer.

### **Successes of Marvin X at the University of California, Berkeley**

As mentioned above, Marvin X (1998, 2002, & 2005) has written that he taught at the University of California, Berkeley in 1972. Although his stint at the University of California, Berkeley proved to be short-lived, Marvin X touched the lives of many students on that campus, including the aforementioned Nisa Ra. Eventually, Nisa Ra changed her name from Greta Pope and married Marvin X.

While teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, Marvin X also produced and staged his play titled *Resurrection of the Dead*. The play was actually written when he was active with the New Lafayette Theatre in

New York. Marvin X has described the play as “a myth/ritual dance drama.” In addition to Nisa Ra as a dancer, the play featured Victor Willis as lead singer. Willis later became the lead singer of the Village People. The cast members in the play also included Amina Grant and Jamila Hunter. At a ceremony during the production of the play, Nisa Ra and other cast members received African names.

After leaving the University of California, Berkeley, Marvin X continued to be productive in 1972. He traveled to Mexico, Trinidad, and Guyana. Marvin X also interviewed the Guyana’s Prime Minister, Forbes Burnham, and published the interview in the *Black Scholar*.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Marvin X (1972) published a book of poems, proverbs, lyrics, and parables titled *Woman—Man’s Best Friend*.

### **Problems of Marvin X at the University of California, Berkeley**

In 1964, Malcolm X, on the lecture circuit, gave a presentation at the University of California, Berkeley. Among the 7,000 people in Sproul Plaza that day to hear Malcolm X, there stood Marvin X. Malcolm X deeply impressed Marvin X with his articulate analysis of social conditions in the USA. Marvin X was also impressed by Malcolm X’s advocacy of Black nationalism. By the time he heard Malcolm X, Marvin X had already been introduced to Black nationalism as an ideology by Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, Ernie Allen, and others. Marvin X (2005) has related that it was at Merritt College where “I had the fortune or misfortune of being educated on the steps of the college by Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Ernie Allen and others on the merits of Black Nationalism” (p. 17).

With regard to Malcolm X, Marvin X (2002) has written that, “When Malcolm X spoke before seven thousand students at U. C. Berkeley’s Sproul Plaza (1964), I was in the audience. When he was assassinated, we wore black armbands to express our grief San Francisco State University, actor Danny Glover among us” (pp. 93-94). Marvin X (2002) has also stated that, “Malcolm’s oratory influenced me to consider Elijah’s Islamic Black Nationalism while I was a student at Oakland’s Merritt College, along with Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Ernie Allen and others who became the new black intelligentsia, the direct product of Malcolm, Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah and Elijah” (p. 93).

That same year, in 1964, Marvin X earned an AA degree in sociology at the Merritt College. Marvin X also enrolled as an undergraduate at San Francisco State. However, in 1966, he left the institution without earning a degree. Marvin X (2005) has informed us that, “After dropping out of San Francisco State in 1966, I was drafted. I fled to Canada” (p. 17). By that time, Marvin X had worked briefly as a research assistant at the University of California, Berkeley writing life histories of Black people under the supervision of sociologist Dean Lohman. Marvin X had also written and staged his first play, *Flowers for the Trashman*, at San Francisco State. In addition, Marvin X’s essays and poems had begun to appear in such periodicals as *Soulbook*, *Black Dialogue*, and the *Journal of Black Poetry*. He would later publish in *Black Theatre*, *Muhammad Speaks*, *Negro Digest* (later *Black World*), and *Black Scholar* (X, 1998).

Some eight years later, Marvin X would also be addressing students at the University of California, Berkeley. Whereas Malcolm X had addressed the students as a circuit lecturer, Marvin X addressed them as a classroom lecturer. However, at that time, Marvin X only possessed an AA degree in sociology from Merritt College. Marvin X (1998) has recalled, “In 1972, before I obtained additional degrees, and after being kicked out of Fresno State, I lectured in Black Studies at U C Berkeley” (pp. 203-204). Doubtlessly, it was the publication record and playwright experience that landed Marvin X a post as a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley. However, it can also be surmised that his lack of graduate degree created a problem for him.<sup>3</sup>

Another problem for Marvin X was the political stances he took. Prior to becoming employed as a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, Marvin X had worked as a lecturer at Fresno State. Although he was relatively popular with the students, the political activities of Marvin X alienated him from the Fresno State administrators and their superiors, including Ronald Reagan.

With regard to Ronald Reagan, Marvin X (2005) has said: “Gov. Ronald Reagan banned me from teaching at Fresno State College, 1969, after he learned I had refused to fight in Vietnam” (p. 17). Marvin X added: “Gov. Reagan had told the State College Board of Trustees to get ‘Marvin X off campus by any means necessary’” (p. 19).

Whereas Reagan launched a vigorous move to oust Eldridge Cleaver as a lecturer in 1968 at the University of California, Berkeley and Angela Davis as an acting assistant professor in 1969 at the University of California, Los Angeles, he also launched a similar move against Marvin X in 1969 at Fresno State.<sup>4</sup> The October 31, 1969 issue of the *Fresno Bee* quoted Reagan as beginning a meeting of the California State University System Board of Trustees with the following statement about Marvin X: “If there is any way to get him off campus—that’s the question I’m going to ask today. I’d like to find out” (Quoted in “Reagan,” 1969, p. 6-A).<sup>5</sup> By the time he began to teach at the University of California, Berkeley, Marvin X had served five months in prison related to military draft resistance and subsequent flights to Canada, Mexico, and Belize (X, 1998, 2005).

Marvin X has explicitly stated that his radical ways caused a problem for him at the University of California, Berkeley and elsewhere. Looking back on his particular experience at the University of California, Berkeley, Marvin X (2005) has said that his “lectureship was short-lived because the entire black studies faculty was purged by the administration for being too radical” (p. 19). He further stated:

Acceptable negro scholars were hired and UC Berkeley joined the nationwide trend of removing black radicals from black studies programs. Black studies returned to the old mission of a handful of handkerchief head negroes containing the field negroes, making sure they don’t revolt. This happened at UC Berkeley, San Francisco State University, San Jose State University and elsewhere across the country. Yes, I was angry that reactionary negro intellectuals were hired to teach black studies, negroes who cared nothing about black studies or black people—all they wanted was a job for life, tenured negroes we call them.  
(pp. 19-20)

He has argued that his experiences in academia reflect the plight of many Black people who sought to teach in higher education.

Following Cecil Brown (2004), Marvin X has identified foreign-born Black professoriate as those who were selected to replace native-born Black professoriate. Marvin X posed:

Cecil noted that after that initial radical thrust to establish black studies in the 1960s, they were immediately removed from the student body and the faculty of colleges and universities coast to coast. I taught at UC Berkeley during the first and last radical black studies regime that was soon replaced with “tenured negroes.” The system realized who and what we were and knew we had to go, after all, the system could not contain us. This happened at UCB, San Francisco State University, Fresno State University and elsewhere, coast to coast. We were immediately replaced with acceptable Negroes, the more pliant variety of military types, intelligence agents, and yes, in many cases, immigrant negroes more acceptable to the colonial college administrators. Thus Africans and Caribbean Negroes were in many cases less radical, even though much of the African American radical tradition comes from immigrants, such as Marcus Garvey, CLR James, Dr. Walter Rodney, George Padmore, Kwame Toure, Malcolm X and Farakhan. (p. 83)

He continued:

And we must ask ourselves would we rather have a radical immigrant African in black studies or a reactionary Negro only because he is a Negro. But Cecil’s point is that the American academic system feels the immigrant Negroes/Africans are easier to control than the violent black American male. So the truth is immigrants have replaced Negroes coast to coast, but even black American males who remain are of the passive variety, and those with a Pan African ideology or Afrocentric approach to black studies are often at odds with the original mission of black studies that was to focus on the plight of the so-called negro in the ghettos of America, how to uplift him out of his morass and degradation. The focus on Africa and Pan Africanism was secondary to this central focus, but such a focus by definition requires a radical intellectualism that the University industrial complex of necessity must avoid. (p. 83)

By the time he was hired as a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, Marvin X had developed a stance on the direction he believed the Black Studies Movement should take. Reflecting back on the Black Studies Movement, Marvin X has written:

The purpose of Black Studies as we envisioned it and went to war for at San Francisco State University was to relate to the community, to establish institutions in the community that would educate the coming generations in community service, including politics, economics, culture and art. But Black Studies reverted to Eurocentric patterns of ivory tower academic nonsense, with graduates hating the hood and happy they escaped to somewhere in the den of iniquity called Corporate America. (p. 41)

For Marvin X, the mission of the department or program in Black Studies was to serve the Black community with the provision of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed cultural capital.<sup>6</sup> He has taken the position that the Black Studies Movement has been taken over by faculty with little loyalty to Black people. Instead of community service, Marvin X has charged that many contemporary Black professors ignore their obligations to help the Black community and instead choose to engage in relatively esoteric research which will collect dust on shelves and few people will ever read.

In the view of Marvin X (2005), White people have too much power in Black Studies “because we know, in truth, black studies is more or less white studies, rather than turning out activist-scholars, it recycles negroes, giving birth to new generations of colonial servants” (p. 88). He has complained:

The activist scholars were long ago removed from academia as a threat to Western scholarship and community liberation. Safe, qualified negroes were brought in who would control the natives and have them chasing rocks in Egypt rather than stopping gunshots in the hood by providing alternative consciousness. . . . Rather than searching for bones in Egypt, the community would be better served giving consciousness to dry bones in the hood. (X, 2005, pp. 88-89)

Marvin X (2005) has further exclaimed that, “The mission of black studies awaits redemption and African Americans must again crash the gates of academia or construct their own radical academic institutions” (p. 85). He added: “Black studies should institute a recruitment drive to get black males and females back on campus but only if the mission is self and community development, not esoteric journeys to the Motherland” (p. 85). Marvin X has argued that if contemporary professors of Black Studies want to be acceptable to the ancestors in Africa it will be important for them to “make peace with the trees and swamps and bayous of Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana” (p. 85). Likewise, Marvin X has argued that contemporary professors of Black Studies need to connect with Black people in the ghetto. In his view, it is necessary for contemporary professors of Black Studies to “make peace with them” and “teach them to make peace with themselves” (p. 85).

During the early 1970s, Marvin X, nevertheless, saw the handwriting on the wall, as the saying goes. He realized that departments and programs in Black Studies were moving towards requiring lecturers to have graduate degrees. Within one year of his departure from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1973, Marvin X returned to San Francisco State. Consequently, he completed a BA degree in English in 1974. The following year, in 1975, Marvin X proceeded to earn a MA in English from San Francisco State. In 1974, Marvin X began to teach at San Francisco State as a lecturer. His courses included Black literature, journalism, radio and television writing. Eventually, he left San Francisco State to become a lecturer at Mills College. He later worked at University of Nevada, Reno, Laney College, and Kings River Community College before retiring from teaching (X, 1998).<sup>7</sup>

### **Implications of the Lecturer Status for Marvin X in the University**

Shamos (2002) has examined the use of titles within higher education institutions in the USA, including the University of California, Berkeley. He has made it clear that there are socially defined positions identified as academic rank in higher education institutions such as the University of California, Berkeley.

In terms of the professoriate at research institutions like the University of California, Berkeley, the highest to low positions include professor, associate professor, assistant professor, lecturer, and instructor. On the one hand,

the tenured professor is generally the highest academic rank in the university among the professoriate. On the other hand, the instructor is generally the lowest academic rank in the university among the professoriate (Shamos, 2002).

Typically, the lecturer position in a university is a non-tenured academic rank. Lecturers are often employed in a university on a year to year or semester to semester basis. In some cases, there is a written or non-written agreement to bring the lecturer back to teach year after year (Shamos, 2002).

In the case of Marvin X, he was hired on a semester to semester basis. Thus, he had to (1) face the significant consequence of not having a tenure-track position; and (2) face the significant consequence of being able to get terminated at the end of a given semester without having a tenure review board as a safety net.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This paper has presented a case study of Marvin X and his experiences with teaching Black studies in 1972 at the University of California, Berkeley. Making use of in-depth interviews and archival research, this paper has focused on the status and role of Marvin X as a member of the faculty in the Afro-American Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley. This paper has also detailed some of the successes and problems encountered by Marvin X at the University of California, Berkeley. Additionally, this paper has addressed some implications of Marvin X's lecturer status at the University of California, Berkeley.

In 2001, Cornel West, on the lecture circuit, gave a presentation at the University of California, Berkeley. During his talk, West acknowledged his mother, brother, nephew, and cousin. West also acknowledged Marvin X as a friend. As a result of writing, teaching, and political activism, Marvin X has proven to be a well known figure among Black academicians and Black political activists.

Over the years, the poems, essays, plays, and autobiography of Marvin X have painted pictures of a man committed to the pursuit of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In 1967, he was drafted into the military of the USA. Marvin X (2002) has written that he refused induction and fled to Canada "to preserve my life and liberty, and to pursue happiness" (p. 93).<sup>8</sup> During the years he taught in higher education, Marvin X inspired his students to commit themselves to the pursuit of life, liberty, and justice. Marvin X is a testament to the teaching and learning that have taken place within the Black Studies Movement at the University of California, Berkeley and elsewhere.

### **Notes**

1. As Wang (1997) pointed out, Afro-American Studies made the transition from program status to department status in 1974.
2. For the interview with Forbes Burnham, see Marvin X (1973). It was conducted in September 1972.
3. Marvin X (1998) has expressed that the White administrators at Fresno State raised the issue of his lack of a graduate degree. According to Marvin X, "In my case, the college said I had minimal qualifications because I only possessed an A.A. degree at the time, although no degree is necessary to lecture at a California college or university. There were numerous lecturers at Fresno State College and other schools who possessed no degree" (p. 203).
4. Ronald Reagan, the governor of California, stated, "If Eldridge Cleaver is allowed to teach our children, they may come home one night and slit our throats" (Quoted in Auther, 1998). For information on his experience at Fresno State, see Marvin X (1998, 2005, 2008) and Patterson (1969a, 1969b).
5. For a photo copy of that article, see Marvin X (1998, p. 209).
6. See Bourdieu (2007) for a discussion of cultural capital as a theorem "to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes and class factions" (p. 84).
7. In the spring 1981 semester at Laney College, the present writer was a student of Marvin X. He took a class with Marvin X titled "Theatre Arts." As partial credit for the class, the present writer wrote a play titled "A Day in the Life of Hughes, Langston." The play was later staged at the College of Alameda in Alameda, CA and the Egypt Theater in Oakland, CA. The present writer also wrote a review of Marvin X's play titled "In the Name of Love" for partial credit for the class. The play featured Zahieb Mwongozi (Craig Erving) in the lead role and was directed by Ayodele Nzinga. The review was published in the *Grassroots*, a community newspaper based in Berkeley, CA. See Cromartie (1982).

8. Prior to his teaching stint at the University of California, Berkeley, Marvin X was tried and convicted of draft resistance in 1971. For his summation at his trial wherein he made his relatively famous statement concerning life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, see Marvin X (1971).

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