

# African American Studies / Black Studies

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Black studies and its variants, African American studies, Afro-American studies, African and African American studies, Africana studies, Pan- African studies, diaspora studies, or the more recent Africology, Africa New World studies, and black women diaspora studies, have emerged since the 1960s as full-fledged academic departments in colleges and universities in the United States and abroad. Black studies is the systematic study of the knowledge, thoughts, and modes of being of African people in both their current and historical manifestations. It intersects various methodologies and perspectives; its unit of analysis is the black world, but it also engages white hegemonic powers and their history of exclusion and dominance. Reviewed here are its historical lineages and stages of development as well as the directions and trends of contemporary scholarship.

## Historical Lineages.

Black studies, defined very broadly as the study of black people, can be traced to the early empires of ancient Egypt, Mali, and Songhai and their intellectual traditions. As a university-based discipline, it is the result of the critical thinking of scholars who explore the cultural, economic, political, and intellectual practices and experiences of people of African descent in Africa, the Americas, and throughout the African diaspora and of the larger sociohistorical contexts from which they evolve. It is part of a historical movement that endeavors to refute and contest pervasive theories of the inferiority of blacks, scholarly omissions about the past heritage and culture of blacks, deeply rooted misrepresentations, legally sanctioned injustices, and a systemic climate of noninclusion and discrimination. It is ultimately the study of and commitment to black advancement.

Black studies, seen as part of the historical freedom movements that started with nineteenth-century black radical traditions, had produced reinterpretations of black histories and cultural life as early as 1882 through the work of George Washington Williams, with his *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880: Negroes as Slaves, as Soldiers, and as Citizens*, published in that year. This was followed shortly by that of William T. Alexander, with his *History of the Colored Race in America*, published in 1887. These pioneering works were followed by groundbreaking reexaminations of black history and culture by the eminent historian and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, who wrote *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, completed in 1899, followed by *The Souls of Black Folk*, the subject of great acclaim, published in 1903. Further foundational work was accomplished by Harold M. Tarver, who published *The Negro in the History of the United States from the Beginning of English Settlements in America, 1607, to the Present Time* in 1905; Benjamin Brawley, with *A Short History of the American Negro* in 1913; and Willis D. Weatherford, with *The Negro from Africa to America* in 1924. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*, published in 1935, later served as the road map for the discipline.

The Atlanta University Project, an important development within the black intellectual tradition, was started in 1897 by Du Bois, who organized yearly conferences at Atlanta until 1910 on aspects of the African American experience linked to practical concerns of black life in the United States and globally. This was a major contribution to black studies and antiracist scholarship. So was the work of Carter G. Woodson, the noted scholar and visionary who, in 1915 in Washington, D.C., founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, an organization that

published the *Journal of Negro History* and served as an academic society that celebrated black life and culture. Woodson also established Negro History Week, now Black History Month, and was involved in publishing the *Negro History Bulletin*. Other scholars who contributed to what was then called Negro history at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) include the sociologist Charles S. Johnson at Fisk University, who surveyed race relations in seven U.S. cities; the distinguished historian Benjamin Quarles at Morgan State University, who later headed the Maryland Commission on Negro History and Culture; the sociologist Monroe N. Work at Tuskegee Institute; the scholars E. Franklin Frazier and Ralph Johnson Bunche at Howard University; the social anthropologist Allison Davis; and the writers Horace Mann Bond and Alain Locke. Later, the work of Harold Wright Cruse, Rayford W. Logan, St. Clair Drake, and John Hope Franklin was also foundational. Contemporary scholars seek to claim rather than reject the earlier efforts of the HBCUs that laid the groundwork for the current discipline. In the early 1920s, for example, there were as many as eighteen courses at nine HBCUs that examined exclusively black life and culture. In the 1960s the Institute of the Black World (IBW) was established as part of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, the research center established in Atlanta as part of the national historic site in King's name that includes his birthplace and the Ebenezer Church; we note the work of the theologian and historian Vincent Harding there.

Unfortunately, in the 1970s and 1980s many top black faculty from HBCUs left for white institutions that offered better funding and research programs. Ironically, the successes of desegregation hurt the very institutions that formed generations of black intellectuals and professionals while nurturing the black intellectual movement over the course of the past century. However, during segregation, traditionally white institutions did start their own black studies departments. Noteworthy contributions during this early period by progressive white scholars include critical work by Melville Herskovits and Herbert Aptheker, who offered reassessments of the historical contributions of blacks in their great works, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, published in 1941, and *To Be Free: Studies in American Negro History*, published in 1948, respectively. At about this time a few programs in African studies emerged, such as the one started at Northwestern University in 1948.

## **Forty Years of Growth and Development: The 1960s to the Early Twenty-first Century.**

The climate of protest following the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* of 1954 facilitated educational changes, including black students having, for the first time, greater access to institutions of higher learning. In 1950 and 1960, 75,000 and 200,000 black students respectively were engaged in postsecondary education; by the mid 1970s, the number reached a million, and in 1980 it exceeded 1.1 million. Black students not only were admitted into these institutions but also demanded that the institutions change. Campuses across the nation were forced to address issues of exclusion, marginalization, and the oppression of people of color within and outside the academy. Demands mirrored larger political crises for civil rights, the rejection of assimilation, and the desire for cultural autonomy. Specifically, black studies departments and programs emerged out of the context of the critical expression of black faculty and students who demanded inclusion and fair representation in the academy. Additionally, the civil rights movement itself, the Black Power movement, liberation movements, the anti-Vietnam War protest, feminism, demonstrations against the treatment of the poor, the rise of affirmative action, gay rights activism, and social support for the liberation of Third World nations all inspired the creation of black studies programs. Demands were made, strategies were formulated, protests and strikes were held, and eventually programs were created and curricula were developed.

The first initiative toward the establishment of a black studies program, at Merritt Junior College in Oakland, California, in 1963, failed but led to the creation of the Soul Students' Advisory Council, a precursor of the Black Student Union that initiated the first black studies program in 1967–1968 at San Francisco State University; the following year it became the first autonomous black studies department in the country. On 14 October 1968 at the University of California at Santa Barbara, a student takeover of the university's main computer installation led to the launching of that school's black studies department, the Center for Black Studies, and a black studies library in 1969.

By the late 1960s, black studies was established in more than one hundred colleges and universities. Within ten years, the number of programs reached five hundred. In the 1980s the number declined to around four hundred, but other gains emerged. The departments of black studies at Ohio State University and Temple University, for example, have each had over sixteen full-time faculty members at one time and were the first to offer graduate programs in the field.

As of March 2007, the comprehensive Web site of the sociologist Abdul Alkalimat, eblackstudies.org, reported a substantial decrease in black studies departments, with only 311 degree-granting black studies programs, of which 185 (59 percent) are at public institutions. They are spread throughout the East, Midwest, South, and West. Interestingly, the two regions with states having the smallest black populations, the East and the West, have the largest number of institutions offering black studies; this is because New York and California have the greatest number of programs, 58 and 60 respectively; between the two of them, their institutions of higher learning offer over a third of the total. Of the 311 schools, 258 have a name directly associated with black studies: African American or Afro American (100), Africana (63), African and African American (45), black (37), Pan-African (7), African (5), and Africology (1). Africology is a name adopted solely by the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. The other 53 fall within those with the more general appellations of diasporic, multicultural, or interethnic studies. Among them, 100 are departments, 168 are programs, 15 are centers or institutes, and 28 are “others.” These programs grant mostly undergraduate degrees: 158 grant a bachelor of arts degree with black studies as a major; 88 grant a black studies minor within a bachelor of arts degree; and 10 grant an associate of arts degree. Master of arts degrees are granted at 21 institutions, while only 9 schools offer doctor of philosophy degrees. They are Harvard University, Michigan State University, Morgan State, Northwestern University, Temple, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of California at San Diego, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and the University of Southern California. Alkalimat points out, “Black studies as a labor market deserves more attention ... [since] ... the founding generation will be retiring ... [and] ... creating a 20 to 30 percent faculty turnover in the next ten years.” This situation cannot be solely remedied by the ten doctorates granted, on average, per year.

Deep ideological divisions about what black studies should be have caused considerable controversy since the 1960s: the inclusionists in the 1970s (at Yale University, for example) coexisted amicably with other departments while the nationalists, generally not viewed favorably by administrations, sought the power to hire and grant tenure to their own faculty and to control curricula. The legacy of Du Bois and the historians and political activists Paul Robeson, C. L. R. James, and Walter Rodney led others to tackle the capitalist political economy and served as a precursor of transnationalism and diasporic studies. A Marxist black radicalism program was created by Alkalimat at Fisk in the 1970s. By the 1980s, the nationalist model was increasingly characterized by the ideological concept of Afrocentricity developed by the scholar Molefi Kete Asante, and was prevalent in many programs, namely at Temple and at most HBCUs. Conflicts, controversies, and polemics remain part of the black studies narrative today.

## Contemporary Scholarship.

Black studies programs suffered severe repression in the 1980s with the backlash of the Reagan era. Financial aid for students, minority scholarship programs, and admission were stalled by fierce attack from the Right and by assaults on affirmative action. Some even suggest urban nihilism and organized genocide against black people and the poor were at work. At the same time, however, some foundations took an interest in diversity and minority education. The Ford Foundation, for example, underwrote the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research (now the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research) at Harvard starting in the 1980s; financed the Huggins Harvard-based report of 1985, *Afro-American Studies*, on the state of minority education; and awarded Darlene Clark Hine at Michigan State in 1991 for her Comparative Black History PhD Degree Program.

What was in the 1960s and 1970s the driving polemic between black nationalism and Marxism seems now to be between Afrocentrism and elite public intellectual debate. Scholars shaping new directions for black studies in the contemporary period include Manning Marable, Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Asante, Hine, Alkalimat, Angela Y. Davis, Gerald Horne, William Julius Wilson, George Lipsitz, Johnnetta Cole, and Stuart Hall; and in the

next generation, Eddie S. Glaude Jr., Tricia Rose, and Robin D. G. Kelley. Now in its third phase, black studies is being shaped by new conversations about gender and sexuality, violence, corporate greed and influences on culture, environmental racism, urban geographies, color-blind and postracial ideologies, whiteness studies, crossracial exchanges, foreign media, diaspora studies, and new global paradigms. Also, new technologies are to be reckoned with in the production, distribution, and consumption of forms of knowledge that some would say are more egalitarian because they are no longer bound by the walls of the academy. Alkalimat, in particular, has advocated for information freedom on the Internet as a means to communicate with the poor and offer a new paradigm for black liberation.

Today black studies continues to present research findings to recover and reconstruct the various histories of blacks in America as well as those in the African diaspora and to credit their contributions in the making of U.S. and global societies. Black studies also perseveres in its efforts to create alternative visions and institutions. It goes beyond the critique of the assumptions of the dominant culture to engage in improving the lives of aggrieved communities and to fulfill the distinctly public mission that it has always had. Ultimately, as black scholars maintain a strong intellectual presence on college campuses nationwide, they also preserve their community ties and commitments. More than ever, black studies continues to play its role in closing the gap between impoverished communities and the academy as well as in reshaping the current cultural, political, educational, and economic landscape. The impact of black studies on the body politic of the twenty-first century is real, as is the underlying significance of this body of work for the American citizenry as a whole.

[See also *Historically Black Colleges and Universities*; *Journal of Negro History*; Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; *Souls of Black Folk*, The; and *biographical entries on figures mentioned in this article*.]

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African-American studies (also known as black studies) is an inter/multidisciplinary field that analyzes and treats the past and present culture, achievements, characteristics, and issues of people of African descent in North America, the diaspora, and Africa. The field challenges the sociohistorical and cultural content and definition of western ideology. African-American studies argues for a multicultural interpretation of the Western Hemisphere rather than a Eurocentric one. It has its earliest roots in history, sociology, literature, and the arts. The field's most important concepts, Pan African or Africana Studies study black communities all over the world and requires course work in history, economics, anthropology, political science, archeology. Depending on the institution course work may also include gender and women's studies, English, film studies, Latin American Studies, art history, etc. See Cornell University, Barnard College, Columbia University. African-American studies would usually be about the people of African descent who form part of the population of the USA (who are usually now called African-Americans) - though some courses might include Africa as well. Africana studies seems to be a more recently invented alternative name - possibly designed to include both of the above. African American scientists, like these 31 examples, have helped 'push the envelope' of science and human understanding. These 31 Black American Scientists, like many others, have made significant contributions to their respective fields of science. They have all, in their own way, carved their place in history and helped further human understanding. This list is far from exhaustive and is no particular order.