

Rethinking Black Studies

## You Can't Do That Without Organization

Lee D. Baker

**W**e are for a vanishing policy,” declared Merrill E. Gates during his 1899 presidential address to the influential reform group called the Lake Mohonk Friends of the Indian.<sup>1</sup> Gates was echoing the familiar refrain of Major Richard C. Pratt, the superintendent of the U.S. Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, who agreed, in part, with the idea that “the only good Indian was a dead one.” As Pratt saw it, “all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”<sup>2</sup> Pratt and Gates were important figures during the so-called Assimilation Era when the federal government fused land allotment to industrial education in an explicit effort to quicken slow processes of Indian evolution from savage pagan to civilized Christian.

In 1928, however, Lewis Meriam explained in his historic report that “some Indians proud of their race and devoted to their culture . . . have no desire to be as the white man is. They wish to remain Indians.” He explained that many “intelligent, liberal whites who find real merit in . . . things which may be covered by the broad term culture” advocate a policy that goes so far, “metaphorically speaking, as to enclose these Indians in a glass case to preserve them as museum specimens for future generations to study and enjoy, because of the value of their culture and its picturesqueness in a world rapidly advancing in high organization and mass production.”

“With this view,” Meriam reported, “the survey staff has great sympathy.”<sup>3</sup> With the help of John Collier, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s politically savvy Commissioner of Indian Affairs, many of the recommendations that Meriam and his staff advanced found their way into the Wheeler-Howard Act of 1934. Better known as the Indian Reorganization Act, this was a sweeping piece of New Deal legislation that curtailed future allotments, empowered local governments, and set up structures to enable improved health, education, land acquisition, and cultural preservation. Despite the fact that this “New Deal” for the Indian has routinely been denounced as a raw deal by most American Indians, broadly construed, the tumultuous period of Indian assimilation began with the passing of the Dawes General Allotment Act (1887) and ended with the Wheeler-Howard Act (1934).

By explicitly employing macabre metaphors, proponents of assimilation barely veiled their desires for genocide, albeit couched in the name of progress and the advance of Christian civilization. A generation later, however, cultural preservation and self determination became the watch-words of federal policies governing Native Americans. Implicitly and at times explicitly, one can view this shift in terms of the federal government's promulgation of policies to first destroy and then protect American Indian culture. The dramatic shift in Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) policies mirrored shifts in American popular culture, aesthetics, and attitudes toward traditional or authentic Native American cultures.

The world-renowned potter Maria Martinez (1887–1980), from San Ildefonso Pueblo, New Mexico, experienced this transformation in a telling way. As a young woman, she was exhibited in the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis as a primitive on the bottom rungs of the evolutionary ladder, as evidenced by her quaint but crude pottery. In 1933, however, Martinez received a special invitation to exhibit her highly touted and exquisite pottery at the “A Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago” and fetched a bronze medal. While her pots remained basically the same, Americans perceptions changed; at the turn of the century Indians were thought to be on their way out, but by the 1930s they were very much “in”—the simple had become the sublime.<sup>4</sup>

The discipline of anthropology and its emerging concept of culture played an increasingly important part in this dramatic shift in federal Indian policy and American culture as it slowly, although never surely, made its way through the Wounded Knee massacre, Chinese exclusion, the Spanish-American War, U.S. acquisition of island territories, Jim Crow segregation, the Progressive Era, World War I, and the Harlem Renaissance.

During this period anthropology became a powerful discipline that scientifically explained, described, and preserved “races and peoples” who were out of bounds, culturally distinct, vanishing, or somehow viewed as primitive. With few exceptions, early anthropological enquiry used “the Indians as the chief subject of investigation.”<sup>5</sup> Although my research is highly critical of anthropology's role in constructing the image of the culturally distinct Indian, this image was important in bolstering the so-called Indian New Deal that articulated a kind of anti-modernism. The reason why the discipline could affect public policy in important ways was because it had a strong organizational presence in Washington. And despite my argument that anthropology was to the image of the Indian as minstrelsy was to the image of Blackness, I admire how these well-meaning liberals used their national organization to lobby against land acquisitions, protect Native North Americans' First Amendment rights, and help to steer New Deal legislation in a direction that tried to empower Native peoples.

More recently, the power of a strong national organization was apparent in *Grutter v. Bollinger, et al.* (2003), which affirmed the Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit ruling that the University of Michigan Law School could employ “narrowly tailored use of race in admissions decisions to further a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body.” The Court carefully endorsed Justice Lewis Powell's opinion in *Regents of Univ. of Cal. v. Bakke* (1978) “that student

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body diversity is a compelling state interest that can justify using race in university admissions.”

Critical to Sandra Day O'Connor's majority opinion were the many “friend of the court” briefs that poured in to support Michigan's case. As she noted in her opinion, she relied on “reports” as well as “numerous studies” cited in the briefs that show “student body diversity promotes learning outcomes.” She directly quoted a brief prepared by the American Educational Research Association, explaining how a diverse student body “better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce and society, and better prepares them as professionals.”

Clearly it was the idea that “diversity makes productive citizens,” which made affirmative action a compelling state interest and not that it enhances learning and enriches students' understanding of the world. O'Connor gave more weight to briefs submitted by 3M, IBM, General Motors, and a group of retired military officers, all of whom supported the law school's policies and the need for affirmative action, than to briefs submitted by scholars. Nevertheless, the range of social science research in the briefs was compelling and gave her argument legitimacy and authority. Sadly, Black Studies scholarship was absent from the dozens of books, reports, and articles that bolstered briefs submitted by the American Sociological Association, the American Psychological Association, and American Educational Research Association.

Black Studies did not offer much in terms of research this time, but it is not too late. An integral part of the admissions process of selective schools is reaching a critical mass of under represented students of color. O'Connor was vague and explained that a critical mass was simply “a number that encourages underrepresented minority students to participate in the classroom and not feel isolated,” but she emphasized that “the Law School's goal of attaining a critical mass of underrepresented minority students does not transform its program into a quota.” Chief Justice Rhenquist, along with Associate Justices Scalia, Kennedy, and Thomas balked and hammered on this one point. Scalia called “the University of Michigan Law School's mystical ‘critical mass’ [a] justification for its discrimination by race,” and Rhenquist argued that “stripped of its ‘critical mass’ veil, the Law School's program is revealed as a naked effort to achieve racial balancing.” Scalia went so far as to invite more lawsuits, suggesting that “some future lawsuits will presumably focus on whether the discriminatory scheme in question . . . has so zealously pursued its ‘critical mass’ as to make it an unconstitutional de facto quota system, rather than merely ‘a permissible goal.’” Sooner than later, lawsuits will be filed probing this very issue and

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Black Studies, its departments, and our students are well suited to explore this issue. The dissenting justices were hell bent on quantifying a “critical mass,” and Black Studies scholars will be well positioned to offer proponents of affirmative action research and analysis that can define a “critical mass.”

Social science organizations have been vital in the *Brown* decision, welfare reform, federal HIV/AIDS initiatives, the countless battles to recognize Native American tribes, and many other cases. Whereas Black Studies has a plethora of organic and public intel-

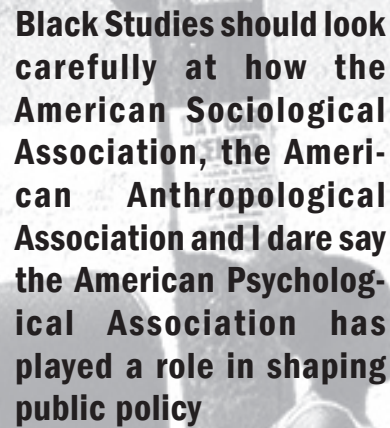


*The Healing.* Photo © Ami Vitale / Panos

lectuals, and an array of scholars whose work directly impacts such things as the prison system, fair housing, and disease, rarely do these high-powered and highly visible intellectuals participate in the leadership and building of our two professional organizations—the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS) whose members have been laboring for three decades and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) whose members have been working diligently since 1916. Although in recent years both NCBS and ASALH have experienced growth and stability, professors from the strongest Black Studies programs in the country could make a more concerted effort in developing, building, and strengthening these important institutions. Both NCBS and ASALH should be important vehicles that unite and strengthen Black Studies departments across the country. More importantly, having strong national organizations could help strengthen Black Studies programs because it might help coordinate teams to facilitate more effective departmental review processes, which occur at even the smallest programs. With departments and programs increasingly granting tenure, having a strong discipline specific organization could also greatly increase the prospects of junior faculty members being evaluated fairly and effectively.

In some respects, Black Studies should look carefully at how the American Sociological Association, the American Anthropological Association, and I dare say the American Psychological Association have played roles in shaping public policy, often in terms inimical to the interests of Black and brown people. We simply need more scholars in the field to invest in and commit to developing strong and powerful national and even international organizations that can have a seat at the national policy table. The inestimable words of A. Philip Randolph should have taught us that “at the banquet table of nature, there are no reserved seats. You get what you can take and you keep what you can hold. If you can’t take anything, you won’t get anything; and if you can’t hold anything, you won’t keep anything. And, you can’t take anything without organization.”





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## Notes

1. Merrill E. Gates, "President's Address," in Proceedings of the Seventeenth Annual Meeting of the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian, 1899 (Ulster County: Lake Mohonk Conference, 1900), 12.

2. Richard H. Pratt, "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites" in Francis Paul Prucha, ed., *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian," 1880-1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 261.

3. Lewis Meriam, *The Problem of Indian Administration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1928), 86-7.

4. Margaret D. Jacobs, *Engendered Encounters: Feminism and Pueblo Cultures* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 3, Richard Spivey, *The Legacy of Maria Poveka Martinez* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2003), 167-8.

5. A. I. Hallowell, "Introduction" in Frederica De Laguna, ed., *Selected Papers from the American Anthropologist, 1888-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 15.