

The Department of African American Studies: Northwestern University



The Department of African American Studies at Northwestern University wasn't officially established until 1972, but like many other such departments around the country, it owes its origins to Black student protest of the late 1960s. A sit-in at the university's business office in May 1968 led to a round of negotiations that produced a commitment by the administration to increase attention to Black history and literature in the curriculum. At student urging, the university hired as visiting professors Lerone Bennett, the highly regarded historian and senior editor at *Ebony* magazine, and C.L.R. James, the legendary anti-colonial activist, independent scholar and Marxist theorist. When the department began, Lerone Bennett served briefly as the first chair.

Many prominent scholars, artists and writers taught in the department during its first decade and beyond. Two themes in the department's early history deserve emphasis. First, in contrast to the widely held notion that early Black Studies programs focused exclusively on the United States, Northwestern's department was internationally oriented from its inception. There was attention to the African Diaspora in both course offerings and extracurricular programming. Jan Carew, who became department chair in 1973, hailed from Guyana and insisted upon a diasporic approach to Black studies. He helped to raise funds for students to travel abroad in order to engage in transnational learning. Jamaica-born Robert Hill was among the first cohort of faculty hires. A scholar of Marcus Garvey and the Garvey movement, Hill brought an international awareness to the study of Black history. Another important feature of the department's early history was the prominence of creative writers on the faculty. The Black arts movement exerted a strong influence on the creation of Black studies departments and Northwestern was no exception. The highly acclaimed poet Mari Evans was among the first cohort of faculty, and the prominent Chicago novelists Cyrus Colter and Leon Forrest joined the faculty in subsequent years.

The mission of the Department of African American Studies at Northwestern University is to advance critical understandings of the central role that race plays in structuring lives, spaces, relations of power, and subjectivities within modern social formations. The department considers different manifestations of Blackness as well as other forms of racialized identity across the globe from historical, theoretical, and perspectives. And thus, analyze and theorize the ways that Blackness and Black people have been produced as signifiers of exploitability, criminality, deficiency, expendability, and sub-humanity over time.

The Department believes that this perspective provides a useful lens for understanding the destructive effects of racial subjugation and Eurocentrism the world over, effects that have always intersected with gender, class, sexuality, and geopolitics, and thus it does more than scrutinize oppression, however, by also calling critical attention to how Black people and other persons of color have responded to and resisted these conditions via their activism, expressive cultures, and intellectual work. In so doing, Black people have contributed substantially to the formation of global freedom struggles and international political debates about social inequality.

In honor of the diverse, transnational, anti-racist, and anti-colonial movements that helped to create a space for Black Studies within the academy and that have inspired the faculty scholarly and political visions, the Department is not limited to analyzing black-white tensions or spaces that exist only within the geo-political boundaries of the United States.

The members of the faculty, therefore, find it imperative to examine the Black experience within complex global processes of racial ordering in the Americas, Europe, Africa, the Pacific, and Asia. This requires dedicating critical attention to the complex relationship between anti-black racism, xenophobia, settler colonialism, and imperialism; and, in the U.S., to the experiences of other non-white and non-European groups such as Native Americans, Latinos/as, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Arab Americans. Thus, the department views Black Studies as both a significant critique of western modernity and as offering essential social, political, and cultural alternatives to the human condition.

The core faculty and affiliates come from a range of disciplines and interdisciplines in the humanities and social sciences. By placing these scholars in conversation with one another, the aim is to encourage an understanding of how, where, and when traditional disciplinary boundaries begin to blur. This process generates critical conversations regarding the social meanings of race and Blackness across the globe, while a commitment to working across--and often against-- traditional disciplinary assumptions illuminates new terrains through which an intellectual and political mission can be advanced.

And moreover, the Department argues that traditionally the social sciences and humanities have found their subject matter within the contours of the western nation-state system and the European and American lineage of western history and philosophy. Hence, the first wave of intellectual developments in Black Studies and African American Studies from the 1960s onwards challenged the neglect and exclusion of critical analyses of Atlantic enslavement, western colonialism and American racism; and facilitated research in the expressive traditions of Black cultural and political movements and the racial dynamics of contemporary social life and public policy; an extremely important period of nation-centered and historiographic scholarship, opening up new fields of sustained inquiry, and underwriting the longevity and vitality of the African American intellectual tradition.

Consequently, over the last 40 years African American Studies with its emphasis on national intellectual inclusiveness and critique has to a considerable extent influenced, if not transformed, the epistemologies and methodologies of the social sciences and humanities in the U.S. At the same time, the scholarship produced by African American Studies has been disseminated through a dynamic transnational circuit of intellectuals, literary movements and knowledge production across the urban centers of Latin America, Canada, the Caribbean, Africa and Europe.

However, at the turn of the 21st century, African American Studies, like many inter-disciplines spanning the social sciences and humanities, is becoming more responsive to and influenced by a contemporary world that is increasingly interdependent and subject to diverse representations and questionings. The world is no longer centered, if indeed it ever was, on the singular cultures of self-enclosed or autonomous nations. The multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-faith and gendered dimensions of national spaces and histories are accelerating to prominence under the influence of economic and cultural forms of globalization. Intellectual orientations are increasingly being underwritten and overwritten by questions of trans-nationalism and the limits of territorialization.

Currently a new wave of diaspora-centered African American Studies is present, where there is a greater emphasis on diversity and inter-disciplinarity are assuming greater prominence in dialogue with the changing complexity of the modern world. The latest developments in African American Studies are contributing to a new wave of intellectual and intercultural developments which are symptomatic of the changing vicissitudes of the world, where the recognition of worldly interdependence, cultural diversity and academic interdisciplinarity are now indispensable for the production of knowledge in the 21st century.

In this context the PhD program in African American Studies at Northwestern University is very much a part of and contributes to this new wave of African American Studies, oriented both to the historical world that produced the African diaspora as well as to the contemporary world that continues to be shaped by the politics, popular cultures, and social movements of Black populations and their relations with various groups. African American Studies in the 21st century is a dynamic field characterized by a history of interdisciplinarity to develop new forms of intellectual work that arise because of trends towards interdependency and multilateralism within and across nations, particularly throughout the African diaspora. The scholarship of African American Studies is poised to respond and contribute to the intellectual debates that arise from these trends. It also provides for the continued development and expansion of fields of inquiry that explore the formation and intersection of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality.

The PhD program in African American Studies at Northwestern University is led by faculty with diverse interests in the histories, experiences, and cultures of people of African descent around the world. This is reflected in the depth and range of our scholarship as well as the courses currently offer (and those that will mount in the future). The department is allied closely with other departments and programs within the university, including Anthropology, African Studies, American Studies, Art History, Asian American Studies, Comparative Literary Studies, English, Gender Studies, History, Latino/a Studies, Performance Studies, the Interdisciplinary PhD in Theatre and Drama, Latin American & Caribbean Studies, Political Science, Sociology, and others. And notwithstanding, African American Studies PhD students may earn a graduate certificate in Gender Studies and in African Studies, or they may participate in the Interdisciplinary Cluster Initiative, a program designed to help graduate students during their academic career at Northwestern by fostering connections with students and faculty in other programs.