



Book Review

Abdul Alkalimat. *The History of Black Studies*. London: Pluto Press, 2021. 372 pp. \$35.00 (ISBN 9780745344225).

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Abdul Alkamimat's *The History of Black Studies* argues that the discipline preceded its 1960s institutional manifestation. Distinctive about his contribution is the argument that the 1960s expression of Black Studies was not merely the emergence of a discipline from roots that were laid in the past, but it was a continuation or validation of something by mainstream institutions that had already begun within the Black community. Alkalimat defines Black Studies as the activities that study and teach about Africana peoples as agents for the purpose of countering racism and celebrating the Black experience. While the term was first articulated in the 1960s, Alkalimat argues that Black Studies was developed throughout the twentieth century as a part of Black intellectual, social, and professional history.

Expanding on his main argument, in the first section of the book, Alkalimat contends that Black Studies had its origin in the work of the first two generations of Black PhDs (p. 303). As the fountainheads of Black intellectual history, early Black PhD achievers "laid the foundation for all subsequent research on the Black

experience” (p. 6). While most of these scholars were employed at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), they prodigiously produced research between the Reconstruction era and pre-1960 era, and tried to transform the Eurocentric curriculums at their institutions. Finally, Alkalimat explains that the full manifestation of Black Studies occurred on HBCU campuses during the first half of the twentieth century.

Alkalimat provides an informative account of the individuals who became the first Black people to earn the highest academic credentials in many academic fields. These included W.E.B. DuBois (History), Alain Locke (Philosophy), Francis Sumner (Psychology), Abram Harris (Economics), and Ralph Bunche (Political Science). Locke became the chair of the Philosophy department at Howard University and taught the first classes on race relations there. Sumner also taught at Howard, and he founded the first degree-granting program in Psychology at an HBCU. Other significant figures include Charles Houston, Howard Law School’s dean, who helped to train students who fought against Jim Crow laws. Moreover, Aaron Douglass, who was one of the most prominent painters of the Harlem Renaissance, created major murals in the library at Fisk University, where he also founded the Art program. For Alkalimat, the main sites for intellectual production among HBCUs were Fisk, Atlanta, and Howard (p. 46). To further support his claim about the centrality of these institutions to Black Studies, Alkalimat contends that there was a sizable amount of research produced by the early generations of Black PhDs at the aforementioned HBCUs. For example, during this time of growth, Fisk’s faculty was able to publish “two books, three songs, and sixteen articles. Four years later thirty-nine books, six songs, and eighty-six articles had been written by Fisk teachers in little over five years” (p. 48). The school produced more research than any other HBCU (p. 48).

According to Alkalimat, Du Bois’ scholarship was determined to be the most important contribution at Atlanta University. While there, Du Bois published two of his most significant books: *The Philadelphia Negro* and *The Souls of Black Folk*. Under Du Bois’ leadership, the social science faculty held annual conferences and produced research that would eventually lay the foundation for all scholarship in the twentieth-century on the African American experience (p. 53). The facts above strengthen Alkalimat’s argument that the works of these scholars are the basis for the discipline of Black Studies.

In the second section of the book, Alkalimat describes how Black Studies moved forward in the 1960s through various social movements. Black Power was one of the main theoretical concepts that informed Black Studies and solidified the discipline's orientation as a social movement. Freedom Schools, developed in the 1964 Civil Rights Movement, created "pedagogies of protest" and their curriculum was a manifestation of Black Studies (pp. 97-99). An early expression of this type of concern for an education relevant to Black students was found in the Nation of Islam's establishment of their own schools in the 1940s and 1950s. Moreover, community-based Black bookstores, the emergence of the Black Arts Movement, the study of Marxism by Black activists, and the political education provided by the Third World Women's Alliance, each shaped the curriculum of Black Studies.

Alkalimat provides a robust discussion of the ways Black Power functioned as a strategic organizing tool on HBCU campuses. For example, he highlights Howard President James Nabrit's initiative to increase the enrollment of white students. Black students, along with faculty like Nathan Hare, resisted this attempt and strove to transform Howard under the Black Power slogan (p. 123). Coming to Howard in 1961, Hare would mentor the most radical activists. He also helped form a Black Power committee during the 1966-67 academic year and was eventually fired. In a special issue of *Negro Digest* that included articles exploring the notion of a Black University, Hare presented a critique of Howard claiming that it was subservient to the racist status quo of academia. Building on national debates, like the aforementioned, Howard faculty held a five-day conference in November 1968 entitled "Towards a Black University" (p. 125).

Beginning in 1969, the Student Organization for Black Unity, led by HBCU student government leaders and Black student activists who were connected to the broader Black liberation movement, sought to organize Black students among southern HBCUs. The slogan they advanced was, "Save and Change Black Colleges" (p. 187). During this same time, Kofi Wangara and Abdul Alkalimat were recruited to teach at Spelman College. They co-taught an African Revolution course that exposed students to revolutionary scholarship, which eventually motivated them to adopt the Black University model and plan a "building takeover to advocate for change" (pp. 125-126). Alkalimat employs these examples to show that the battle for a culturally relevant education was not something exclusive to predominantly white

colleges and universities, but happened on HBCU campuses and resulted in the formation of Black Studies units on these campuses as well.

The third section of the book shows how Black Studies was established and explores the challenges it faces. Alkalimat emphasizes the importance of organizations, articles and journals, departments, and PhD programs as the keys to the academic professionalization of the discipline. While each of these milestones have been achieved, there are still areas where the discipline can grow. For example, he notes that there are a disproportionate number of Black Studies academic units located outside of the region of the country where most African Americans reside (p. 235). He goes on to explain that there is a gender imbalance in favor of men in the positions of full professors, academic journal editors, and editorial board members of Black Studies journals. These facts notwithstanding, Alkalimat highlights the deep roots and stability of Black Studies as an important project of empowerment, grounded in Black intellectual and social movement histories.

Students and some faculty contributed to the formulation and development of Black Studies as an academic profession on HBCUs as well. For example, at Howard, after a speech by Muhammad Ali in 1967, the students seized the administration building for four days. Moreover, the next year a conference was held on campus addressing the notion of a Black University with Stokely Carmichael as the keynote speaker. In fact, the first annual meeting of the African Heritage Studies Association was held at Howard in 1969. Eventually, Russell Adams was hired as Director of Afro-American Studies in 1971 (pp. 204-205). At Morehouse and Spelman, the faculty participated in a Black Studies organizational think-tank led by Vincent Harding called the Institute of the Black World. One source Alkalimat cites suggests that this organization would help give direction to the Black Studies movement and offer evaluation of the new discipline (p. 222). These insights, related to the significance of HBCUs to the history of Black Studies, are some of Alkalimat's major interventions and complicate the idea that HBCU's maintained a Eurocentric curricular focus. The claim that most HBCUs dismiss Black history and culture as being of no value was articulated by Carter G. Woodson. However, Alkalimat complicates this narrative by placing HBCUs at the root of Black Studies. Although this contribution is important, there could be a point of contention some readers may have about this text.

One issue readers may struggle with is how Black Studies is operationalized. When describing the current state of discipline, Alkalimat concludes that "the bulk of

Black Studies research does not proclaim allegiance to any one dogma” and looks to various paradigms as guides for research (p. 280). This way of operationalizing the discipline may seem problematic to a variety of readers, including those who are aligned with an Afrocentric epistemology as articulated by scholars like Molefi Asante, Daudi Azibo, Ama Mazama, Serie McDougal, and Victor Okafar. Akalimat’s broad and inclusive way of defining Black Studies may complicate disciplinary boundaries. This concern notwithstanding, Akalimat has written an informative book that provides a wealth of detail that one may not find in other texts about the history of the discipline.