

“Mau Mau Tech”: The Making of a Black University in Oakland, California, 1960-1970

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Abstract

During the late 1960s, Black students at predominantly white and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) radically transformed higher education in the United States. Disappointed with the failures of integration, Black students challenged racist curricula and hiring practices, and called on universities to serve their Black Communities. Merritt College, a small community college on seven acres of land in the flatlands of North Oakland, California, holds significance for the Black Studies, Black Campus, and Black Power Movements as home to the first Black Studies Department and home of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Unfortunately, Black students' efforts to gain community control of Merritt College to establish a “Black University” have been overlooked. Changing demographics and a recognition of the limited power wielded by Black staff and Black Studies Departments within the predominantly-white institution led students to seek complete community control of Merritt College as an independent and reimagined Black university that would serve the needs of the adjacent Black community. This study uses archival materials to uncover the related political and spatial struggles for Black Power at Oakland's Merritt College. Further examination of the Black Campus Movement on community colleges and other campuses within proximity to Black communities, like Merritt College, will enable

a deeper understanding of the geographical as well as political dimensions of the Black Power Movement.

Black Militancy on Campus

In 1969, the *Wall Street Journal* asked, “What happens when black militants gain the upper hand on a college campus?” Students at Oakland, California’s Merritt College successfully agitated to establish the nation’s first Black Studies Department in 1969 and hire the first Black college president in the state of California, Dr. Norvel Smith, a year earlier. Additionally, Black Panther Party for Self-Defense co-founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale were Merritt alumni. Of the prospect of Black Power on campus, the *Wall Street Journal* wrote:

Though many of this nation’s educators fear such a prospect, nowhere does it appear more of a reality than at Merritt College, a little-known, two-year junior college located in one of this city’s sprawling black slums. What has happened here has been overshadowed by the often-violent confrontations between students and police at nearby San Francisco State College and the University of California at Berkeley. But to many educators what has happened at Merritt, a school of 8,880 students, is nonetheless just as significant.¹

As the 1960s came to a close, Merritt College’s Black students were at the forefront of the nationwide Black Campus Movement that changed the face of higher education in the U.S. While scholars have focused on initiatives to establish Black Studies and change hiring practices, efforts to establish a “Black University” on the Merritt College flatland’s site have been overlooked. How did Black students at Merritt College, a predominantly white institution in California, reimagine the purpose of education and the role of the university in relationship to the campus’

surrounding Black community? How did their earlier victories evolve into spatial and territorial demands for community control?

Black Flatlands, White Hills

Long before Newton wrote in *Revolutionary Suicide*, “There are two very distinct Oakland, the ‘flatlands’ and the hills,”² real estate interests inscribed caste boundaries onto Oakland’s topography. The working class lived and labored in the city’s flatlands, while the middle and upper classes lived in the white foothills and hills.³ After the Second World War, spatial struggles over the distribution of postwar wealth dominated Oakland and its nearby suburbs. In Oakland, as whites left Oakland for the suburbs—seeking lower taxes, better schools, and job opportunities—Black activists formed organizations and sought political power to stem decline in their communities.⁴

Oakland’s Black population remained relatively small and segregated until after World War II. Thousands of Black migrants came to Oakland for jobs, housing, and educational opportunities, as well as an escape from the Jim Crow South. Until 1950, Blacks mostly lived in West Oakland. The population expanded north to South Berkeley, forming a “Black Belt,” a densely segregated Black population. Along this corridor, and stretching two blocks on Grove Street between 57th and 59th Streets, stood Merritt College. A salmon-colored building with an expansive auditorium, Spanish-tiled roofing, “expansive courtyards, wide hallways, and arched windows, and later surrounded by bungalows.”⁵

From University High to Merritt College

The purposes of the Grove Street facilities changed over time. Officials commissioned “University High” in 1923 to serve the children of elite University of California faculty. The school closed during World War

II, but reopened as the Merritt School of Business in 1946. The campus later became a part of Oakland Junior College in 1953. In 1964, Merritt College joined the new Peralta Junior College District.⁶

Changing neighborhood demographics and expanded access to education both increased Merritt's Black student population and led to demands for Black Power on campus. During the 1960s, whites fled North Oakland for Oakland's hills and nearby suburbs as the city's Black population increased. In 1960, California adopted its Master Plan for Higher Education. The plan guaranteed access to higher education for all adults or high school graduates and created a socially stratified, three-tiered system of community (junior) colleges, state colleges, and universities. By 1969, the *Wall Street Journal* labeled Merritt College, "A Campus Where Black Power Won." Historian Donna Murch notes "a virulent backlash" to Black student organizing. Officials moved Merritt from the Black flatlands of North Oakland to the lily-white East Oakland hills in 1971. "While the relocation had been in the planning stages for a decade, many speculated that campus militancy hastened the move," Murch writes. Although she documents student opposition to Merritt's removal, some Black students supported the move as a means to create a space to establish a Black university.⁷

The Black Revolution on Campus

During the late 1960s, Black students protested on over 200 campuses nationwide, demanding Black Studies, increased numbers of Black students and faculty on predominantly white campuses, improvement of physical plants, and, in the most radical cases, levels of community accountability and control of facilities and universities to serve Black communities, especially local, often surrounding communities. Although writers have noted how Black students renamed Crane Junior College in Chicago's west side to Malcolm X College, fought to trans-

form HBCU into Black universities,⁸ and created several alternative Black universities such as Malcolm X Liberation University in Durham, North Carolina,⁹ many have overlooked the efforts at Oakland's predominantly white Merritt College to create a Black University that would serve the Black community. Changing demographics and the recognition of the limitations of Black Studies professors and Black staff within the predominantly white institution led students to seek complete community control of Merritt College as an independent and reimagined Black university.

A Campus Where Black Power Won?

As the Black student proportion of Merritt increased, Black students sought increased power on campus through the establishment of Black Studies, hiring Black faculty and staff, and taking over the student government. Between 1964 and 1969, the Black population at Merritt increased from ten to forty percent. Over 57,000 white people left Oakland during the 1960s. In 1970, Blacks comprised 34.5 percent of the city's population.¹⁰ As their numbers increased on campus in North Oakland, Black students sought to control the college in their community.

Black Studies

The small but growing Black student population at Merritt in the early 1960s drew the attention of the University of California (UC) School of Criminology. UC Berkeley sociologists organized a semester-long "Experimental Sociology" course to survey the Black junior college students "relying heavily on accessible community colleges for advanced education" as a means to better understand the swelling, Black youth migrant population. While these urbanized students with southern roots appeared to be on the road to middle-class socialization, many had

nationalist leanings, supporting groups like the Nation of Islam and the Afro-American Association over integrationist-oriented groups like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).¹¹ One course participant, Huey Newton, used the course to demand Black Studies classes.¹² Student demands to create a space for Black intellectual inquiry and community service required a committed teaching staff of sufficient numbers. Under student pressure, Merritt soon established the nation's first Black Studies course in 1964. From 1964 to 1966, Black students formed the Soul Students Advisory Council (SSAC) and mobilized for a complete Black studies curriculum and Black instructional and counseling staff. The struggle continued through April 1968, when students staged a boycott, demanding a Black Studies Department with adequate funding and six instructors.¹³

Merritt's First Black Faculty

In 1965, the SSAC pressured Merritt's administration to hire a Black counselor specifically for Black students. Without an immediate hiring, then-student Bobby Seale threatened to shut the campus down.¹⁴ In 1965, the recently formed Peralta Junior College District hired its first Black teacher: Sid Walton. Walton became the faculty adviser to the SSAC. He later authored the proposal for a Black Curriculum, worked with students to institutionalize Black Studies and fought the majority-white faculty senate to change the district's hiring practices. The administration claimed that Walton threatened to unleash the militant Black student body if his demands were not met. As for the proposed East Oakland Hill campus site, Walton said, "it [would] be burned down as fast as it [was] constructed."¹⁵ His proposed curriculum gained the approval of the radical yet fledgling Black Panther Party, founded in late 1966. They explained, "The Black Panther believes that this type of

curriculum will become the standard thing in all Black colleges in racist dog America.”¹⁶

California's First Black College President

The Black Student Union (BSU) later took over faculty senate meetings, stopping all other business from occurring, leading to the forced retirement of the campus' previous white college president, Edward H. Rutherford.¹⁷ The BSU then mobilized to hire local economic development leader, Dr. Norvel Smith. BSU member Leo Bazille sat on his hiring committee and, in June 1968, Smith became the first Black president of a junior college in California.¹⁸ He pledged to increase minority enrollment and implement a meaningful Black Studies program that would benefit the Black student body at Merritt.¹⁹ By the end of 1968, Black students had succeeded in all their demands, including the establishment of the Black Studies department, hiring of Black faculty and staff—including President Smith, and making Black Studies courses transferrable to the University of California.²⁰ The *Wall Street Journal* erroneously attributed these gains to Dr. Smith. In fact, previously mentioned Black victories at Merritt College, including Smith's employment, owed primarily to committed and consistent Black student activism.

'A Black University'

Black student demands radicalized after they realized the limited power allocated to both them and the Black community within Merritt's existing power structure. When more conventional methods proved unsuccessful, or inconvenient, Black students caused major disruptions on campus as tactics to achieve their demands.

A 'Major Disruption'

On November 6, 1968, nearly four-dozen students overturned tables and tossed food in the cafeteria during an impromptu demonstration in support of the San Francisco State College Strike, the longest student-strike in U.S. history, dedicated to establishing Black Studies. Merritt College students also allegedly entered the campus bookstore and tossed books during a “major disruption” that left a white bookstore manager’s nose broken.²¹ A SSAC member referred to the incident as a “family matter to be settled within the family,” and added, “We have the mechanism for a peaceful solution.”²² Students later held two meetings on campus that day. More than 600 Black students attended the first. A smaller meeting was held later for white allies. A third of the attendees there were Black.²³ Merritt’s growing Black student population’s emphasis on handling the matter internally and regulating space through Black-only meetings demonstrates a growing sense of empowered territoriality.

In January 1969, the Merritt BSU, alongside the Merritt chapters of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)—a multicultural student coalition and a radical white student activist group—held a three-day strike in solidarity with San Francisco State.²⁴ During Merritt’s strike, concerns about the college’s planned relocation appears to have prompted Dr. Smith to release a document outlining the hill site acquisition and other financial issues.²⁵ The Peralta College district planned to relocate the campus’ equipment, faculty, and classes to a remote site in the hills of East Oakland. Meanwhile, Black students at Merritt hoped the planned relocation of the college would enable the formation of a Black university at the North Oakland flatlands site.

'Total Control of these Facilities'

In the spring of 1969, an all-Black student government came into office. At a Grove Street press conference, student body president Fred T. Smith stood alongside Joel Garland and Elvoyce Hooper as Black students announced the proposed Black university. The "BSU of Merritt College is determined to gain total control of these facilities and build upon them a complete Black University." In light of the forthcoming move from the flatlands to the hills, the proponents of the Black university maintained that the Black community of South Berkeley and North Oakland would lack access to higher education and that relatively few Black students from the flatlands would travel to the hills. "Let the white students have their campus in the hills and we'll have our black university down here," declared Hooper, chairman of the planned Black university conference. Rooted in the demographic and spatial division of Oakland, Black students claimed ownership of Merritt. Despite major Black Power milestones over seven years, students realized that the institution had incorporated and mollified Black student gains:

We have increased the number of our black faculty, acquired a black president, gained total control of our student body government, and black students sit on the major decision-making bodies of this college. And our black studies department is a model for the nation... (however) ... Instead of moving out into the community as is our purpose and duty, we find most of our time and energy still utilized to fight racism on this campus we so-called control. We find that student power at Merritt consists of paper diagrams with no effect toward positive programs for either students or the community...

Despite changing neighborhood and campus demographics, and the creation of Black Studies, students still lacked institutional power. "We watched as the Black Studies department we fought so hard for is

bastardized by and pimped off by Negroes and whiteys,” students lamented. “Control is the word and that is why the Black Studies department will not fulfill our desires and needs while it exists within a racist institution, because we cannot control the Black Studies department,” adding that, “whitey will cripple any program that is meaningful for Black people.”²⁶

Reporters asked numerous questions about the proposed Black university. “Will whites be admitted to the proposed university?” reporters asked. “No comment,” Fred T. Smith responded laconically. The only enrollment requirements for the Black University would be flatlands residency. The *Montclarion*, a local newspaper serving the liberal and affluent white foothill neighborhood of Montclair, although located in North Oakland, noted, “The entire Black residential area surrounding (Merritt College was) currently growing rapidly to complete Blackdom.”²⁷

Education for ‘Liberation’

In order to liberate Black people, the community needed an independent Black University with a curriculum designed to radicalize the community and provide education to directly serve the community’s needs. Black students argued that a Black university would be a place:

...Where students in medicine will work in the community hospital set up by the university. Students in chemistry will work on exterminating rats and roaches within the black community. Students in physics will develop new weapons to defend the community. Students in building trades will build the homes and factories of the community. Students in education will build and teach in the new elementary and high schools for the community, every course and every student actively engaged in liberating the community from oppression. However the means, and it

*will by any means, black students, educators and communities will move toward total liberation.*²⁸

Students announced their intention to organize a Black University conference from Merritt. Titled “Uhuru–Umoja”, Swahili for “freedom” and “unity,” the conference featured a local Nation of Islam minister, Nathan Hare, the radical sociologist who helped spark the San Francisco State University (SFSU) Strike, Leo Bazille, former SSAC vice-chair and Revolutionary Action Movement member Isaac Moore, along with Walton, and another radical Black faculty member, Sarah Fabio. Black Studies would be a space to build a Black University. Students would either take over predominantly white schools, transition Black Studies into Black Universities, or transform Black Colleges into “universities that relate to the Black communities around them, to lend direction, and become one with their communities.”²⁹ The conference title and theme demonstrated the growing radicalism at Merritt and the influence of the African Liberation Movement, specifically East African land insurgencies of the 1960’s—like the Kenya Land and Freedom Party (Mau Mau) uprising in Kenya, in which Africans fought to remove British colonial settlers from country—upon Black student activism and political and spatial demands for power in Oakland.

In the early 1960s, Black students at Merritt College joined the Afro-American Association, a cultural nationalist organization started by UC Berkeley law student Donald Warden. In these study groups, Black students learned about African history and the African independence movements. As Black students and community activists learned African history and contemporary politics, they began to incorporate anti-colonialist ideology not only into their theories, but their geographically rooted organizing strategies.³⁰

Ultimately, white officials moved Merritt College to the Oakland hills where the campus opened in 1971. Black students hoped to raise money from Black elite to for the Black university. Sister Makinya Sibeko-Kouat (formerly Harriett Smith), the first Black student body president of Merritt College, later recalled, “We wanted the white people out so we could establish our own university,” however, “we couldn’t get the money.” Back in the flatlands, community pressure kept the Grove Street campus (North Peralta Junior College) until 1974, when a judge ordered the physical plant closed by court order due to seismic retrofit concerns.³¹ Today, Merritt College rests atop the Oakland Hills. The North Oakland plant is a senior center.

Huey P. Newton College

Although most scholarship on the Black Campus Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s highlights battles over curricula and hiring practices, the spatial struggle for community control of Merritt College emerged from urban segregation and suburbanization. Changing Oakland demographics during the 1960s—Black influx and white flight—combined with increased access to education and enabled an ongoing struggle led by Black students at Merritt. Despite numerous gains, Black students realized they lacked power and did not truly control a community college geographically located within their neighborhood. Their college still existed within a system controlled by elite white corporate interests. Black Studies within a racist institution could not serve the needs of the Black Community. As a result, students reimagined Merritt as a territorially autonomous university controlled by and in service to the Black community.

The insurgency of Black student activism mirrors other anti-colonial struggles. During the Experimental Sociology class in 1963, one white student shared the nickname another white friend used to describe

Merritt College: “Mau Mau Tech.” Less than a decade later, Black students attempted to remake and reshape the campus as a Black University, paralleling attempts of the African Liberation Movement to decolonize their territories. In the midst of the “Free Huey” movement from 1967-1970, students spray painted a proposed name for their new college on the walls on the portables lining Grove Street: Huey P. Newton College.³²

While many physically resisted the removal of Merritt College, particularly its equipment,³³ many welcomed the relocation as a means towards establishing a Black university. This development demonstrates the impact between working-class, grassroots organizing and access to higher education that further fueled the Black Power Movement amongst youth.

Considering the postwar proliferation of community colleges and the geographical proximity of many to Black communities, future research should examine the impact of the Black Campus Movement in community colleges. This study uses archival materials to uncover the intertwined geospatial and political struggle for Black Power at Oakland’s Merritt College; however, future oral history interviews of former Merritt College students and community activists will increase our understanding of the role of spatial as well as political considerations in educational struggles of local Blacks, especially Black migrants. Finally, studying factors such as community college siting will increase our understanding of the intersections of race, space, and higher education in urban contexts, and the geographical implications of the Black Power Movement.

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