

Africana Studies: Cornell University



In 1969, and in the wake of the historic, student-led takeover of Willard Straight Hall on campus, the Africana Studies & Research Center (ASRC) at Cornell University became the birthplace of the field of Africana Studies. The first year it enrolled 160 students from a pool of 250 applicants and offered 10 courses approved for credit by four colleges. The center was renamed the Africana Studies and Research Center (formerly named The Center for Afro-American Studies) at the request of its director, James Turner, in late October of the same year. The center was originally located at 320 Wait Ave. In April 1970 arsonists destroyed the building, resulting in the center's relocation to Triphammer Road.

At the same time, like San Francisco State University, it represented one of the nation's earliest departments established in Black Studies. Since its origination at Cornell, the field of Africana Studies has been increasingly embraced and universalized as a discipline in academic programs and departments at colleges and universities around the nation. That is to say, many programs and departments have increasingly adopted the name "Africana" to signal their investments in interdisciplinary methodologies and in examining Blackness comparatively in global and diaspora perspectives. We are proud to literally be the pioneers in having established "Africana" as a concept and remain actively involved in advancing its development theoretically and pedagogically toward yet new directions and new horizons.

Just what is Africana Studies? The African American historian and emeritus professor from this department, Robert L. Harris, offer a useful definition of the field in Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley and Claudine Michel's anthology *The Black Studies Reader*: "Africana studies is the multidisciplinary analysis of the lives and thought of people of African ancestry on the African continent and throughout the world. It embraces Africa, Afro-America and the Caribbean but does not confine itself to those three geographical areas. Africana Studies examines people of African ancestry wherever they may be found — for example, in Central and South America, Asia and the Pacific Islands.

Its primary means of organization are racial and cultural. Many of the themes of Africana Studies are derived from the historical position of African peoples in relation to Western societies and in the dynamics of slavery, oppression, colonization, imperialism, emancipation, self-determination, liberation and socioeconomic and political development."

In the 21st century and nearly 50 years after its inception, the ASRC remains committed to continuing academic innovation in this field and to remaining at its forefront theoretically and pedagogically, while sustaining its ongoing commitments to activism and community engagement.

The ASRC has continued to be a site of critical and theoretical dialogues related to topics such as the philosophy of "Africana Thought." The department, whose research is supported and enabled by its John Henrik Clarke Library, has advanced toward a more central engagement with gender and sexuality in areas such as Africana women's studies and Black queer studies. As an institution, the Africana Studies & Research Center has increasingly shaped the "new Africana Studies." The work of this field is significant and exceptional at Cornell and in the larger profession for its consistent and sustained critical and theoretical engagement of the concept of race. This engagement can be found in the overall models and methods of teaching at Cornell that are truly dynamic. In recent years, the ASRC's commitments to scholarship and activism have been evident in the faculty's development of programs and projects related to topics, such as the prison industrial complex, the crisis of Darfur in Sudan, race and the presidency, academic labor, the Black radical intellectual tradition, Trayvon Martin and Rachel Jeantel, and the protests in Ferguson, Missouri.

The Africana Studies & Research Center extends the teaching and learning opportunities that we provide in both our undergraduate and graduate classrooms well beyond to service learning projects and community initiatives, from local to transnational contexts.

Source: <http://africana.cornell.edu/history> [retrieved June 6, 2017]

Resources: Bobo, Jacqueline, Cynthia Hudley and Claudine Michel, eds. *The Black Studies Reader*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004. Brown, Scot, ed. *Discourse on Africana Studies: James Turner and Paradigms of Knowledge*. New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2016.