

1. What is Black Studies? (video transcript)

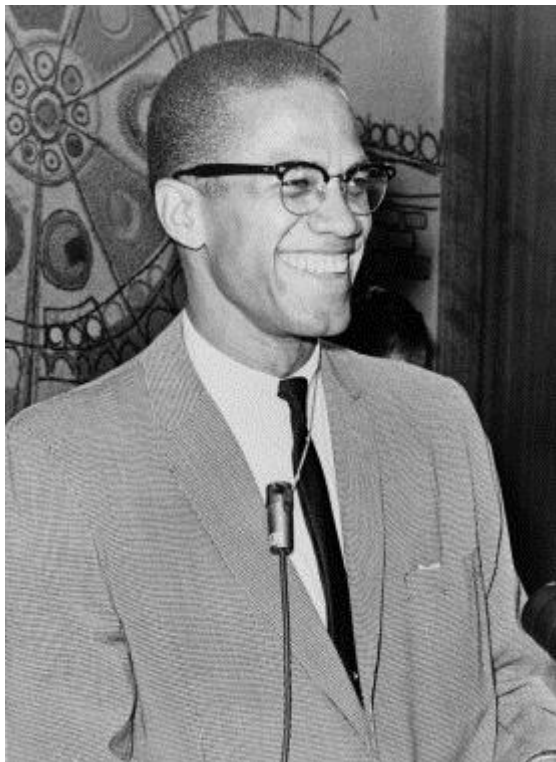
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In this episode, we look at the origins of a relatively new academic discipline. How did Black Studies [or African American Studies] come about and how is it distinct from other academic disciplines? Also, what are the challenges faced by scholars, academics and students of Black Studies in higher education? ...

Black Studies is a relatively new academic field. It spans across disciplines encompassing the social sciences such as history, sociology, psychology, and political science as well as the humanities, including music, art, literature, and religious studies. Different academic institutions may use different terms to describe it depending on their particular focus, but, whether it goes by the name Black Studies, African-American Studies, or Africana Studies, the discipline is generally rooted in a radical movement for fundamental education reform.

The discipline of black studies is a direct challenge to the European centered framework and its justification of the subjugation, enslavement, and colonization of African people and their descendants throughout the world. The comments of well-known 18th century philosopher David Hume are fairly typical as an example of how Africa and its people were framed in the eyes of the European colonizers. As a footnote in his *Essay and Treatises* written in 1768, he writes: I am apt to suspect the negroes ... to be naturally inferior to the white. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences. (Harris 1987, 19)



The need to reclaim one's heritage in the face of such a disparaging mainstream narrative is at the very core of the development of black studies as an academic discipline. As such, self-definition becomes critical. The different departments that have sprung up throughout the country do vary in the terms they use to describe themselves. Whether they go by the name Black Studies, Africana Studies, or African-American Studies, the process of naming is very deliberate and carries a particular meaning for the individuals who undertook to establish the various academic departments.

The different focus that each of these departments may have makes naming a matter of political control, which is a critical principle of self-determination and self-definition. "African American Studies" focuses on persons of African descent throughout the Americas, including North, Central, and South America, the Caribbean, as well as northern countries like New Foundland and Greenland. So, the term, "African American" makes "African American Studies" a more historically specific branch of the discipline that describes the experience of Africans in the western hemisphere with a relatively narrow lens. (Colon 2003) While there tends to be some focus on the continent of Africa there is no specific focus on persons of African descent in Europe or Asia.

The term, “Black Studies” represents a more politicized vision of the discipline. The institutionalization of Black Studies – that is, the formal establishment of Black Studies within academic settings – came about largely as a result of what was known in the 1960s as the “Black Power” movement. (Colon 2003) Malcolm X and The Nation of Islam, in an attempt to reclaim their sense of self-definition urged the “so called Negro” to become “Black.” Black became redefined as a popular, a positive affirmation of self.

“Black Studies” reflects the politicization of the discipline in that it is largely aimed at the discovery and dissemination of information pertaining to what Black people have undergone and achieved, and the use of education and knowledge to defend and vindicate the race against its detractors. This reframing was a symbolic victory for the masses of Black people, but it also carries with it certain problems and challenges. (Spearman 2011)

Like Black Studies, Africana Studies is not limited to the experience of persons of African descent on the continent of Africa or the western hemisphere, but is much broader and focuses on the African Diaspora as a whole. (Colon 2003) The African Diaspora refers to the disbursement of persons of African descent throughout the globe. It is well known that persons of African descent had a presence in ancient Greece and Rome as well as widespread contact between Africans and Asians via the Indian Ocean. There is some evidence to suggest that there was a pre-Columbian disbursement of Africans across the Atlantic well before 1492. Systematic and widespread dispersal of Africans throughout the globe, however, took place on a far more massive scale in the past 400 years as a result of the Atlantic slave trade and the subsequent colonization of the continent of Africa. Africana studies focuses on the Pan-African links and experiences of persons of African descent not only on the continent of Africa and in the Americas, but in places like England, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, as well as Russia and various other parts of Europe and Asia. It does so, however, without the political context that you find in the “Black Power” movement.

Aside from the terminology, Black Studies, African American Studies, and Africana Studies are similar in that they came about largely in response to a systematic misrepresentation of the experience of persons of African descent in such a way as to popularize the notion that they are inferior. It is in response to miseducation, which, as Malcolm X explained, has redirected the world view of black people in such a way as to prevent them from identifying with their true history, culture self-awareness, and well-being; and diseducation, by which black people have been deprived of access to education altogether. (Colon 2003) As such, a core value in Black Studies is an underlying social mission that requires the application of theory to methodology and the combination of knowledge to activism toward the practical resolution of issues in the Black community. That is the reason why Black Studies always has historically been so closely aligned with activism and social justice.

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Related Links:

White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education, by Noliwe M. Rooks

[Malcolm X, “You Can’t Hate the Roots Of A Tree” \(YouTube\)](#)

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2. Why Pursue Black Studies? (video transcript)

In this episode, why pursue Black Studies? What is the significance of Black Studies in higher education? Also, we look at the contributions that Black Studies as a discipline has made in academia. How has the Black Studies pioneered and developed theories and approaches to problems in ways that have added to academia and society as a whole? Is Black Studies solely for the consumption of African American students? Should it be? Why should Asian, Latino, or White students have an interest in pursuing Black Studies?

Hello and welcome again to African Elements. In this episode, why pursue Black Studies? What is the significance of Black Studies in higher education? Is it just a “feel good” topic for students of African descent to pursue? Also, we look at the contributions that Black Studies as a discipline has made in academia. How has the Black Studies pioneered and developed theories and approaches to problems in ways that have added to academia and society as a whole? Is Black Studies solely for the consumption of Black students? Should it be? Why should Asian, Latino, or White students have an interest in pursuing Black Studies? All that coming up next.

As we saw in episode 1 on the origin of black studies, Black Studies came about as a result of centuries of struggle to overcome systematic institutionalized oppression. To this day black studies remains closely aligned with social protest, student activism, and social justice. In this program, when I use the term social justice, I’m defining it as the equal distribution of advantages and disadvantages within a society. That does not necessarily mean that everybody has to have the same material stuff. What it does mean is that if one does happen to be poor that should not mean being left behind during a natural disaster such as the one that took place in New Orleans during hurricane Katrina in 2005. It means that if one does happen to be poor, that shouldn’t mean having one’s life cut short by preventable diseases. Social justice means applying the same standard of justice to the rich and to the poor, as opposed to a justice system in which wealthy people who happen to be caught abusing illegal drugs are sent to drug rehab, while poor people are sent to

prison for the same offense. Social justice means that being poor, being vulnerable, being a racial, ethnic, or sexual minority will not have bearing on your fundamental right to exist. As Cornel West (CW), Professor of African American, and Religious Studies at Princeton University explains, social justice means putting poor and vulnerable people at the center of how we view the world.

AG: Do you share Carl Dix's criticism of President Obama's Father's Day speeches?

CW (Cornel West): Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I think that it's quite telling that he would give personal responsibility speeches to black people, but not a lot of personal responsibility speeches to Wall Street in terms of execution. And when you actually look at the degree to which issues of accountability for poor people—but where's the accountability when you're bailing out these Wall Street elites, \$700 billion? That's socialism for the rich. That's your policy. Don't then go to these folk who are locked into dilapidated housing, decrepit school systems, many on their way to a prison-industrial complex, and talk about their fathers didn't come through. And we know the fathers got problems. We understand that. But there are structural institutional challenges that he's not hitting, hitting head on. And I should say this, too, I think, in terms of style, that the Obama administration is obsessed with the wrong Lincoln. They are obsessed with the Lincoln who they think moved to the right and was trying to create bipartisan consensus with conservatives, whereas we know there's no Lincoln without Frederick Douglass. There's no Lincoln without Harriet Beecher Stowe. There's no Lincoln without Wendell Phillips or Charles Sumner. That was a social movement.

. . . And if he doesn't understand the greatness of Lincoln was responding to the social movements of working people and poor people, he's going to end up with a failed presidency, with a lot of symbolic gestures, but, on the ground, everyday people, those Sly Stone called "everyday people," suffering still

. . . Most importantly, at this moment, we come together and say, put poor and working people at the center of the way you look at the world, not just in the terms of the United States, but in terms of the American empire's impact on those Frantz Fanon called "the wretched of the earth."

AG: So, how are you going to be the Frederick Douglass?

CW: Well, by working with a variety of others—revolutionary communists to socialists, to progressive liberals, to prophetic Judaic, prophetic Christian, prophetic Hindus and others—to constitute some motion, raising voices, lifting the voices, which is the anthem of black people, and then to create ways of organizing and mobilizing so that the Obama administration does not remain mesmerized by the Wall Street elites and seduced by neoliberal policy.

AG: Have you been talking to President Obama?

CW: No, not at all. No, no.

AG: Have you met him?

CW: Oh, I met him initially, in order to join the campaign. Oh, absolutely, indeed. We met for four hours.

AG: And now, since he's become president?

CW: Oh, no, no. I think he holds me at arm's length. And for good reason, and for good reason. Because he knows that there's a sense in which I would rather be in a crack house than a White House that promotes neo-imperial policies abroad and neoliberal policies at home.

AG: Why a crack house?

CW: Because a crack house, at least I'm in solidarity with folk who are sensitive to a pain. It's just that they have the wrong response to their pain. Instead of being in a crack house, they ought to be organizing. But they're dealing with their suffering. They're just dealing with it in the wrong way. The White House, escaping from the suffering, and that's why I keep my distance. I'm not against people who work inside of the White House; it's just not my calling. That's not what I'm here for. ... You could say, "Waterboarding is torture." Wow, that's a breakthrough. What are you going to do about it? It's a crime against humanity are you going to enforce it? "Well, we're not thinking about that." Well, that's the challenge. Don't tell me something obvious like, waterboarding is torture. We could say the same thing about wiretapping. Is wiretapping criminal? Yes! Then how come you're not going to prosecute? "No, we're moving forward." Oh really? You don't do that for Jamaal on the corner when he gets caught with crack. You send him to jail. The rule of laws are going to be equal for the well-to-do and the poor? Aww, that's where the challenge is. That's where we need to mobilize — multi-party, multi-tendencies, multi-organizational alliance — and it's going to take a while because the euphoria around the Obama administration is just beginning to wane, and the euphoria is understandable as we noted before, you know. A black man in the White House is still a breakthrough, but it's a small, small "b." We're looking for the breakthrough for working people and poor people.

Since social justice is so integral to the very core of black studies as a discipline, one of the ways in which black studies has contributed to academia as a whole has been in forwarding a pioneering social theory that social justice is not simply something that those in power may choose bestow on the most poor, oppressed, and vulnerable in society because it makes them feel good. Black studies teaches us that social justice is actually critical in holding together the very fabric society, and that those in power would do well to promote social justice not simply out of benevolence, but out of a sense of self preservation. The very formation of black studies as a discipline is a very testament to how this theory of social justice works in the real world. At the height of the Civil Rights and Black Power movement, the systematic oppression and subjugation of black people threatened to tear the country apart. In response, National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, more commonly known as the Kerner Commission, was convened by President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 28, 1967 in the wake of a series of urban rebellions that took place in the Los Angeles community of Watts, and in Chicago in 1965, as well as in Newark and Detroit in 1967. Framed as a National Security issue, President Johnson commissioned the body to seek answers as to what exactly took place in these uprisings, why they took place, and what can be done to prevent future uprisings. In

what is probably the most frequently quoted line of the report, the Kerner Commission warned that, “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”

The report identified white racism a main cause of urban violence and urged the creation of new jobs, new housing, and a stop to de-facto segregation as well as government programs to provide needed services, in addition to more diverse and sensitive law enforcement agencies. While the Johnson administration largely ignored the report’s findings and recommendations, as we saw in the previous episode, a climate of civil unrest was a major factor in the creation and development of Black Studies on colleges and universities nationwide. Amidst a climate desegregation, although – albeit necessarily not with “all deliberate speed” – African American students slowly made their way onto institutions of higher education. As they did so, however, they often found themselves subject to the same racism and marginalization as they experienced in their communities. They found that their histories and experiences were largely not reflected in the curriculum, their food could be found in the cafeteria, and their presence could not be found in school governance and leadership. The outcome was predictable. As black people were rebelling against racism and social injustice in cities throughout the nation, the presence of those same factors gave rise to a series of student protests on college and university campuses. On November 5, 1968, under the threat of building takeovers and a campus strike at San Francisco State University, a coalition of Black and Asian, Latino, and Native American students, from the Black Students Union and the Third World Liberation Front, presented the San Francisco State College president with a list of fifteen nonnegotiable demands for institutional change. Among them the school was to immediately establish departments of Ethnic Studies and Black Studies. They demanded no fewer than seventy full-time faculty members, fifty for the departments of Ethnic Studies and twenty for Black Studies. Further, they demanded self determination and autonomy in that the new departments would be controlled solely by the faculty, students, and community groups were to be “free from interference by college administrators, or the statewide Board of Trustees.” They demanded that the college accept all Black and nonwhite students who applied for admission in the fall of 1969, regardless of their academic qualifications. They demanded that new departments should be degree-granting, and finally, that no disciplinary action could be taken against any students, teachers, or administrators should they take part in the campus strike, that would follow if any of their demands were rejected. As tensions mounted between the coalition of students demanding institutional change, and conservative elements within student government, acts of civil disobedience became interspersed with spats of more radical means of resistance. Hundreds of small fires were set, and eight bombs were detonated over the course of the student strike. Over the course of the next several months, San Francisco State University became the first campus in the nation to become continuously occupied by police presence. Although there were no deaths attributed to the strike, the threat of violence was real, and San Francisco State University ultimately chose to take the recommendations of the Kerner Commission to heart and implement some institutional change as a countermeasure against social uprising. Thus, San Francisco State University approved the nation’s first four year curriculum in Black Studies in the 1967-1968 academic year.

The student revolts that gave rise to black studies happened alongside similar uprisings in the Asian and Chicano/latino student communities, and oftentimes they took place as part of the united front. Thus, Asian studies, Chicano latino studies, and Gender studies come from a similar efforts

from marginalized communities in their struggles toward social justice. For that reason, Black Studies theories and methodologies have much to offer to their sister disciplines. WEB Dubois writings on the color line and dual consciousness, that is, the dilemma African Americans face in constantly having to negotiate the boundaries of living simultaneously living in two worlds (black and white) are works that Asians, Latinos, women, and sexual minorities may find value in. The African-American experience in terms of citizenship in the United States – granted by the 14th amendment to the constitution -is an experience that the immigrant community may find value in especially in light of the current backlash on the immigrant community in Arizona in which citizens and noncitizens alike who come from immigrant backgrounds are faced with a whittling away of their civil rights. Some have even considered a partial repeal of the 14th amendment such that the children of undocumented immigrants born in the United States would not be given citizenship rights. As far as the African-American experience -we've been there and done that, and the country would do well to look two that experience as well as the experience of Jim Crow before we go any further down this very dangerous road. By the same token, black studies, and black students, have much to gain in engaging Asian Studies, Chicano/Latino Studies, and Gender Studies. The brilliant contributions of the late Gloria Anzaldua have in many ways succeeded those of WEB Dubois. She writes as a Latina, a woman, a second generation Mexican immigrant, and a lesbian and the notion of border crossing along multiple borders (that is the cultural boundaries between the various aspects of her identity). Is it possible to exist as a Latina in a United States society that devalues that aspect of who she is? How does one negotiate being a woman in a US and Latino society with strong notions of male supremacy? How is it possible to exist as a lesbian within a context that looks upon homosexuality with disdain? These are questions that Gloria Anzaldua deals with that bring dual consciousness to a whole new level – a level of multiple consciousness. I believe black studies would do well to add some of those theories and perspectives into a discipline that encompasses people of multiple identities especially when black people of diverse backgrounds are often in such close contact. Why is it that when you visit the cafeteria on your campus you often see African Americans and Africans (immigrants from Africa) sitting at different tables? What about Blacks from the Caribbean? Are they just as black as black folks from Mississippi? What about black folks who happen to be gay or lesbian? Are the just as black as heterosexual black folk? The social critique of Gloria Anzaldua may be helpful in helping students of Black Studies wrestle with those questions.

Finally, what about white students? What do they have to gain from black studies? What is it like to experience the United States as a person of African descent, and what insights can a person gain by looking at that experience? Again, Cornel West shares his insights at an event that I hosted at Sonoma State University. A warning to viewers, this excerpt does contain language that some consider to be offensive, but Dr. West uses the language to make it very eloquent point:

. . . And we need is so very badly today, especially after 9-11 . . .

Especially after 9-11. Never in the history of the nation have all Americans felt unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence and hated for who they are. It's a new experience any Americans. Many white brothers and sisters, to me, "You know, brother West, I just can't get over this sense of being hated like this." I say, "You don't say! Really?! Oh! That's a novel thing, huh?" "Yeah, I just don't

like it.” I say, my dear brother, to be a nigger in America for 400 years is to be unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated for who you are. So, we’ve got some experience that might be useful. We’ve got some experience that might provide some insight for the nation itself to access the best of its past and its present, now that the whole nation in that particular sense has become “niggerized.” What kind of resources are available for that nation? Will they remain socratic? Self critical? Or will it become self righteous? Will they remain prophetic or will it become revengeful? Let’s look at certain moments in black history when black folk had to respond to vicious forms of degradation called terrorism. What did Emmet Till’s mother say when she stepped to the lectern when her baby, Emmet, shot down by American ... murdered by American terrorists in Mississippi August 1955. You all know who Emmet Till was? She brought his body back to Chicago. They said under no circumstances will we allow the coffin to be open. She said, “This is my only baby. I’m 32 years old, and my husband fought in the Jim Crow army against a vicious xenophobe named Hitler, carrying the U.S. flag, and now his baby is now the victim of American terrorism. We go’n keep that coffin open. And they did keep that coffin open in Chicago, didn’t they? And 50,000 citizens of all colors – the first major civil rights demonstration, three months before a black sister named, Rosa Parks sat down in order to stand up for justice in December, 1955. And what did she say when she stepped to the lectern – tears flowing, socratic juices still at work – looks over the lectern, her baby’s head is five times the size of his ordinary head, and the coffin is open? And she says, “I don’t have a minute to hate, I’m gonna pursue justice for the rest of my life! What level of spiritual maturity and moral wisdom and courage to still both critique, but also the care and to love went into that statement. She’s not isolated. This is a tradition that produced her. That took very seriously the interrogation of dogma like white supremacy, but yet at the same time she refused to get in the gutter with cowardly gangsters who killed her baby because she didn’t have to read Shakespeare’s, *The Merchant of Venice*, to know that the law can be bent one way or the other. Against Shylock or for him or, against Portia or for him. She didn’t have to listen to the quality of mercy speech of Portia, then Portia herself was unable to enact. She had already been molded by something else that said, “I’m still not gonna hate! I’m not gonna hunt them down like cockroaches. I’m not gonna exercise of vengeance and revenge. I’m not gonna be manichaeian, thinking that somehow, I’m purely good and they are purely evil. No! I’m deeper than that! Martin had the same challenge when four young sisters in Birmingham were victims of American terrorism. 16th St. Baptist Church, you will know what I’m talking about, September 1963. The only time Brother Martin cried in public. Did you know what to say. Wondering whether this non violence was a hoax and anyway. People gonna be killing babies like that in church, in Sunday school. He looks of the parents. Tears flowing again. What does he say? “Somehow we’ve got to muster the armors of love and justice.” This is a great people at their best! At their best! And it’s a human potential for any people at their best!

As Cornel West is fond of saying, there’s much that society at large can gain from the experience of a “blues” people, a people whose unique experience provides fresh new perspectives and insights. That does it for this episode. Join me next time for a look into the African past. We explore rise and fall of powerful and wealthy African kingdoms as well as the fateful path they took that ultimately led to the Atlantic slave trade -the trafficking of millions of human beings from West Africa to the Americas.

3. Africa in Historical Context (video transcript)

In this episode, we look at Africa in historical context and the events leading up to the Atlantic slave trade. Black Studies is a response to widespread misrepresentation of the history of the African continent and people of African descent, but what does an alternative context look like? Do we simply glorify Africa in response? If, in fact we are to look to Africa's glorious past as an alternative, then how did things go from a wealthy Africa to the Atlantic Slave Trade and European colonization? We will explore rise and fall of powerful and wealthy African kingdoms as well as the fateful path they took that ultimately led to the Atlantic slave trade -the trafficking of millions of human beings from West Africa to the Americas.

Throughout history, civilizations have risen and fallen. By the 16th century, Europe is in a state of expansion. Europe was in the midst of an age of Renaissance and Exploration and at that particular time Africa happens to be in a state of decline. But backing up the timeline to, say the 4th and 5th century, Rome is declining; Europe is in the Dark Ages, you see feudalism, warlordism, disease, black plague, bubonic plague and various kingdoms that are vying for what's left of the crumbling Roman Empire. As it happens, at that particular time Africa is thriving. So, how we go from wealthy West African kingdoms to the Africa that exists at the time of European colonization. There is a very complex chain of events that takes place with some key players that helps to explain how that process unfolds.

One of the first key players influencing the African continent as a whole is Egypt. Egypt sits on some prime real estate. The 2nd two major players on the scene, Greece and Rome, are very quickly going to realize that in order to get what they need to survive they need to somehow go through Egypt. That's the reason why Alexander the Great in 322 BC conquers Egypt and makes it a Grecian province — the same thing with Rome for the same reason. They're going to capture much of North Africa and the gateway to the Middle East, which means access to China in order to get what they need to survive.

By the time Rome conquers much of North Africa, they have already established a relationship with the folks in the trans- Sahara. So already folks in West Africa and the trans-Sahara are linked into this global network of trade that Rome has established for its own reasons because they need access to trade in China.

Around the 6th century A.D., Islam is starting to expand across North Africa, across Egypt — the Mameluk Empire. Coincidentally you have a subsequent decline in Rome, partly because access to trade with Asia has now been blocked by the Muslims. As Rome starts to crumble we see bubonic plague, middle ages, feudalism, warlordism — it's a very violent time not a very pleasant place to live.

Also as Rome declines, West Africa begins to expand to fill that vacuum that Rome has left. A series of large and powerful West African kingdoms will going to dominate events in West Africa for the next several hundred year. Until about the 1600s, the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai dominate the sub-Saharan region of West Africa and trans-Saharan trade routes.

In 1453 Constantinople was conquered by the Muslims and it became Istanbul. It was the fall of Constantinople that prompted Spain to hire Christopher Columbus to sail all the way around the world to try to get to Asia and it prompted the Portuguese to try to circumnavigate Africa. When Portugal circumnavigates Africa? Africa is cut out of the picture and the trans-Saharan trade comes into disuse.

Slavery is nothing new in human history and tends to go hand-in-hand with conquest. The Egyptians would conquer their neighbors and they would make slaves of them. The Greeks conquered their neighbors and made slaves of them as did the Romans and virtually every other human civilization in one form or another. As West Africa began to fall apart the one thing that they have plenty of — slaves as a result of conflict — is the one thing that expanding Europeans are in need of. There had been a trans-Saharan slave trade in West Africa centuries before Europeans arrived on the scene. When Europeans arrived on the scene the slave trade continued — only not over the trans-Sahara, but across the Atlantic.