

African-American Studies

The Foundations of African-American Studies, The Emergence of African-American Studies Departments

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African-American Studies (also known as black studies [or Africana 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, methods, and findings to date are situated within these disciplines.

More than one hundred and fifty years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans still struggle for a space in academia for a legitimate voice to express their interpretations and perspectives of their historical and contemporary experiences in Africa, the diaspora, and North America. Those in African-American studies argue not only that their voices have been marginalized, but that the history of African Americans' experiences and contributions to the United States has historically and systematically been missing from the texts and the curricula. Thus, African-American studies functions as a supplementary academic component for the sole purpose of adding the African experience to traditional disciplines.

Implicit to African-American studies is the notion that the black diasporic experience has been ignored or has not been accurately portrayed in academia or popular culture. From the earliest period of the field to the present, this movement has had two main objective: first, to counteract the effects of white racism in the area of group elevation; and second, to generate a stronger sense of black identity and community as a way of multiplying the group's leverage in the liberation struggle.

The Foundations of African-American Studies

The Atlanta University Conferences held from 1898 to 1914, under the auspices of W. E. B. DuBois, marked the inauguration of the first scientific study of the conditions of black people that covered important aspects of life (e.g., health, homes, the question of organization, economic development, higher education, common schools, artisans, the church, crime, and suffrage). It was during this period that African-American studies was formally introduced to the university and black academics initiated re-search studies.

One of the important goals of the scholars of this period was to counteract the negative images and representations of blacks that were institutionalized within academia and society. This was in response to the major tenet of social science research at this time that argued blacks were genetically inferior to whites and that Africa was a "dark continent" that lacked civilization. The American Negro Academy, founded in 1896, set as one of its major goals to assist, by publications, the vindication of the race from vicious assaults in all areas of learning and truth. In 1899 DuBois published a sociological study, *The Philadelphia Negro*. This landmark study highlighted the conditions of blacks in Philadelphia in the Seventh Ward. The study investigated the black experience as reflected in business, public education, religion, voluntary associations, and public health.

In 1915 the founding of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) by Carter G. Woodson marked the beginning of a new era in African-American studies. The ASNLH was founded to promote historical research; publish books on black life and history; promote the study of blacks through clubs and schools; and bring harmony between the races by interpreting the one to the other. In 1916, Woodson founded the *Journal of Negro History* and served as its editor until his death. This was perhaps one of Woodson's greatest contributions to the area of African-American studies.

In 1926 Woodson and his colleagues launched Negro History Week. This event, which later evolved into a whole month, was not intended to be the only time of the year in which Negro history was to be celebrated and taught. Woodson and his colleagues viewed this as a time to highlight the ongoing study of black history that was to take place throughout the year.

It was during this time that historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) began to respond to the scholarly activities in history and social science. It was becoming clear that black education should conform to the social conditions of black people. Black colleges began to add courses in black history to their curricula; this corresponded with the call by black college students for a culturally relevant curriculum, a theme that reoccurred later with greater political influence.

In 1919, prior to the influx of HBCUs offering black history courses as a part of their curriculum, Woodson issued the first report on African-American studies courses offered in Northern colleges. He reported the following courses:

1. Ohio State University, *Slavery Struggles in the United States*
2. Nebraska University, *The Negro Problem Under Slavery and Freedom*
3. Stanford University, *Immigration and the Race Problem*
4. University of Oklahoma, *Modern Race Problems*
5. University of Missouri, *The Negro in America*
6. University of Chicago, *The Negro in America*
7. University of Minnesota, *The American Negro*
8. Harvard University, *American Population Problems: Immigration and the Negro*

Furthermore, Woodson reported that a small number of HBCUs were offering courses in sociology and history pertaining to the Negro experience. Woodson stated that in spite of the lack of trained teachers, Tuskegee, Atlanta University, Fisk, Wilberforce, and Howard offered such courses, even at the risk of their becoming expressions of opinions without the necessary data to support them.

The period from approximately 1940 to the mid to late 1960s marked yet another era of African-American studies in history and the social sciences, characterized by an growing legitimacy and an increasing number of white scholars entering the field. Prior to this time, black scholars did the majority of the research conducted on African-American studies.

The Emergence of African-American Studies Departments

The student strike of 1968–1969, held at San Francisco State University (SFSU), forced the establishment of the Division of Ethnic Studies and departments of Black, Asian, Chicano, and Native Studies. The Black Student Union at SFSU drafted a political statement, "The Justification for African-American Studies," that would become the main document for developing African-American studies departments at more than sixty universities. The demands/objectives within this document included the opposition of the "liberal-fascist" ideology that was rampant on campus (as shown by college administrations who had attempted to pacify Black Student Union demands for systemic curriculum by offering one or two courses in black history and literature); the preparation of black students

for direct participation in the struggles of the black community and to define themselves as responsible to and for the future successes of that community; the reinforcement of the position that black people in Africa and the diaspora have the right to democratic rights, self-determination, and liberation; and opposition to the dominant ideology of capitalism, world imperialism and white supremacy. During this period, Nathan Hare and Jimmy Garrett collaborated to put together the first African-American studies program in the country.

African-American studies departments were created in a confrontational environment on American universities with the rejection of traditional curricula content. The curriculum preferred by these departments was to be an ordered arrangement of courses that progressed from introductory to advanced levels. Darlene Clark Hine (1990) contends that a sound African-American studies curriculum must include courses in African-American history, literature, and literary criticism. These courses would be complemented by other courses that spoke to the black experience in sociology, political science, psychology, and economics. Furthermore, if resources would permit, courses in art, music, language, and on other geographical areas of the African diaspora should be available.

Mainstream university support for African-American studies emerged in the late 1960s. This was done in conjunction with the protests of the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the admission of a massive influx of black students into predominantly white institutions. The preconditions for the growth of African-American studies were demographic, social, and political. Between 1945 and 1965, more than three million blacks left the South and migrated to northeast, north central and western states. The black freedom movement, in both the civil rights phase (1955–1965) and Black Power component (1966–1975), fostered the racial desegregation and the empowerment of black people within previously all-white institutions. The racial composition of U.S. colleges changed dramatically. In 1950 approximately 75,000 blacks were enrolled in colleges and universities. In the 1960s three quarters of all black students attended HBCUs. By 1970, approximately 700,000 blacks were enrolled in college, three quarters of whom were in predominantly white institutions.

Organization and Objectives

One must be careful not to use African-American studies programs, departments, and centers interchangeably; they are not synonymous. According to Hine, African-American studies departments are best described as a separate, autonomous unit possessing exclusive rights and privileges to hire and terminate, grant tenure to their faculty, certify students, confer degrees, and administer a budget. Programs may offer majors and minors, but rarely do they confer degrees. Furthermore, faculty appointments in programs are usually joint, adjunct, or associate positions. Centers, on the other hand, focus more on the production and dissemination of scholarship and the professional development of teachers and scholars in the field than on undergraduate teaching. The difference in the structure and mission between centers, departments, and programs tend to complicate the attempt to assess and identify African-American studies accurately.

However, Maulana Karenga outlines several objectives that African-American studies seeks to achieve.

These objectives have served as the backdrop for the discipline since its evolution in the 1970s. However, the discipline has been under great scrutiny and has been challenged by many academics about its objectives and its relevance. Karenga argues that there are fundamental and undeniable grounds of relevance of African-American studies that clearly define the field's academic and social contributions and purpose. These are outlined in Table 2.

From 1968 to 1971, hundreds of African-American studies departments and programs were developed. Approximately 500 colleges and universities provided full scale African-American studies programs by 1971. Up to 1,300 institutions offered at least one course in African-American studies as of 1974. Some estimates place the number of African-American studies programs reaching its peak at 800 in the early 1970s and declining to about 375, due to the lack of resources and support, by the mid-1990s.

African-American studies has been evolving as a result of a radical social movement opposed to institutional racism in U.S. higher education. Considering the conventional roles of American education and its institutionalized racism, African Americans in many sectors view education as oppressive and/or liberating. In result, many African Americans began to consider African-American studies and black education as having a special assignment to challenge white mainstream knowledge for its deficiencies and corruption.

The development of African-American studies from the very outset was marked by blacks being compelled to evaluate the largely racist nature of established education in America. Due to European cultural hegemony, blacks and Africans in the diaspora have found the issue of perspective to be perennially problematic. The disastrous experience of chattel slavery, the basis for cultural hegemony, produced historical discontinuity and preempted normative culture building through a decentering process. Although the experience of oppression and exploitation required movement away from an African center, it was this experience that produced the conditions for the emergence of an African-centered consciousness. Thus, the problem of perspective emerged as the black intellectual tradition.

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