

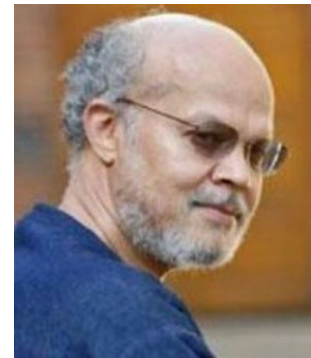


March 2026 Newsletter

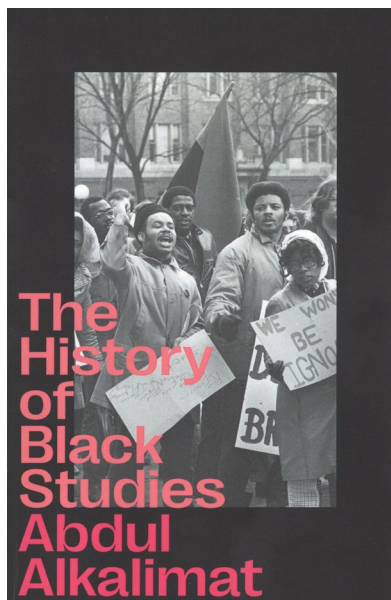
The History of Black Studies

By Abdul Alkalimat

Overview: A surge of African American enrollment and student activism brought Black Studies to many US campuses in the 1960s. Sixty years later, Black Studies programmes are taught at more than 1,300 universities worldwide. This book is the first history of how that happened.



Black Studies founder and movement veteran Abdul Alkalimat offers a comprehensive history of the discipline that will become a key reference for generations to come. Structured in three broadly chronological sections - Black Studies as intellectual history; as social movement; and as academic profession - the book demonstrates how Black people themselves established the field long before its institutionalisation in university programmes.



At its heart, Black Studies is profoundly political. Black Power, the New Communist Movement, the Black women's and students' movements—each step in the journey for Black liberation influenced and was influenced by this revolutionary discipline. (London: Pluto Press, 2021; paperback ISBN: 9780745344225, eBook ISBN: 9780745344249, 384 pp.)

About the author: Abdul Alkalimat is a founder of the field of Black Studies and Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. A lifelong scholar-activist with a PhD from the University of Chicago, he has lectured, taught and directed academic programs across the US, the Caribbean,

Africa, Europe and China. His activism extends from having been chair of the Chicago chapter of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960s, to a co-founder of the Black Radical Congress in 1998.

The following pages provide an excerpt from this study, presenting the introduction chapter's roadmap to this remarkable history. You can obtain this volume at the Pluto Press website, <https://www.plutobooks.com/>, other suppliers, or your local library.

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<http://www.diaspora.illinois.edu/news0326/news0326.html>



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History
of
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Abdul
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*To my comrades in People's College
and the Black student activists of today*

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Introduction

This book tells the history of Black Studies, familiar to many as the campus units that teach college-level courses about African-American history and culture. This book will present a comprehensive survey of all such programs, but Black Studies has been more than that.

The term “Black Studies” emerged in the 1960s but, as this book will demonstrate, Black Studies developed over the entire course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. This book defines Black Studies as those activities:

- (1) that study and teach about African Americans and often Africans and other African-descended people;
- (2) where Black people themselves are the main agents, or protagonists, of the study and learning;
- (3) that counter racism and contribute to human liberation;
- (4) that celebrate the Black experience; and
- (5) that see it as one precious case among many in the universality of the human condition.

Each of these five points will be considered further along in this introduction.

Now is an appropriate time to write and read a history of Black Studies because colleges and universities across the USA have been celebrating the fiftieth anniversaries of the founding of their Black Studies programs. Campuses are bringing together the alumni, faculty, and community activists who helped found their respective programs. Each has its own particularity but, to draw larger conclusions, we need to consider frameworks that can be used to compare and talk about all these local histories.

This is also a moment when the generation who founded Black Studies at mainstream colleges and universities is moving into retirement and facing health challenges and mortality. This brings with it a crisis of both individual and institutional memory loss, a crisis that calls for activities to capture local accounts of the founding and development of Black Studies on each campus.

Finally, Black Studies faces threats. The economic downturns of 2008 and 2020, the latter due to the coronavirus pandemic, have put pressure on higher education. Before then, endowments and public funding kept higher education relatively insulated from economic pressure. But for more than a decade, tuition

increases and limits to financial support have impacted Black enrollment as well as support for Black programs.

The resurgence of racism contributes to this daunting atmosphere, both as a broad social reaction and at the highest levels of political leadership. All in all, the most fundamental negative obstacle facing Black people all over the world at this moment hinges on the concept of race.

Science has discredited race as a concept (American Anthropological Association 1998; important studies include Gould 1996; Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin 1984; Prewitt 2013). It is a term that posits a biological and hierarchical classification of humans, *Homo sapiens*. On this concept rests the practice of racism: large and small prejudicial beliefs, words, and actions that are systematized, institutionalized, persistent, and more or less violent. A liberal justification for the use of the concept of race argues that race is socially constructed. But this falls woefully short. Race is nothing less than a socially constructed lie.

Race serves as a good example of Alfred North Whitehead's fallacy of misplaced concreteness: an abstract idea that does not fit reality (Whitehead 1985 [1925]). Racism exists, but races do not. But as the sociologist W.I. Thomas observes, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" ("Thomas Theorem" 2018). Racism infects virtually all areas of scholarship and public policy. Black people are systematically lied about as a justification for their continued exploitation and marginalization in American society.

Racism can be understood as some combination of three false ideas: deficit, difference, and dependency. The deficit idea centers on denying that Black people can reason and think just as well as anyone else. The concept of human reason itself has even been claimed by Eurocentric thinkers as originating in Greece and Rome (see Blaut 1993). Of course, this is self-serving. It also contradicts what we know about the mind and the brain. Any human brain has the same structures or centers that mobilize both thinking and feeling.

The idea of deficit has long taken the form of attacking the capacity of Black people's brains. One early effort involved classifying head size and shape. It defined the cephalic index as "the ratio of the maximum width of the head of an organism (human or animal) multiplied by 100 divided by its maximum length (i.e., in the horizontal plane, or front to back)" (Boas 1899). Franz Boas, distinguished anthropologist at Columbia University, took his students Zora Neale Hurston and Margaret Mead to Harlem in the 1920s to measure the heads of Black people as part of disproving this theory ("Sigerist Circle Bibliography on Race and Medicine" n.d.; Helmreich 2004; Boas 1899; Fergus 2003).

Intelligence testing and IQ theory was a second argument made for Black people being deficient, starting with the British psychologist Cyril Burt and followed notably in the USA by William Shockley, Arthur Jensen, Richard Herrnstein, and Charles Murray. The book by Herrnstein (at that time the former chair of the Harvard University Department of Psychology) and Murray, *The*

Bell Curve (1997), became the magnum opus of this argument. This sparked a debate that produced several volumes of criticism: Jacoby and Glaberman's *The Bell Curve Debate*, Fischer's *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth*, and an expanded edition of Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* (Herrnstein and Murray 1997; Jacoby and Glaberman 1998; Fischer 1996; Gould 1996). Scholars have debated the basis for intelligence: nature (genetic inheritance) versus nurture (social influences). One of the revealing aspects of the research reported in *The Bell Curve* is that a great deal of it was undertaken in apartheid South Africa by racist scholars. Leon Kamin, in his article "Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics," spells out two disastrous failings of the book:

First, the caliber of the data cited by Herrnstein and Murray is, at many critical points, pathetic and their citations of those weak data are often inaccurate. Second, their failure to distinguish between correlation and causation repeatedly leads Herrnstein and Murray to draw invalid conclusions.

(Kamin 1995, 82)

The false theories that support the idea that Black people are intellectually deficient are accompanied by false theories that explain that Black people are just fundamentally different. This view has been held even by liberals who have worked in what they thought were in the interests of Black people. Robert Park, a University of Chicago sociologist who served as president of the Chicago Urban League, worked closely with Booker T. Washington and mentored E. Franklin Frazier. Yet, he wrote:

The Negro is, by natural disposition, neither an intellectual or an idealist like the Jew; nor a brooding introspective like the East Indian; nor a pioneer or frontiersman, like the Anglo-Saxon. He is primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake. His *métier* is expression rather than action. He is, so to speak, the lady of the races.

(Park and Hughes 2009, 139)

This is not simply a view held by so-called white people (another socially constructed lie), but a fallacy based on limited understanding of how the diversity of experience falls under the universal category of being human (for more on Robert Park, see Raushenbush and Hughes 1992).

Correspondingly, many Black people feel there is something "different" about white people, especially as compared to themselves. The Senegalese artist and politician Leopold Senghor famously stated, "Emotion is Negro as reason is Greek" (Constant and Mabana 2009, 69). His philosophy of *Négritude* not only argued that Black people were culturally different, but also negated reason for Black people and emotion for the Greeks. Perceptual differences can be found

in great diversity between Blacks and whites, as well as among Blacks from different countries and different regions within the USA and different classes. The key is to always find the link between particularity and universality by which every community can be regarded as fully human.

The still-more ominous arguments about difference have to do with differences that suggest antisocial behavior and tendencies toward violence. Some racists argue that Black people have enlarged sexual organs and an uncontrollable lust that predisposes them to promiscuity and rape. This argument has been used to delegitimize Black women with children applying for welfare support. It has also served as a cover for lynching Black men, especially on the charge that their sexual lust leads them to defile white women (see Graves 2005, Chapters 3 and 4).

Deficit and difference feed into the third fallacy about Black people: Black people are dependent on the largess of white people (Fraser and Gordon 1994). This old argument includes claims that colonialism and even slavery were benevolent practices that saved Black people from their savage selves. Today, the argument covers the view that Black people are lazy, don't want to work, and therefore have led the USA in the negative direction of the welfare state. This view argues that if Black people are too lazy to work then they need to starve—so down with all forms of welfare. Of course, this view depends on the false image of welfare recipients being mainly Black people. But the opposite is true: even though Black people are on welfare at a somewhat higher rate than white people, most welfare recipients are white (Tracy 2017).

Black Studies responds directly to these deficit, difference, and dependency theories of Black people's supposed inferiority. The five aspects of the definition above are crucial to the response, and each merits elaboration.

First, Black people are the object of study. African Americans are primary, but this links to Africans and the peoples of the African Diaspora. African Americans are those with the historical experience of the transatlantic slave trade, the Middle Passage to the Americas, living through a slave society and various forms of racist oppression, with a tradition of resistance in struggles for freedom. This study includes comparative research that places Black people in a national and global context. And as with most definitions, this one is challenged by emergent social phenomena, in this case, post-slave-trade African migration to the USA, and Black Studies has responded to this.

Second, Black people are the main agents of research, knowledge creation, cultural creativity, and teaching about the Black experience. This specifies cultural creativity as an important form of intellectual production that is highly visible in Black Studies. And while non-Black scholars have made important contributions, Black Studies must be understood as primarily the intellectual productivity of Black people working on behalf of their own community.

Third, Black Studies is fundamentally anti-racist scholarship that contributes to Black liberation in its analysis and its advocacy for change in higher education and the society in general. The study of the Black experience involves defining the conditions of oppression and exploitation under which Black people have lived, and continue to live, and the forms of resistance to these conditions. As such, Black Studies contributes to the freedom struggle.

Fourth, Black Studies encompasses the cultural celebration of the Black experience, especially as it includes the study of the historical forms of Black culture and the traditional rituals of celebration. This combines theory and research with cultural practice.

Fifth, the study and celebration of the Black particularity functions as one path in the search for a universal understanding of the human condition. It is a legitimate arena for seeking knowledge about humanity. This celebrates diversity and universality, and searches for ways that the Black experience, like all peoples' experience, can be a gateway for grasping the universals that define all levels of human attainment.

To sum up, Black Studies consists of a broad set of intellectual activities generated by Black people in order to rationally and culturally reflect on and celebrate their own experience. An autonomous process, it evolves in dialogue and struggle with mainstream institutions of power. It is the intellectual and cultural manifestation of centuries of Black people's resistance to the racism and national oppression that began with the transatlantic slave trade.

Social forces shape this dialectical process. At every historical moment of Black Studies, three main underlying dialectical processes are at work: (1) the interaction between middle-class forces and working-class forces; (2) the dynamic of formal structures arising out of social movements; and (3) the interplay between dogma and debate. Put simply, Black people created Black Studies, and this book demonstrates and explains how they did it.

OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

This book consists of three parts comprising a total of fifteen chapters. The three parts are Black Studies as Intellectual History, Black Studies as Social Movement, and Black Studies as Academic Profession. These modes, as I call them, do not quite equate to historical periods. Some activities characteristic of one mode continue across two or three historical periods. Most activity at any given moment reflects the dominant mode, but activities reflecting other modes may be emergent or otherwise present as well. As a result, the book's narrative occasionally departs from the strictly chronological to explain these three modes.

The three chapters of Black Studies as Intellectual History explain the twentieth-century origins of Black Studies. This involved Black scholars in higher

education, Black people organized in community-based institutions, and Black activists and theorists of the Freedom Movement. Much of this took place outside of colleges and universities, because Black people were by and large excluded from those campuses. But the early scholars who fought for and won entrance went on to produce foundational knowledge, first as doctoral students in mainstream institutions and then for much longer as faculty in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

The six chapters of *Black Studies as Social Movement* bring to light the research and teaching institutions that Black people built as part of six particular forms of struggle. These struggles gave rise to emergent and countervailing organizations such as schools, libraries, museums, and cultural centers.

Finally, the six chapters of *Black Studies as Academic Profession* trace the emergence and establishment of Black Studies across mainstream higher education. This entailed disrupting earlier academic norms and then negotiating an operating definition of Black Studies. To examine how Black Studies became established in twentieth-century higher education, this part of the book then reviews five core academic activities that together cover teaching, research, and service to the profession.

BLACK STUDIES AS INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Chapter 1, *The Academic Disciplines*, demonstrates that Black scholars did the foundational scholarship for Black Studies. The chapter discusses the early Black PhD achievers across fourteen disciplines. These scholars, the clearest evidence of Black intellectual achievement, defeated any racist claims as to their ability. They also laid the foundation for all subsequent research on the Black experience. They were part of the rise of a Black professional class. Their research publications have long been available, thanks to bibliographic documentation, but were for the most part ignored by mainstream scholars until Black Studies in the 1960s.

Chapter 2, *The Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, explains how the scholars in Chapter 1 led an institutional struggle for Black Studies. Although they were educated at the most elite institutions, racist practices blocked them from mainstream positions. For the most part, they found employment in historically Black colleges and universities, particularly Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia, and Howard University in Washington, DC. Established after the American Civil War, these institutions featured a Eurocentric curriculum designed to assimilate a Black middle class. The struggle for curriculum focusing on the Black experience first took place at these HBCUs, to be repeated in the 1960s in mainstream institutions.

As the vast majority of Black people had not had access to higher education, they created Black Studies within their communities' own social and cultural

institutions. Chapter 3, *The Political Culture of the Black Community*, argues that libraries, museums, cultural centers, and high schools were bases for Black Studies developing in the community and serving mainly Black and working-class people. Case studies of New York, Chicago, New Orleans, and Los Angeles make this clear.

BLACK STUDIES AS SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Chapter 4, *The Freedom Movement*, argues that the 1960s Freedom Movement organizations initiated Black Studies in the form of freedom schools, where a new curriculum oriented to the Black experience raised the consciousness of people engaging in movement activity. Examples of this are the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer and the school boycott movement in Chicago in 1963 and 1964.

The slogan of “Black Power” signaled a shift in popular consciousness from integration into the mainstream of society toward Black unity and self-determination. Black Power emerged as an ideological concept in 1966, first articulated by Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) militants Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Willie Ricks (Mukasa Dada). The icon Martin Luther King Jr. gave way to the icon Malcolm X. Chapter 5, *The Black Power Movement*, argues that the Black Power Movement spread the study of Black people’s history and culture as a national influence on all other movements and created emergent institutions, conferences, journals, bookstores, and independent schools.

Black-Power-oriented cultural activists led the launch of a new arts movement. Chapter 6, *The Black Arts Movement*, argues that Black identity and self-determination toward Black liberation created a cultural movement. This chapter presents information on many art forms: music, literature, theater, dance, visual arts, television, and film. Arts organizations, journals, and cultural centers emerged in local communities to carry forward and institutionalize these ideas and practices.

Socialism has long been an active ideological and political influence in Black protest movements. At one point, the global standard was the 1917 Russian Revolution and the USSR. But with the development of revolutionary transformations taking place in China, Vietnam, and Cuba, along with Pan-African socialist movements, Black activists began to look to the former colonial third world for inspiration and guidance. Chapter 7, *The New Communist Movement*, argues that study groups, newspapers, and a national process of debates within that movement added the serious consideration of socialism to Black Studies.

Black women have always provided critical leadership and essential labor power to every Black social institution and social movement. This includes a

history of national organizational development. Chapter 8, *The Black Women's Movement*, explains how those forces shaped Black Studies by advancing the insight, voices, and agency of Black women and advancing women's experiences as a window into all aspects of the Black experience.

The Black Student Movement exploded after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the near-immediate surge of first-generation Black college students arriving on campus out of the working class. All of the other social movements aided the development of the Black Student Movement. These students were the original social force who entered the formerly segregated mainstream institutions of higher education as agents of change. Chapter 9, *The Black Student Movement*, argues that Black students first and foremost articulated the demands that led to Black Studies in mainstream higher education. The primary source of inspiration for these students and for all of the Black-Power-influenced social movements was the ideological leadership of Malcolm X.

BLACK STUDIES AS ACADEMIC PROFESSION

With the background of Part I, *Intellectual History*, and Part II, *Social Movements*, set forth, Part III of the book then examines six different aspects of Black Studies in mainstream higher education. Chapter 10 traces how Black Studies took root on campuses by means of social disruptions caused by the Black Student Movement and their allies on and off campus. The well-known national case is San Francisco State University; this chapter also discusses Howard University in Washington, DC, Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia, and Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

As campus student revolts spread across the country, a national dialogue took shape with the purpose of reaching a collective definition and mission of Black Studies as an academic profession. Chapter 11 argues that different class forces in the Black community drove this process of collectivizing a definition of Black Studies: established middle-class Black academics with key positions in mainstream institutions and the HBCUs together with emergent leaders from the Black-Power-inspired social movements, including young faculty and graduate students emerging out of the working class.

Black Studies then undertook a process of institutionalization into a mainstream academic discipline. Chapter 12, *Building Institutions*, argues that despite its radical origins, Black Studies adapted to the institutional norms of higher education. This was accomplished by a younger generation than the founding generation of Black Studies activists from the social movements. Drawing on 2013 and 2019 surveys, the chapter reviews key areas in the field:

faculty, leadership, curriculum, administrative structure, gender, program activities, and community relations.

Black Studies faculty and administrators faced the challenge of peer review, that is, of meeting the professional standards of their colleagues in similar positions throughout higher education. The process of adapting to mainstream norms included developing Black Studies into a formal academic profession. Chapter 13, *Establishing the Profession*, argues that this took shape in four ways, centered on the established process of peer review: PhD programs, academic journals, professional associations, and conferences. The chapter looks at Temple University in Philadelphia, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, in particular.

The scholarship of every academic profession is a function of its development of general theoretical tendencies and norms for research methods. Chapter 14, *Theorizing*, argues that there have been two main theoretical frameworks in Black Studies: Afrocentrism and Black Experientialism. One emphasizes historical continuity with Africa and the African Diaspora, anchored historically in ancient Egypt. The other starts from the study of the African-American experience and draws comparisons to the diversity of the African Diaspora. This chapter also discusses Black Women's Studies and Black Queer Studies, each rooted in Black Experientialism.

Chapter 15, *Norming Research*, argues that Black Studies research has developed normative methods that focus on documenting the collective works of key scholars, creating genre-based collections of works produced by Black scholars, and studying the major social institutions and movements of the Black community. Central to this process has been refuting racism in mainstream scholarship. A discussion of evaluation research explains how Black Studies developed self-governing evaluation practices in order to maintain the highest standards of an academic profession. The conclusion of the book considers the history recounted here alongside the work of other Black Studies historians to assemble a whole story that others will hopefully fill in and elaborate upon even further.

Relying on a broad definition of Black Studies enables this book to reach deep into recent and earlier history to identify contributions from many generations of scholars, culture creators, activists, and ordinary Black people. The definition of Black Studies, again, is as follows: the study and teaching about African Americans and often Africans and other African-descended people, led mainly by Black people, countering racism and advancing freedom, celebrating the Black experience, and asserting our place alongside the rest of humanity. In response to and in dialogue with dominant social currents, Black people created Black Studies.

This book is at times encyclopedic, because so much of Black people's history making and telling has been devalued and omitted from the record. Likewise,

this book works to put the radicals in the record. They too, have been much erased.

One final note about methodology: this volume quotes a few sources at length. With Black Studies continually challenged, not only with regard to academic programs but also library collections, the quotations are not easy for everyone who will read this book to find in totality. As a result, what might seem like lengthy passages are necessary here.

“Abdul Alkalimat is one of the most rigorous and committed Black radical thinkers of our time”

—Barbara Ransby, award-winning author of
Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement

“Magisterial [...] The most comprehensive history of the field of Black Studies. A landmark book”

—Molefi Kete Asante, Professor, Temple University

“Abdul Alkalimat, one of the pioneers of Black Studies, provides a powerful, expansive, and compelling history”

—Keisha N. Blain, award-winning author and co-editor
of the #1 *New York Times* Bestseller *400 Souls*

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BLACK STUDIES

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