

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s
by Stefan M. Bradley

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Bradley, Stefan M. *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2009.

In 1626, the Dutch bought Manhattan from the Lanape Indians for a cool twenty-four dollars. Three hundred and forty-two years later, the residents of Morningside Heights and Harlem avoided a similar land grab by yet another group of powerful white Manhattan oppressors. Or such is the impression one gets after reading Stefan Bradley's penetrating *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s*, a wonderful example of the potential of microhistories to provide perspective on broader historical movements.

Bradley tells the story of Columbia University's 1968 attempt to encroach upon Morningside Park to build a gymnasium complex and the angry response of black Manhattan and Columbia students to the plan. Columbia's sense of entitlement, bolstered by the inherent mandate of the city and the hubris accompanying Ivy League membership, led the school to seek its own best interest and (not for the first time) forget the realities of the majority black neighborhoods that surrounded it. At the same time, however, the school was, Columbia argued, filling a student need. Its students were predominantly white, but, regardless of race, the gymnasium wasn't something they saw as a constituent part of their best interest. Thus Bradley sets the stage for a series of race and class confrontations that would be emblematic of the era. The further dynamics of black student activism at a "white" college and the influence of the national student and Black Power movements continue to layer those confrontations. So too does the fact that the bulk of this showdown happened in the weeks following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The story has far broader bounds than the sidewalks surrounding a local park.

Still, the park remains the focal point, the grounding element for the broader interpretation, and at the heart of the debate about the park, Bradley tells us, was ownership. Ownership was intrinsically important to a black community who had historically suffered as the owned for so many centuries. Jim Crow exacerbated the problem in the South. Residential segregation in the north created a new kind of ownership mentality, one that held to ownership as a way of maintaining the sanctity and protection of autonomous neighborhoods. But ownership is something more than fancy words on written, notarized deeds. Ownership in Bradley's hands is also a function of perception, and something fundamentally more powerful than squatter's rights. Harlem's position wasn't a land claim because "we were here first." It was a land claim that argued, "This land is ours because it means more to us. It is not additive as it would be for you. It isn't an annex. Isn't an addendum. It is intrinsic to who we are." This seems reasonable enough, but the black community outside of Columbia wasn't the only group making an ownership claim. The New York power structure—that is to say, the city's most prominent white people—were saying much the same thing about Columbia. The university belonged to the city, and its growth and development only benefited the island that claimed it.

So, ultimately, this is a book about identity—that venerable stand-in for almost every kind of ownership claim. But such contests over identity almost always take the form of a stakes game—as this one clearly does—in which the powerful tend to have the deck stacked in their favor. Or so it would seem. It's true that Columbia's powerbrokers had significant national influence, but so too did Harlem, the de facto center of black America.

The most interesting identity battle in the contest over Morningside Park, however, had little to do with the Columbia administration versus the representatives of its surrounding black neighborhoods. Instead, that battle came in the form of the students themselves, members of one community who chose the other in the stakes game going on above their station. The students were, for the most part, against the administration's land grab, but they came at their antipathy from vastly different angles. White students entered the fray from the organizational base of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), who had been fighting, along with similar groups, against a whole host of issues since the early 1960s. Members of SDS came of age in a Cold War nuclear world, and the onset of Vietnam only grew their latent suspicions. In such a climate, all bureaucracy became suspect, and the bureaucracy that affected them most directly was the university administration. The resulting student movement was equally frustrated with racism, but those students would always be outsiders to black activists who lived with a far less privileged reality.

Meanwhile, Columbia's small black student body formed the Students' Afro-American Society (SAS), which concerned itself specifically with the needs of a minority student body at a campus with a less than stellar race record. It was this group, SAS, which had the hardest road to hoe in the shifting crosscurrents of identity. They fought against the Columbia administration, negotiated a complex relationship with their fellow activist students in SDS, and ultimately reached across a significant class divide to align themselves with the residents around the school, over and against those within it.

SAS's battle with SDS resembled the broader split of the black Civil Rights Movement with its white benefactors and participants, mirroring the Black Power move to support autonomous black institutions as a way of salvaging black culture. The battle over the park, for example, was one in a litany of causes that SDS championed. It didn't have the same resonance, the same meaning, to white activists. It was an excuse again to attack the administration, another in a long line of soapboxes. And so, though both organizations had the same goals in mind, a fundamental difference in motive split them apart.

With the communities of Morningside Heights and Harlem, however, SAS sought to bridge a chasm rather than create one. For better or worse, the black students of Columbia carried an Ivy League pedigree. They were black residents of Harlem, but they remained miles apart from the local shops and apartment buildings down the street. As SAS aligned itself with the frustrated residents of the neighborhoods surrounding Columbia, they made the same ontological leap that, for example, Stokely Carmichael made as he screamed, "Black Power!" into the hot Mississippi night during the 1966 March Against Fear. They chose race over class, black community over the ivory tower. It was a reclamation project, and it was ultimately a statement of identity. The residents made a similarly bold, if less complex, leap when they embraced their black advocates from the Ivy League.

If there is anything missing in Bradley's intricate coupling of a local movement with broader national trends, it is a comparative evaluation of black activism at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The comparative sweep of Bradley's analysis extends ably to similar Ivy League schools like Harvard and Cornell, and it clearly establishes Howard as the center of the black college universe, but in the full scope of black student activism, students at HBCUs played an integral role—one that took a completely different shape than did the role created by the black experience at traditionally white universities. Those differences centered on protests against university administrations.

Columbia had high academic standards, actively recruited black students, and used its most manipulative practices on the neighborhoods surrounding it. The administrations of HBCUs were radically authoritarian and regularly expelled students who sought changes to make their schools more like, for example, Columbia. Students at HBCUs wanted departments of black studies, too. They protested for civil rights, too. But because the majority of HBCUs were cloistered within Jim Crow societies and depended upon white legislatures for funding, their leaders virulently cracked down on such activism. This was black student power that didn't feed from SDS, whose history long predated the Cold War. And if such a comparative analysis did nothing more than provide a counterpoint to Bradley's admirable treatment of the higher end of such black student protest, it belongs in the account. This is, after all, a tale of race and class.

Of course, the final element of significance in Bradley's work is the fact that in the contest of Harlem vs. Columbia University, Harlem won, as "black activists succeeded in taking something back from a white establishment." (8) That "something" was bigger than a park. It was the positive reconciliation of an identity crisis imposed upon them by someone else. And in the wide temporal range of African American history (or, as the Lanape Indians would surely argue, Native American history), it is these reconciliations—be they slave rebellions, emancipations, elections, educations, legislations, or successful defenses of local community parks—that ultimately tell the tale.

—*Thomas Aiello*