

"A Horse of a Different Color": The Struggle for Equality at the University of Michigan

by Melba Joyce Boyd

"NO MORE BUSHIT," an expression coined by Ann Arbor poet, Ken Mikolowski, dominated the plethora of signs hoisted above the protestors gathered in front of the U. S. Supreme Court in Washington, D. C. on 1 April 2003 to support affirmative action and the University of Michigan's admissions programs. Others carried expressions more representative of their particular political perspective or sardonic wit: "Angry White Men for Affirmative Action" and "Yale Law Students Apologize for Idiot Alum Bush." "Fuck Bush," read the placard of a diminutive white coed walking silently through and around us. We smiled whenever she appeared, like a refrain underscoring our theme of resistance. Hand printed in blue letters on white cardboard, it conveyed stringent sentiments about the "illegitimate president of the United States," whose academic record was so abysmal, he could not have gotten into the University of Michigan even with 20 race points. But despite this embarrassing contradiction, he filed an amicus brief on the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. on behalf of the white complainants.

Reflecting a rainbow of races and affiliations, a sea of people in blue jeans, sweat-shirts, and even academic regalia, chanted, displayed signs or quietly offered their passion at this affront to one of the few remaining progressive policies in higher education in pursuit of egalitarian possibilities. The NAACP Detroit Chapter filled 100 buses, accounting for at least 5,000 of the participants. The rest of us came in cars, trains, and planes comprising head counts that ranged from 10,000 in the dailies to estimates of 100,000 by veteran activists. Such figures rarely jibe with actual history, and as I walked

midstream in an endless flow of marchers, heads bobbed up and down before and behind me. The maize and blue of the University of Michigan, the green and gold of Wayne State University and the green and white of Michigan State dominated, but a rainbow of colors emanated with the insignias of Howard University, Georgetown Law, University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, Temple, UC-Berkeley, Morehouse, Spelman—the list was legion.

MY SON YELLED OUT TO A COED wearing a burgundy Stanford U pullover, "Hey. Do you know my cousin, Maja Varner?" She yelled back, "Yeah. She wanted to come too, but she had a midterm exam." Students, faculty, alumni, and activists came from across the street in D.C. and across the nation from California, connecting like distant cousins at a family reunion. We commiserated about a conservative federal bench, a Republican Administration, and the War in Iraq. Despite the dismal political outlook, we were inspired. We came to be seen, to be counted, and to let it be known that there would be witness on this damp day on the steps of the U. S. Federal Courthouse and the Lincoln Memorial.

In my case (class of 1979, BA, English), the demonstration was a family event. I came with my youngest sister, Dorothy Clore-Davis (class of 1990, BA, English and Mathematics), and my son, John, a senior engineering student, who was nestled inside my womb when I wrote my dissertation and taught English composition courses to pay the rent. Destined to retrace his prenatal carriage, he entered the University of Michigan as a freshman 18 years later as salutatorian of his senior class at Martin Luther King, Jr. High

School in Detroit. With a 3.99 G. P. A. and a 30 ACT score in Math, he was aggressively recruited by U of M and MIT.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN is an intellectual tradition in our family encompassing three generations that have matriculated in a range of disciplines and levels of degrees in English, education, mathematics, engineering and actuarial science. On various occasions when I was a child, I visited the campus with relatives researching in the libraries or seeking advanced remedies in the university hospital. The green ivy on faded brick buildings, the subtle hills and valleys, and the leisurely saunter of students crisscrossing the exquisitely manicured lawns enchanted me. I imagined I would be a student there someday. Perhaps, it was the impressive high ceilings of the library or the undertow of Native American bones buried underneath the weight of Western philosophical thought, pondering a rapidly changing American intelligence.

In any case, the subliminal enchantment of the campus may have subconsciously influenced my decision to attend the University of Michigan, but my practical and immediate motivation was to secure a terminal degree in the face of a growing hostility about affirmative action in national politics and the dismantling of Black Studies programs at universities across the country. Tenure denials, reductions in financial assistance, and the abandonment of the anti-poverty programs in urban centers indicated that the political winds were shifting to the right, and that it was time to make a move before the doors were shut. Moreover, the polity of U-M was still associated with radical thought and movements of the 1960s and 70s, and my mentor, Dudley Randall (class of 1951, MA, Library Science) encouraged me to go because at that time, Detroit native and poet Robert Hayden (class of 1946, MFA, English) was a professor of English there.

THE UNIVERSITY FELT FAMILIAR, and the intellectual climate I encountered in 1976 was receptive and stimulating. In almost every aspect, I felt like I belonged there, except when I stepped outside the

Department of English and tried to take a course in the Department of Art in filmmaking. The interdisciplinary subject of my dissertation included an analysis of the interconnections between film and literature, psycholinguistics, and visual thinking in verbal processes. When my advisor William "Buzz" Alexander contacted this particular professor about a directed study in filmmaking related to my dissertation topic, he was receptive, even enthusiastic. But when I appeared at his office for a scheduled appointment, a halting expression flung his eyes and mouth wide open. As my grandmother explained it, I was a horse of a different color.

He stumbled over a few irrelevant excuses of why he would not agree to an independent study with me. A Latino undergraduate seated next to the professor's desk with his head bowed intensified the setting of this encounter. I suppose, from the professor's point of view, we were coming out of the woodwork. I stood there staring stoically at the professor thinking, "Ain't this a trip," when in a flash of frenzy the professor said, "I can't help you!" He then turned to the distraught young man for support, "Can I?" Without looking up, the student shook his head in negative confirmation.

This was one of the most cowardly acts I had ever witnessed in higher education, and the only prejudice at the university that I experienced. But at the same time, it was consistent with the intermittent prejudice minorities encounter throughout life and career. When we spoke on the telephone, this professor assumed that I was white probably because I was a graduate student and a student of Rudolph Arnheim, a distinguished professor in the Department of Art History. But judging from the condition of that Latino brother, whatever that professor was teaching, I didn't want any of it.

A Retrospective on Racial Discrimination

WHEN MY FATHER, John Percy Boyd I, graduated from Tuskegee Institute in 1948 in mechanical engineering, my parents moved from Alabama to Detroit, where he sought employment in the automotive indus-

try. Although he graduated from the same institution where George Washington Carver developed products for the Ford Motor Company, the "man" in personnel denied his application because, "Ford doesn't hire colored engineers. The only place I can offer you a job is in the foundry." At the time, this policy was pervasive, and ultimately, my father had to settle for a job in the Post Office (the black graduate school, we sardonically called it) because the U. S. government did have a nondiscriminatory hiring policy in civil service.

My mother transferred to Wayne State University, where she majored in physical education. Her experiences were both beneficial and painful. She was an excellent swimmer and was often asked by the instructor to demonstrate strokes for the rest of the students. But at the end of the semester, she was given the obligatory "C," (for Colored) despite her performance. This same "C" haunted my youngest sister in an American literature course at the U of M, wherein no matter what she wrote and no matter how many conferences she had with the instructor, she never achieved a grade higher than "C" on her essays. But in my family, such experiences are regarded as "the salt in the sugar," or "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

THEREFORE, when my brother, Siegel Clore, achieved a perfect 36 in Math on the ACT and many of the elite universities aggressively sought his application, he still followed tradition and went to University of Michigan at the tender age of 16. Unfortunately, he did not enter the protective prism of a progressive graduate program, but an undergraduate quagmire of competitive egos congealing in an ambitious white student body that by that time (1989) viewed minorities as interlopers undeserving of the elite status associated with the university. Within this confusion and misunderstanding of affirmative action, the majority student population did not know that the minority students were comparable to them in scholarly capabilities, and in some instances, as in the case of my brother, they were sometimes superior in academic measurements and per-

formance, as his 3.75 GPA in his freshman year illustrated.

I was a professor and director of African American Studies at the University of Michigan-Flint and adjunct professor at the Center for African American and African Studies (CAAS) at the time and witnessed the tension between these two perspectives in debates waged on the Ann Arbor campus under the topic of "Political Correctness." The popular anti-affirmative action attitude, which paralleled the rise in Republicanism in the nation and in the State of Michigan, championed the legacy of race privilege, and conversely cursed minorities, especially black, Latino and Native American students, even those endowed as legacies of the university.

For many on Michigan's campus, blackness was associated with the myth of racial inferiority, which simultaneously affirmed white supremacy. The climate was the inverse of the progressive polity that characterized the university's identity in the 1960s and 1970s. While many of the white students in the 1980s-1990s aspired for an excellent education and a universally enlightened view of the world, too many others regarded the degree as a passport to wealth and an upper class epitomized by whiteness. But as I reminded the students who entered my intellectual sphere, a public university has a larger responsibility than to foster the exclusivity of a privileged race, especially since it receives funding from taxes collected from all the races and working classes in the state.

Black Student Activism

RACIAL AND GENDER PREJUDICE has plagued universities since their inception, and evidentiary experiences have motivated student strikes to change institutional character. The first of the Black Action Movement (BAM) strikes occurred after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968. Similar protests appeared on campuses throughout the state and the nation. The students at U-M demanded changes that resulted in the implementation of minority recruitment programs, scholarships, the hiring of black faculty and the establishment of a black studies program. Over the years, sub-

sequent student demonstrations in Ann Arbor—BAM II, BAM III and BAM IV—answered and rebuked racism on campus. The most recent confrontation with the aggressive politics of the extreme right in the form of the anti-affirmative action suits awakened campus and institutional complacency for a show of solidarity, but a defense based on an argument for diversity ignores racial memory and the role student activism has played in the installation and retention of affirmative action at the university.

UNDERSTANDING THIS HISTORICAL DYNAMIC is crucial to realizing that racial justice on campus and in society has not come about as a consequence of a liberal epiphany on the part of the Board of Regents of U-M, but because black students connected with the broader civil rights struggle beyond the ivory tower. More specifically, the movement of the struggle onto northern campuses during the 1960s meant a confrontation with class discrimination and a broadening of the black middle class. At the same time, the implementation of affirmative action in the workplace provided a simultaneous, mass movement of blacks and other minorities into the American economic infrastructure. But for sure, these graduates carried credentials equal to their white counterparts, and in many instances, minority applicants armed with advanced degrees from “prestigious” universities, such as the U-M, have more often than not been the agents for change. Godfrey Dillard, an alumnus of the law school was the lead attorney for the ACLU intervention suit, and Congresswoman Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, also an alumna, was in the forefront of political activities to save affirmative action at the university. The nation may be split over the issue of affirmative action, since the 5 to 4 decision is consistent with recent polls that indicate that 54% of Americans support diversity in colleges and the workplace, but it is an edge tilting to the left and moving in an intelligent and progressive direction.

I’ve offered these stories of struggle because they illuminate the day-to-day prejudice that eats away at the fabric of democracy and fair play in our society, and because they

are rarely recognized as a part of the progressive intellectual consciousness. Moreover, they confirm the need to highlight the racial experience so that white Americans take responsibility for historical and contemporary conditions, which are plagued by prejudice and beleaguered by inhumanity. With or without affirmative action, I would have appeared on that campus, as was the case of members of my family and other African American legacies. But unlike Justice Clarence Thomas, we did not distance ourselves from the black community or the struggle for racial justice that opened the door wider, broadened its diversity, and complicated the intellectual and creative of nexus of the academic community, and the nation.

Concluding

BLACK STUDENTS ARE STILL AGENTS of change in the university. Monique Luse (class of 2003) was the key motivator for the march on April 1, 2003. Although, like the trials and tribulations that Ms. Luse endured, the march began under rain clouds. It was cold and there were intermittent showers. We collected in front of the Supreme Court, and the speakers had to shout because microphones and bullhorns were disallowed. Kweisi Mfume of the NAACP was speaking when I reached earshot of the podium. Then Senator Ted Kennedy explained that he had just left the courtroom. He appealed to us to continue faith in justice and not to give up the fight, and without a stage or an amplifier his voice assumed a character in sync with the humility of the ideals he expressed.

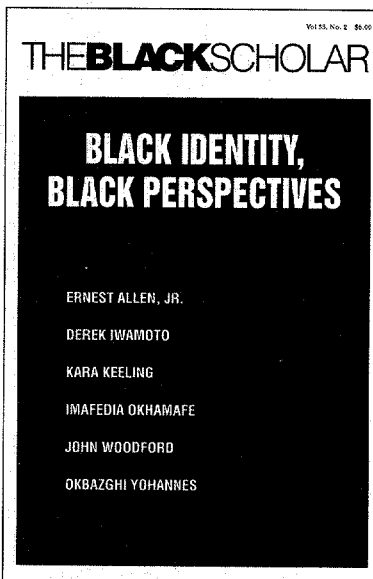
As we marched, the clouds receded and the sunrays warmed and illuminated our good humor and camaraderie. We shouted: “They say Jim Crow, We say Hell No,” and correlated the attack on Iraq with the attack on affirmative action: “Books not Bombs.” Stony-faced policemen aligned the curbs and patrolled our troops as we paraded down Constitution Avenue. But a sympathetic black police officer wearing a red, black, and green armband leaned against his motorcycle and saluted us with an uplifted fist. When we reached the Lincoln Memorial, some of

us took off our shoes, some took photographs and some read the Gettysburg Address chiseled in stone. We congregated on the steps, filled the lawns that surrounded the empty pool before the monument, and reflected on the 1963 March on Washington. As we left, I listened to the distant voice of a Native American speaking about the long and treacherous journey for justice grounded in human sacrifice.

DESPITE THE DISMAL FORECAST that we would lose the decision, we refused to submit to negative forces of skepticism and hopeless abandon. When the ruling in favor of the University of Michigan was announced on June 23, 2003, the sun was shining, and I felt warm and good, my family was joyful and the struggle was affirmed. As I drove to Ann Arbor to turn in my grades for the spring semester, I listened to the news report that the "President" applauded the Supreme Court for its support for diversity. "Bushit!" I said out loud, and then turned the radio off and popped in a Santana CD. But in my in-between-thoughts, I saw a small, white coed holding up a sign by the road. And, I smiled all the way to campus.



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