

4 History, Historians, and African American Studies

An educational reform movement and distinct byproduct of the turbulent Black Power era, African American Studies has undergone a host of transformations since the formal establishment of the first degree-granting Black Studies program at San Francisco State College in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. While scholarship, ways of thinking and knowing, and academic worldviews that could be considered part of what we now call “Black Studies” (as well as countless other names ascribed to this academic field) began most concretely with groups of African American scholar-activists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Black Studies became something of a politicized, household term and first substantively penetrated the mainstream academy between the late 1960s and the middle of the 1970s.

Black Studies, by name, originated as an uncompromising manifestation and expression of “Black Power” in the US academy. The early Black Studies movement boldly confronted racism in American higher education. Its advocates, primarily African American students, faculty, and scholar-activists, demanded that US colleges and universities acknowledge the needs of their black student populations by offering courses pertaining to African American history, life, and culture, and by creating Black Studies programs, departments, institutes, and centers that sought to transform American society and empower what its promoters referred to as “the black community,” an all-inclusive term for black America. Black students were central to the birth and initial growth of the movement. It is not an overstatement to suggest that without these students' participation – extensions of the long black freedom struggle or what Ibram Rogers has dubbed “the long black student movement” – the character of Black Studies as we know it in the twenty-first century would not be the same. During the middle years of the Black Power era, administrators at predominantly white colleges and universities scrambled to create and manage a wide range of Black Studies-related platforms, academic courses being among the most paramount. Scholar Noliwe Rooks' observation is accurate: “There is to date no other discipline in the academy so closely aligned with social protest, student activism, and violence as Black Studies, and its emergence and rapid spread surprised many.”¹ By the decline of the Black Power era in the mid-1970s, more than 100 Black Studies degree programs had been founded and more than 500 Black Studies entities, under an assortment of arrangements, had been launched – more often than not in great haste.

It is worthy of notice that Black Studies was first recognized in predominantly white colleges and universities around the same time that the mainstream US historical profession began to consider the study of African American history as being “legitimate.” In some sense, the struggle for the inclusion of Black Studies and the study of African American history in US higher education were very much part of the same fabric and movement. Black history was a vital discipline for Black Studies and both fields stressed the primacy of centering the black experience from the vista of African Americans themselves. When the first Black Studies

programs and departments were set in motion, numerous black historians and a small cluster of white historians had established a significant body of scholarship and a rough blueprint for the field. The pragmatism evoked by Black Studies practitioners was central to many African American historians' conceptualizations of African American history. In 1971, for instance, philosopher of black history Earl E. Thorpe deemed African American history “a weapon in the fight for racial equality” and “a contribution to the knowledge and understanding of mankind.”² In the early 1970s, historian Sterling Stuckey reinforced his elder's beliefs, stressing that, within the context of the study of the black past, politics and history were indivisible.

Courses in black history were part of the bedrock of the Black Studies curricula. Likewise, introductory courses in Black Studies were, and still are, often organized within historical frameworks. As historian Edwin S. Redkey noted at the historic Black Studies symposium at Yale University in 1969: “The call for black studies usually begins with a demand for a course in black history.”³ Others belonging to different ideological camps echoed Redkey. Looking back at the turbulent late 1960s more than a decade later, black cultural nationalist Maulana Karenga noted: “The first and seemingly most urgent objective was to teach what was called the Black experience in its historical and current unfolding.”⁴ In the early 1990s, the renowned black public intellectual Henry Louis Gates, Jr., reflected, “when black studies formally entered the curriculum, history had been the predominant subject, a decade later, literary studies had become the ‘glamor’ area of black studies.”⁵

There are several explanations for the conspicuous location of history within the Black Studies enterprise. History was among the most popular disciplines that black students during the Black Power era demanded to have taught, with black subject matter at the forefront and from a black perspective. The earliest curricula in Black Studies featured courses in African American history. The first “core course” in the Black Studies bachelor's program at San Francisco State College in 1969, for instance, included “101. Black History.” As the program's first coordinator, sociologist and psychologist Nathan Hare argued that “a sense of pastness” should serve “as a springboard in the quest for a new identity and better future.” For him, history-centered Black Studies courses should “have as a requirement some participation” in practical, hands-on community activism, such as “panel discussions for younger children in church basements or elementary and junior high schools. A class project,” he added, “might be the establishment of a black history club.”⁶

Since the field's formative years, scholars have posited countless definitions of Black Studies and have widely debated its mission, purpose, theoretical underpinnings, methodologies, and nomenclature. As one scholar observed about 40 years after Black Studies first entered the US academic lexicon: “There is no definition on which the different schools of thought agree.”⁷ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage with the multitude of conceptualizations of the field. To be sure, many distinct schools of thought have debated Black Studies' meaning in numerous ways. African American Studies has been called a discipline; a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary field of academic study; and a “multidiscipline.” That is, scholars in this field encompass academicians trained in various areas of scholarly inquiry

and they often approach the field, and call upon others to do so, by employing a range of disciplines. The field is transdisciplinary in its scope, vision, and methodologies. At the most basic and generic level, most tend to agree that as an intellectual enterprise Black Studies involves the rigorous, methodical, and interdisciplinary study of people of African descent. This unique and complex characteristic makes African American Studies challenging, and yet potentially informative and wide-ranging. What African American Studies is not is perhaps clearer than its exact meaning. Molefi Kete Asante's musings from the mid-1980s are especially insightful in clarifying misunderstandings of the field. "*Courses in History, Art, Sociology, Psychology, and Communication that deal with African people do not constitute the discipline of African-American studies,*" the popularizer of Afrocentricity and the founder of the first Ph.D. program in African American Studies emphasized:

In other words, the study of black people is not African/African American Studies. If that were so we could argue that African American Studies has existed for a hundred years. It is not the study of blacks that is the fundamental issue but the study of blacks and others from an Afrocentric perspective; this is the locus of African American Studies.⁸

Nevertheless, most scholars within Black Studies approach the study of people of African descent using a specific traditional discipline as their major frame of analysis, most often history, English, sociology, political science, anthropology, education, or psychology. Sociologist Fabio Rojas concluded that, during the 2003–4 academic year, there were approximately 855 professors of African American Studies. Of the 762 Black Studies professors with doctorates about whom Rojas assembled data, the doctoral degrees by discipline revealed interesting results: history (19.19%), English (13.55%), sociology (11.13%), politics (10.97%), anthropology (7.42%), Black Studies (6.45%), education (4.84%), and psychology (4.52%). The other disciplines are 3.0% and less in terms of representation.⁹

What scholars consider as constituting Black Studies in the twenty-first century differs from how the founders of the field envisioned it. Black Studies' scholarly scope has certainly expanded by leaps and bounds since the early 1970s. Yet, during its formative years, Black Studies possessed a more practical and activist dimension than most contemporary renditions of the field. That is, many of the field's outspoken and influential pioneers were scholar-activists who argued that their scholarly craft needed to be linked with generating social change and facilitating community engagement. Nathan Hare was very clear about this in founding the discipline's first degree-granting program. This belief is also embodied in the National Council of Black Studies' decades-old guiding mission of "academic excellence and social responsibility."

When this "extra-academic" mission and worldview began to decline is hard to decipher. In 2000, Sundiata Cha-Jua ascertained that since the mid-1980s Black Studies practitioners "have largely removed the field's extra-academic mission." Whatever the case may be, it is clear that in the new millennium the prominence of the Black Studies "scholar who not only produces engaged scholarship but is actively engaged in the Black freedom movement" has significantly diminished.¹⁰ Like Cha-Jua, many Black Studies scholars hailing from different generations

have called for the reinstatement of this “historical mission,” as Ronald W. Bailey has called it. Three decades after the first Black Studies programs were established, Bailey was convinced that younger generations of Black Studies scholars took for granted the revealing history of the field. “From where we stand today, looking at this history it is easy to emphasize professionalization and to forget the importance of those of the ‘innovation generation’ and to ignore them. Without them, there would be no Black studies as we know it today,” remarked Bailey; “we should practice with more humility the injunction, if I may paraphrase, of lifting up our eyes unto the hills from whence cometh our historical, collective wisdom. Black intellectual history gives us the best foundation for the Black studies enterprise.”¹¹ In a critical study of 185 Black Studies programs and departments, hip hop generation scholar Ibram Rogers deduced that Black Studies entities appear “to be more focused on producing excellent academicians, which the academy welcomes, than socially responsible practitioners.” He found that only about 12 percent of Black Studies programs and departments require service-learning activities.¹²

Along with a bewildering number of definitions for Black Studies and the debates surrounding its historical connection to social change, there are many interchangeable names for this discipline, interdisciplinary field of scholarly inquiry, and “multidiscipline,” many of which acknowledge the role of Africa and its vast diaspora, including African American Studies, Afro-American Studies, African Diaspora Studies, African American and African Studies, Africana Studies, African American and African Diaspora Studies, and Africology. As the reader might have noticed, throughout this chapter, I use the terms “field,” “discipline,” and “multidiscipline” interchangeably. I also use the terms “Black Studies” and “African American Studies” interchangeably. This decision is a conscious one. In 2009, about three decades after first publishing his classic *Introduction to Black Studies* (1982), Maulana Karenga convincingly argued that the term “Black Studies” should be used as “the standard category for the discipline.” Though at one level he supports employing the term Africana Studies, Karenga is most comfortable with the designation Black Studies for several reasons, history being one of the most important: “My preference is to maintain Black Studies as a historically significant term” – one that first emerged during the 1960s. For Karenga, “Black Studies” directly links the discipline with “its historical roots in the emancipatory struggles of African Americans.” The founder of the popular African American holiday Kwanzaa adds: “To say Black Studies is to call into being a history of struggle on the intellectual and social level.”¹³

Since the early 1970s when scholars scrambled to define this newly created field of academic inquiry, many Black Studies scholars have tended to identify and credit an often somewhat randomly selected group of professionally trained and amateur intellectuals active during the era of Jim Crow segregation as being the primary progenitors of the modern Black Studies movement. Two icons whose names are prevailingly evoked are historians and scholar-activists W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. They wholeheartedly embraced what in 1969 Nathan Hare identified as the “expressive and pragmatic” phases of Black Studies. The fact that these progenitors of the modern Black Studies enterprise were professionally trained historians is more than a coincidence. Much of Du Bois's, Woodson's, and their co-workers' scholarship embraced the “three major functions” of Black Studies described by Alan K.

Colon in the mid-1980s:

(1) corrective – the distortions and fallacies surrounding and projected against Blacks for elitist and racial and cultural supremacist purposes are countered with factual knowledge and critical historical interpretation; (2) descriptive – the past and present events that constitute the Black experience are accurately documented; and (3) prescriptive – concepts, theories, programs, and movements toward the alleviation or resolution of group problems faced by Blacks are generated and promoted.¹⁴

Often consciously harking back to Du Bois, Woodson, and other black historians active during the first half of the twentieth century, during the late 1960s professionally trained historians participated in and significantly shaped the frequent and plentiful debates surrounding the meaning and purpose of Black Studies as well as the enterprise's precipitous inclusion in the curricula of predominantly white colleges and universities. Many black historians' participation in the Black Studies movement was linked with their taking part in the black history movement during the Black Power era. They challenged the US historical profession in ways similar to how Black Studies' advocates confronted institutions of higher education as a whole.

Many black scholars opposed the paternalistic, unorganized, and problematical way in which Black Studies was often half-heartedly integrated into the mainstream academy by unprepared administrators. Between 1968 and 1970, *Negro Digest*, an important outlet for black scholars founded in 1942 and renamed *Black World* in 1970, dedicated several issues to unpacking the concept of “The Black University,” a direct rebuttal of the non-threatening, integrationist model of Black Studies. Along with Gerald McWorter (now Abdul Alkalimat), Nathan Hare, Stephen E. Henderson, and others, Vincent Harding, who earned his Ph.D. in history from the University of Chicago in 1965, was outspoken in his opposition to the hasty emergence of Black Studies in mainstream universities. Harding's radical, activist, and community-focused stance was, as he reflected in the 1980s, molded by his participation in “the modern black freedom movement” in the South.

Founded in 1969 largely under the headship of Vincent Harding, the Institute of the Black World (IBW) – an eclectic coalition of black scholar-activists bound together by the idea that “their minds are meant to be fully used in the service of the black community” – embraced what historian Derrick E. White has called “pragmatic nationalism.” Historians, namely Lerone Bennett, John Henrik Clarke, Benjamin Quarles, and Horace Mann Bond, were members of the IBW's Advisory Council, and the Research Staff included Bennett, Harding, and Sterling Stuckey. An important part of the IBW's agenda was the establishment and preservation of community-centered Black Studies programs. The organization “became an independent source for the development of Black Studies curricula, educational methodology, and teaching materials.”¹⁵ Opposed to the prevalent “make-shift” Black Studies schemes of the times, they realized that the field was in its infancy and in order to survive and thrive it needed to be “well-structured,” defined clearly, “unified,” and “not discipline-bound.” In their “Statement of Purpose,” history, a vital part of what they termed “the Black Experience,” was duly emphasized. “Among our basic concerns and commitments,” they stressed, “is the

determination to set our skills to *a new understanding of the past*, present and future conditions of the peoples of African descent ... with an emphasis on the American experience.”¹⁶ Cognizant of the intimate connections between the past and present experiences of black America, the first of the ten elements of the IBW's approach to Black Studies was “serious research in many areas of historical and contemporary black existence which have either been ignored, or only superficially explored.”¹⁷

In its founding year, the IBW, under Harding's guidance, “conducted their first systematic analysis of emerging Black Studies programs” and organized a “Black Studies Directors Conference.”¹⁸ Also in 1969 in *Negro Digest*, Harding published what he called “An Open Letter to Black Students in the North” entitled “New Creation or Familiar Death?,” in which he argued that historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the South, collectively dubbed “The Black University,” greatly suffered as a result of northern white universities' “sudden conversion to black studies.” In Harding's mind, “Afro-American studies in white settings” did not best suit the black freedom struggle, in part because the proliferation of such programs led to the “raping” and “raiding of black schools” of many of their brightest students and faculty. Echoing the concerns articulated by Gerald McWorter in his 1968 essay “The Nature and Needs of the Black University,” Harding dubbed this phenomenon a “brain-draining process” and encouraged black students and professors not to “sell out the black colleges of the south” and instead to help actively support the IBW's efforts. His reasoning was down-to-earth. “It is only logical,” he promulgated, “that black institutions in the black community, if properly funded, organized and led, could probably do the best job of creating new scholars in the field of Afro-American Studies.”¹⁹

Harding's presence and influence in the Black Studies movement extended well beyond the Black Power era. His narrative *There Is A River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (1981) was for at least a decade after its release a widely adopted narrative for courses in Black Studies and African American history. Harding crafted this book in the tradition of the Black Studies that Maulana Karenga and other cultural nationalists espoused. “Identifying fully with the subjects of my study and the substance of their hope, I have freely allowed myself to celebrate,” Harding introduced his opus; “The only history I know is one that drives us into the future, moving like a river toward our best possible evolution.”²⁰ Harding's poetic and spiritually grounded 1986 essay “Responsibilities of the Black Scholar to the Community” remains germane to Black Studies scholars in the twenty-first century. He charged that “the historian has a responsibility for the opening of the future” and that all scholars must think about how they can repay “a debt” that they owe to contemporary and future members of the black community based upon the sacrifices that their ancestors made, which resulted in more opportunities for upcoming generations.²¹

Though he urged black scholars to avoid alienating themselves from the masses of their people and focused much of his research on humanizing “the slave community,” historian John W. Blassingame, longtime chair of the Afro-American Studies Program at Yale University, conceptualized Black Studies somewhat differently than Harding and his IBW colleagues. While Blassingame was a graduate student at Yale, Harding and those who believed in the

“Black University” project openly rebuked Yale's Afro-American Studies Program and similar programs at other “Establishment schools.” Nevertheless, it could be argued, as one historian has, that Blassingame was perhaps “one of the top experts on Black Studies.”²² In 1971, Blassingame edited one of the first major anthologies on Black Studies, *New Perspectives on Black Studies*.

Blassingame authored two essays in this collection. One, originally published in 1969, discussed the numerous problems resulting from the hasty creation of Black Studies programs at ill-equipped, predominantly white universities. In the other essay, “Black Studies and the Role of the Historian” (an extension of a paper first delivered at the 1969 American Historical Association meeting), Blassingame indicted the US historical profession for its racist tradition, beliefs, and behavior, and critiqued black students and activists for uncritically enlisting a mythicized version of black history in the black freedom struggle. For Blassingame, the role of the black historian in the Black Studies movement should be “to record the truth.” Challenging black students who demanded the employment of black professors to teach black subject matter, Blassingame opined that empathetic white scholars could indeed effectively teach black history. Summing up, he defined the “role of the historian” in the debates surrounding Black Studies as that of creating well-researched, objective scholarship that would help “the black studies ship as it sails through stormy seas in the years ahead.”²³

Nathan Huggins, historian and then-Chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies and the Director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University, authored one of the decade's most controversial overviews of the field, his *Report to the Ford Foundation on Afro-American Studies* (1985). This document functioned as a kind of blueprint for the Ford Foundation's funding of Black Studies programs across the nation. Huggins was commissioned by the Ford Foundation to assess the past, present, and future of the field. Though he did recognize the efforts of the field's predecessors during the era of Jim Crow segregation, Huggins' history of African American Studies zeroed in on the post-World War II transformations in higher education and the student unrest during the late 1960s. His main case studies included San Francisco State College, Cornell University, the University of California – Berkeley, Yale University, Harvard University, and Wesleyan University. Echoing Blassingame, he chided black students for their militant and so-called “limited” perceptions of the field. Huggins canvassed the roles of historians in Black Studies more than the roles of those from other disciplines because he reasoned that “to the extent that there was a field, it depended upon them.”²⁴ In assessing examples of Black Studies programs, college models, departments, centers, and institutes, Huggins, to the dismay of some, deduced that the program model was the strongest approach.

Several leading scholars in Black Studies disputed Huggins' report. The most outspoken was Molefi Kete Asante who chastised Huggins first for not unraveling how African American Studies was not simply the arbitrary study of black people and, second, for centering the role of the historian in the field. “An afrocentric perspective constitutes the critical difference between African-American Studies and other fields,” Asante insisted:

It is never clear in Huggins' mind what the discipline is and what it is not. It is certainly not history and sociology; that would make it a redundant field of study. But since he is a historian and not an African Americanist he cannot see the redundancy ... Huggins' study omits the strongest departments, fails to record the history of the field accurately, does not assess the research achievements of scholars, and consequently does a disservice to the field.²⁵

Historians Robert L. Harris, Jr., Darlene Clark Hine, and Nellie McKay, longtime Professor of American and African-American Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, wrote up the Ford Foundation's second report on African American Studies, *Three Essays: Black Studies in the United States* (1989). In his essay, "The Intellectual and Institutional Development of Africana Studies," Harris, then the Director of the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University, employs the inclusive name "Africana Studies" for the field that he construes, in simplest terms, as "the multidisciplinary analysis of the lives and thought of people of African ancestry on the African continent and throughout the world." History prevails in his analysis. Not only does he propound that "many of the themes of Africana Studies are derived from the historical position of African people in relation to Western societies," but also he partitions the evolution of the field into four distinct phases from the 1890s until the late 1980s. In the last stage, Harris surmised that Africana Studies was "in fairly good condition." Unlike Huggins, he resolved that departments were more desirable than programs, since the latter are dependent upon faculty from other departments. He also called for an expansion of the field in terms of scope, an updating of curricula, and greater support for Black Studies faculty who were often – and still are – expected to mentor African American students to a greater extent than their white colleagues.²⁶

In her essay, "Black Studies: An Overview," Darlene Clark Hine explored the diversity of Black Studies programs, spotlighting the debates surrounding nomenclature as well as "the differences in structure and mission between 'departments,' 'programs,' 'centers,' and 'institutes.'" Hine was optimistic that by the late 1980s, unlike during earlier times, white administrators supposedly "sang the praises" of Black Studies at their institutions. Still, she lamented that without Black Studies, racial diversity in higher education would greatly suffer. Like those before her, Hine recommended that there should be some sense of standardization in the field and the creation of multiple Ph.D. degree programs. When her report was published, Temple University was the only university with a Ph.D. program in African American Studies. Where Hine departs from previous overviews of the field is in her assessment of "Black Women's Studies" and "Black Women's History." For her, these areas of scholarly inquiry could lead the way for the "future of Black Studies."²⁷

The Ford Foundation's second report on Black Studies did not spark the same controversy as the first one written by Huggins. Yet Hine's part of the report was critiqued by the then Chair of the National Council of Black Studies (NCBS), Selase W. Williams. His appraisal of Hine was similar to the charge that Asante leveled against Huggins. Williams accused her of not being familiar with Black Studies. Hine was especially irked by his supposition that she did "not view the mission of Black Studies as fundamentally different from that of traditional

academic disciplines.”²⁸ Hine retorted with an essay in *The Black Scholar* in which she put forth what she called “an exercise in Black intellectual history of both the movement of Black Studies and the idea of Black Studies.” She drew clear distinctions between Black Studies and other disciplines, remarking: “Most Black Studies scholars agree that the field is distinguished from other academic endeavors because of the tension between theory and practice and that they must always respond to the needs of two masters, the academy on the one hand, and the Black community on the other.”²⁹ Hine confessed that in her report for the Ford Foundation she honed in on scholars in the field of Black Studies whom she considered to be “Traditionalists,” those scholars operating in “traditional” disciplines who had made contributions to the Black Studies undertaking. In her follow-up essay on Black Studies, she outlined the contributions of “ideal types within the Black Studies community of scholars, writers, and thinkers.” Unlike most scholars of her status at the time, she took stock of the scholarship of Afrocentric thinkers (“Authentists”) without dismissing them. In the end, Hine acceded that Black Studies was a complicated, varied, wide-ranging, and multifaceted academic venture.

When we consider historians who have been active in the Black Studies enterprise, Manning Marable must be highlighted for his scholarly contributions. He earned his Ph.D. degree in history from the University of Maryland in 1976, but embraced a multidisciplinary approach after his *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (1983). During the mid-1990s, Marable, the founding Director of the Institute for Research in African American Studies and the Center for the Study of Contemporary History at Columbia University, was among the very few professionally trained historians who belonged to the group of widely visible and publicized “black public intellectuals.” In 1998, the *New York Times* featured an article, “A Debate on Activism in Black Studies.” This exposé showcased a squabble between Marable and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. about the purpose of Black Studies. While Gates frowned upon the activist nature of Afrocentrism and in part clung onto the notion of “knowledge for its own sake,” Marable bemoaned that, 30 years after the founding of the first Black Studies departments and programs, those active in the field seemed to have turned their backs on interfacing their scholarship with social change. “Scholars have an obligation not just to interpret, but to act,” he expounded. Marable persisted: “We can only advance our field of scholarship by reaffirming the connection between the intellectual work and public advocacy.”³⁰

In the introductory essay to *Dispatches from the Ebony Tower: Intellectuals Confront the African American Experience* (2000), Marable historicized and interrogated Black Studies as it entered the twenty-first century. He delineated African American Studies as being synonymous with “the black intellectual tradition.” Reiterating ideas that Alan K. Colon articulated in the mid-1980s, Marable maintained that African American Studies had three main functions: “descriptive” (describing the black experience “from the point of view of black people themselves”), “corrective” (challenging racism in popular culture and the academic mainstream), and “prescriptive” (making connections between scholarship and struggle, between social “analysis and social transformation”). For Marable, Black Studies represented “a critical body of scholarship that sought over time to dismantle powerful racist intellectual categories and white supremacy itself.”³¹

Marable located the “ ‘conceptual period’ ” of Black Studies during the period from Reconstruction through the Great Depression and, like others before him, deemed Du Bois as being most responsible for laying the ideological foundations for the field. Marable's discussion of Black Studies on college and university campuses during the Black Power era is for the most part the standard account for its time. He does, however, elaborate on how, by the mid-1970s, the mainstreaming process of Black Studies began and, as a result, the radical Black Studies programs stopped being supported and funded. The “integrationist” or “inclusionist” approach to Black Studies was, he stressed, welcomed by predominantly white institutions of higher learning. For Marable, Huggins' 1985 Ford Foundation report embodied “the triumph of the liberal reformist version” of the field. Marable categorized Black Studies into three major ideological camps – “inclusionists,” “cultural nationalists” (namely Afrocentric thinkers), and the “transformationalists” or “radicals” – and identified himself as belonging to the last group, ideological descendants of the Institute of the Black World. Marable was unambiguous about what he viewed as being the best future path for Black Studies in the new millennium. The field should, he reasoned, embrace the diversity of approaches, welcome and engender debate, and, most importantly, advocate for the transformation of “the existing power relationships and the racist institutions of the state, the economy, and society.”³²

Later in his career, Marable specifically addressed the role of the historian in the Black Studies venture. In a 2008 interview with Jeanette R. Davidson, he called himself a “renegade historian.” He professed that history was a key discipline in Black Studies, a central feature of which for him remained the empowerment of oppressed African Americans. Echoing Malcolm X, Marable asserted: “history is the foundation for any possible empowerment project on the part of the oppressed because, if you don't have a sense of where you've been ... you can't possibly know where you want to go. That history, the historical knowledge, grounds us to processes that transcend generations and push us forward.”³³ Deep down, he believed that Black Studies “as an intellectual field utilizes tools that draw upon various disciplines ... to reconstruct Black life, you need a 360-degree approach that must be interdisciplinary.”³⁴

The historians that I have discussed thus far were of course not alone in molding, shaping the discourse about, and participating in Black Studies from the Black Power era until the new millennium. Nor were they alone in dissecting the role of history in the Black Studies enterprise. Since the early 1970s, namely beginning with Abdul Alkalimat's *Introduction to Afro-American Studies* (first published in 1973), many scholars have produced introductory textbooks and edited volumes on African American Studies. That historians have not prominently authored such books is a little surprising. Several of these texts stand out for their usefulness, including Alkalimat's classic, Karenga's *Introduction to Black Studies* (first published in 1982), the exhaustive *The African American Studies Reader* (first edited by Nathaniel Norment, Jr., in 2001), and Talmadge Anderson and James Stewart's *Introduction to African American Studies: Transdisciplinary Approaches and Implications* (2007).

The first major textbook for Black Studies is arguably Alkalimat's *Introduction to Afro-American Studies*. History is central to his conceptualization of the field: “Afro-American

Studies is an academic field that combines general intellectual history, academic scholarship in the social sciences and the humanities, and a radical movement for fundamental educational reform.” Alkalimat stressed that one of the main objectives of Black Studies was “to rewrite history and reconceptualize the essential features of American society.” He may have highlighted sociology as being the “leading disciplinary contributor” to Black Studies, but he organized his book within a clear historical framework. After dealing with African history in a very general sense and the history of slavery, Alkalimat structures his book around themes, all of which he historicizes.³⁵

Maulana Karenga's *Introduction to Black Studies* became, according to seasoned African American Studies scholar Perry Hall, “probably the most widely circulated introductory text” on the field during the 1980s.³⁶ Currently in its fourth edition (2012), it remains a noteworthy introductory text for Black Studies, especially in defining the discipline and discussing its “seven core subject areas.” History is essential to Karenga on various levels. For him, an overview of the history of Black Studies, rooted in the black student movement of the 1960s, is “imperative.” Knowledge of this past, he reasons, will help students in the discipline to better locate themselves within the evolution of the field. He provides multi-leveled definitions of Black Studies. In the simplest terms, he characterizes the field as being an interdisciplinary one, “the scientific study of the multidimensional aspects of Black thought and practice in their current and historical unfolding.” As “an interdisciplinary social science,” Black Studies, for Karenga, has seven key “subject areas of specialization which do not replace the discipline, but sharpen its focus in the given subject area.”³⁷

These subject areas, with the descriptor “Black” preceding them, are history, religion, social organization, politics, economics, creative production, and psychology. Though he upholds that each subject area is vital to understanding the “wholeness” of the black experience, Karenga plays up the indispensable role of history as perhaps the foundational subject area. For Karenga, Black Studies and the study of black history are similar in that, potentially, they both can critically illuminate past phenomena with the goal of psychologically liberating black people. “Black Studies,” he notes, “then begins with rigorous research and critical intellectual production in the key social science, history, which lays the basis for and informs all others and which will affirm the truth of the Black experience and negate the racist myths which have surrounded it.”³⁸ Karenga further underscores the significance of history, suggesting that Black Studies “begins with Black History because it is relevant, even indispensable to the introduction and development of all the other subject areas.” Black history, Karenga adds, “offers not only a broad framework for critically viewing and understanding Black people, but also a necessary background perspective for critical insights into other subject areas of Black Studies.”³⁹ For Karenga, Black Studies shares with black history a “profound concern for critical interpretation of events, issues, important personages, and social units of the past which illuminate understanding of current thought and practice and its common heritage and contributions to human advancement.”⁴⁰

Since the late 1990s, especially in the first decade of the new millennium, numerous scholars have released and marketed edited volumes and anthologies for those teaching introductory

courses in African American Studies. Though not edited by historians by trade, such compilations often include contributions from historians and always offer some type of historical overview of the field. One of the more recently published excellent introductory books on Black Studies is *Introduction to African American Studies: Transdisciplinary Approaches and Implications* (2007), co-authored by Black Studies veterans Talmadge Anderson and James Stewart. They endorse a “transdisciplinary” approach to Black Studies because, they contend, such a concept provides “tools of analysis” that extend beyond those employed by “narrowly structured disciplinary studies and normative academic disciplines.” For them, “indigenous” African American knowledge and “ways of knowing” are paramount. Despite this frame of analysis and their acknowledgment that all disciplines have roles in the Black Studies enterprise and that future models for the field must extend to science, technology, and public policy, history still assumes a prominent role in how they define Black Studies as “a field of study that systematically treats the past and present experiences” of African Americans. Practitioners of African American Studies, they argue, should employ history “with the goal of educational and social improvement.” Further, under the heading “Primacy of History in Black and African American Studies,” Anderson and Stewart posit: “Historical studies provide the foundation for all other types of inquiries in African American Studies ... The study of history within African American Studies incorporates the field's overarching ideological principles.”⁴¹ Like Alkalimat's and Karenga's introductory tomes, Anderson and Stewart's book is sub-divided into chapters that explore and historicize social, psychological, political, economic, and scientific and technological aspects of black life.

Sociologist Fabio Rojas has attempted to locate what he calls “a Black Studies Canon.” Drawing on statistical data, surveys, and interviews, he identified 18 books that his respondents considered to be “canonical,” books that Black Studies scholars “believe that ‘everybody’ should have read.”⁴² Leading the somewhat disjointed list of 18 books is, unsurprisingly, Du Bois's classic *The Souls of Black Folk*. There is only one book by a historian, curiously Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson's *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (1998). Equally as intriguing, the only books among the collection that directly overview the discipline are Karenga's *Introduction to Black Studies* and Alkalimat's *Introduction to African-American Studies: A People's College Primer*.

Determining which texts are “canonical” within Black Studies is a herculean task, especially because those most active in the field hail from different disciplinary backgrounds. The valiant efforts of the National Council of Black Studies to standardize the discipline have yet to be realized, as revealed by even a casual perusal of college and university departments, programs, and units. Indeed, as Rojas points out, Black Studies, “as an academic discipline, has extremely porous boundaries. The Black Studies profession has not made black studies a self-contained academic community” in the manner that the more traditional, mainstream disciplines have. As for every area of academic study, the black historical profession is, of course, not monolithic. Without ignoring obvious generational and ideological differences, historians studying and teaching about specific periods and themes in black history could probably reach some type of consensus regarding canonical works. After all, historiographical

knowledge is one of the most important pillars, if not the foundation, of the historian's craft. The impact of certain historians' scholarship may be influenced by the academic politics of the sanctioning process, but the presence and power of transformative scholarship cannot be denied.

How do we then decipher which books have recently made the biggest splash in the Black Studies community? Depending upon one's disciplinary approach or specific subfield of specialization, the possibilities are countless. For the last several decades, especially since the 1990s, black public intellectuals' widely publicized scholarship has garnered a lot of mainstream attention and has been associated with Black Studies in the public sphere. During the 1990s, the writings of bell hooks, Cornel West, Manning Marable, Michael Eric Dyson, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., William Julius Wilson, and a few others reached a broad readership. West's *Race Matters* (1992) and many of Dyson's books have been especially popular and sold widely. The black public intellectuals who rose to fame during the 1990s continue to publish, but they have not been as influential in more recent times. They have been replaced by a new crop of black public intellectuals whose scholarship has been increasingly noticed. Among historians, Peniel E. Joseph is perhaps one of the most noticed black historians of the hip hop generation. He is among the first African American historians of his generation whose work has been widely reviewed in major newspapers. Just weeks after its release, leading papers such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Boston Globe* positively reviewed his *Stokely: A Life* (2014).

Though she is not necessarily active in the field of Black Studies *per se*, Michelle Alexander has become a household name in the field with her 2010 book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. A law professor and former civil rights litigator and advocate, Alexander received a prestigious NAACP Image Award in Outstanding Literary Work (in non-fiction) for her book, which also remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than a year. Several months after the paperback version of the book was released in January 2012, roughly 175,000 copies had been sold. Alexander has made many television appearances on MSNBC, HBO, PBS, NPR, and other networks. According to Alexander's website, www.newjimcrow.com, her book has helped inspire the founding of several grassroots organizations committed to reforming the criminal justice system and the plight of those who are incarcerated.

More than any historian, Alexander has singlehandedly reintroduced the term "Jim Crow" into the American lexicon and African American public discourse. Why is Alexander's book so popular? First and foremost, it is jargon-free and accessible and knuckles down on one of the most pressing issues facing black America. The public is aware that the black male incarceration rate is astronomical. Second, she oversimplifies history in a manner that resonates with most readers, who do not want to be burdened with drawn-out historical arguments or narratives. That is, she does not trace the history of African American mass incarceration from the convict lease system to the present. On the other hand, she samples selectively, often symbolically and figuratively, from the past and makes generalized connections between the past and the present. "This book argues," she affirms, "that mass incarceration is, metaphorically, the New Jim Crow and that all those who care about social

justice should fully commit themselves to dismantling this new racial caste system. Mass incarceration – not attacks on affirmative action or lax civil rights enforcement – is the most damaging manifestation of the backlash against the Civil Rights Movement.”⁴³ Alexander's study is Black Studies in orientation in several ways. First, she draws relevant links between the past and the present, despite her oversimplified analysis of African American history prior to the conventional civil rights movement. Second, she calls upon her readers and the public to challenge the oppressive system of mass incarceration in the United States.

Alexander's study has triggered debates, but not really between opposing camps within Black Studies. In other words, it seems that most Black Studies scholars have welcomed her work. On the other hand, other books have generated debates within the community of Black Studies academicians. Beginning with his *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (1980), Molefi Kete Asante's scholarship has engendered a great deal of debate. Since the 1990s, scores of black and white scholars have rejected, embraced, and analyzed his ideas. The roll call of scholars who have written entire books directly responding to Asante's notion of Afrocentricity from the mid-1990s well into the new millennium is long. The most outspoken is Mary Lefkowitz, the author of *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (1996) and *History Lesson: A Race Odyssey* (2008). Asante's defenders have published numerous essays in the *Journal of Black Studies* and many books with Africa World Press. In addition to writing many essays defending Afrocentrism, Asante has directly responded to his critics in a book, *The Painful Demise of Eurocentrism* (first published in 1999).

In addition to Asante's various incarnations of Afrocentrism, biographies of major historical figures have certainly sparked debate and discourse among the Black Studies community. Dyson, for instance, initiated critical discourse with two of his biographies, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (1995) and *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2000), and his scathing attack on Bill Cosby. Manning Marable's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Malcolm X, a spiritual leader of the students who ignited the Black Studies movement, sparked an unprecedented amount of discourse amongst groups of Black Studies scholars immediately after its release. At Black Studies conferences, Marable's opus was widely discussed and debated, and journals such as the *Black Scholar* (Summer 2011) and the *Journal of African American History* (Summer 2013) featured forums on Malcolm X, using Marable's interpretations as points of critical departure.

Marable's book seems to have polarized the black intellectual and Black Studies communities in compelling ways. According to Sundiata Cha-Jua, a formally trained historian who is very active in Black Studies, Marable's study “has sparked a level of controversy unseen in Black Studies and the African American liberation movement since the 1992 Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill dispute, nearly two decades ago”; Cha-Jua continues:

Marable's controversial book is regenerating the critical dialogue characteristic of the transdiscipline, at its best ... it has sent a bolt of energy through the discipline ... I doubt any previous work in the discipline has elicited such an extensive and passionate response. It is likely that it will inspire black studies units to offer several new courses on Malcolm and spur scholar-activists on the humanities side of the discipline to adopt a similar large-scale research team approach.

Cha-Jua's extensive review of Marable's book is balanced. Like other scholars “guided by the core intellectual principles of black studies,” Cha-Jua critiques Marable's narrative approach, sensationalized accounts of his subject's sexuality, and factual inaccuracies. Overall, he is very equitable, noting that the book is worthy of “both commendation *and* condemnation.”⁴⁴

Two major edited volumes published in 2012 directly challenge Marable's rendering of Malcolm X. The most comprehensive collection of various responses to Marable is an online source edited by Abdul Alkalimat, *Debate Over the Attempt to Reinvent Malcolm X: 200 Writers Respond to Manning Marable's Book on Malcolm X*. This resource includes the reactions of many of the key movers and shakers in Black Studies. Though Marable's critics pose different sets of critiques, they all seem to agree that Marable, influenced by his own political vision and his desire to humanize a widely heralded black icon, constructed an image of Malcolm X that appeals to mainstream America.

At least one historian has stepped forward to defend Marable against the onslaught of criticism that his book has endured. For Peniel E. Joseph, his mentor's biography “achieves the rare feat of rescuing a man from his own mythology with deep archival research and brilliant insight” by sparking controversy about Malcolm's life. Marable presents the “most detailed examination yet” of the final years of Malcolm's life, Joseph continues: “we now have a historical portrait of Malcolm X that goes beyond literary clichés and autobiographical fictions to reveal an all-too human man beset by personal trials and political tribulations that would have felled the less courageous.”⁴⁵

There is no way to predict how much time will pass until another historian writes a book that triggers the type of clamor that Marable's biography on Malcolm X did. Undoubtedly, there will continue to be disputes among historians of the black past and within specialized areas of study within Black Studies. At the same time, it seems that Black Studies scholars born during and after the Black Power era are less inclined to passionately debate among themselves. To be sure, younger Black Studies scholars critically review each others' books in academic journals, but they have not clashed with each other in the manners that the early Black Studies movers and shakers did. As argued earlier in this chapter, while a few scholars in the new millennium have called for a return to the scholar-activist approach to Black Studies, it does not seem that the “social responsibility” component that once energized the field and the black historical profession is popular today. History, nevertheless, will continue to be a “core” discipline of Black Studies.

The African American experience and approaches of Black Studies scholars historicizes the dilemmas that African Americans have faced, directly linking them to deeply rooted evolutionary processes. Causation becomes paramount and historicism is useful for Black

Studies. A careful, African American Studies-centric examination of African American history demonstrates that the contemporary problems facing blacks are the byproducts of various pasts and incidents, impacted by contemporary developments and interpretive models, and related to future trends. As two leading scholars in African American Studies recently noted, “Recognition between the parallels between the past and the present is a central feature of African American Studies historiography and associated analyses of both the causes and the persistence of inequality in various areas ... This linkage between the past and the present also informs the design of interventions.”⁴⁶

Notes

- 1 Noliwe M. Rooks, *White Money / Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 32.
- 2 Thorpe, *Black Historians*, 18, 23.
- 3 Edwin S. Redkey, “On Teaching and Learning Black History,” in *Black Studies in the University: A Symposium*, ed. Armstead L. Robinson, Craig C. Foster, and Donald H. Ogilvie, 181 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).
- 4 Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies* (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1989), 26.
- 5 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 93.
- 6 Nathan Hare, “Questions and Answers About Black Studies,” *The Massachusetts Review* 10 (Autumn 1969): 727.
- 7 Nathaniel Norment, Jr., “Introduction,” in *The African American Studies Reader*, ed. Norment, xxxiii (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2007).
- 8 Molefi Kete Asante, “Book Review Essay: A Note on Nathan Huggins' *Report to the Ford Foundation on African American Studies*,” *The Journal of Black Studies* 17 (December 1986): 256, 258.
- 9 Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).
- 10 Sundiata Cha-Jua, “Black Studies in the New Millennium: Resurrecting Ghosts of the Past,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society* 2 (Summer 2000): 44, 46.
- 11 Ronald W. Bailey, “Black Studies in the Third Millennium: Reflections on Six Ideas That Can Still (and Must) Change the World,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society* 2 (Summer 2000): 79, 80.

- [12](#) Ibram Rogers, "Required Service-Learning Courses: A Disciplinary Necessity to Preserve the Decaying Social Mission of Black Studies," *The Journal of Black Studies* 40 (July 2010): 1120.
- [13](#) Maulana Karenga, "Names and Notions of Black Studies: Issues of Roots, Range, and Relevance," *The Journal of Black Studies* 40 (May 2009): 55, 57, 58.
- [14](#) Alan K. Colon, "Critical Issues in Black Studies: A Selective Analysis," *The Journal of Negro Education* 53 (Summer 1984): 268–9.
- [15](#) Derrick E. White, "'Black World View': The Institute of the Black World's Promotion of Pragmatic Nationalism," *The Journal of African American History* 95 (Summer–Fall 2010): 372.
- [16](#) "The Institute of the Black World Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center Atlanta, Georgia Statement of Purpose and Program Fall, 1969," *The Massachusetts Review* 10 (Autumn, 1969): 713 (emphasis mine).
- [17](#) "Institute of the Black World: Prospectus," *Negro Digest* 19 (March 1970): 22.
- [18](#) White, "'Black World View,'" 376.
- [19](#) Vincent Harding, "New Creation or Familiar Death?" *Negro Digest* 18 (March 1969): 7, 13.
- [20](#) Vincent Harding, *There Is A River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1981), xi, xxv.
- [21](#) Vincent Harding, "Responsibilities of the Black Scholar to the Community," in *The State of Afro-American History*, ed. Hine, 278.
- [22](#) Robert L. Harris, Jr., "John W. Blassingame: March 23, 1940 – February 13, 2000," *The Journal of Negro History* 86 (Summer 2001): 422.
- [23](#) John W. Blassingame, "Black Studies and the Role of the Historian," in *New Perspectives on Black Studies*, ed. Blassingame, 226 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).
- [24](#) Nathan Huggins, *Report to The Ford Foundation on Afro-American Studies*, in *Inclusive Scholarship: Developing Black Studies in the United States* with Introduction and Commentary by Farah Jasmine Griffin, 45 (New York: Ford Foundation, 2007).
- [25](#) Asante, "Book Review Essay: A Note on Nathan Huggins' *Report to the Ford Foundation on African American Studies*," 256, 261, 262.
- [26](#) Robert L. Harris, Jr., "The Intellectual and Institutional Development of Africana Studies," in *Inclusive Scholarship*, 91, 97.
- [27](#) Darlene Clark Hine, "Black Studies: An Overview," in *Inclusive Scholarship*, 101, 106,

- [28](#) Williams criticized Hine in the Fall 1990 NCBS Newsletter. See Darlene Clark Hine, “The Black Studies Movement: Afrocentric-Traditionalist-Feminist Paradigms for the Next Stage,” *The Black Scholar* 22 (Summer 1992): 11.
- [29](#) Hine, “The Black Studies Movement,” 12.
- [30](#) Manning Marable, “A Plea that Scholars Act Upon, Not Just Interpret, Events,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 1998, B13.
- [31](#) Manning Marable, “Black Studies and the Racial Mountain,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society* 2 (Summer 2000): 17–18, 19.
- [32](#) Marable, “Black Studies and the Racial Mountain,” 20, 26, 31.
- [33](#) Jeanette R. Davidson, “Black Studies for the Public: Interview with Manning Marable,” in *African American Studies*, ed. Davidson, 102–3 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).
- [34](#) Davidson, “Black Studies for the Public,” 103.
- [35](#) Abdul Alkalimat, *Introduction to Afro-American Studies: A People's College Primer* (Chicago: Twenty-First Century Press, 1986).
- [36](#) Perry Hall, *In the Vineyard: Working in African American Studies* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 9.
- [37](#) Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 33, 35.
- [38](#) Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 31.
- [39](#) Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 43.
- [40](#) Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 34.
- [41](#) Talmadge Anderson and James Stewart, *Introduction to African American Studies: Transdisciplinary Approaches and Implications* (Baltimore: Imprint Editions, 2007), xiii, 4, 7, 43.
- [42](#) Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies*, 200.
- [43](#) Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 11.
- [44](#) Sundiata Cha-Jua, “From Malcolm Little to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, A Life of A Revolutionary Transformation: Manning Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*,” *The Black Scholar* 41 (Summer 2011): 14, 15, 23.

- [45](#) Peniel E. Joseph, “Rescuing Malcolm X from his Calculated Myths,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (*The Chronicle Review*) May 1, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/Rescuing-Malcolm-X-From-His/127272>.
- [46](#) Anderson and Stewart, *Introduction to African American Studies*, 91.