

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

**AFRICANA
STUDIES 50
WILLIAMS**

**FIFTY YEARS OF AFRICANA STUDIES AT WILLIAMS COLLEGE
1969-2019**

**AN EXHIBITION COMMEMORATING THE FIFTY YEAR PRESENCE OF AFRICANA STUDIES
HELD IN THE SCHOW GALLERY (SAWYER 455) AT WILLIAMS COLLEGE
JANUARY TO JUNE, 2019**

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FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS:

FIFTY YEARS OF AFRICANA STUDIES AT WILLIAMS COLLEGE, 1969-2019

Not only does tradition provide kinship ties, but tradition determines progress in the sense that both scenes of culture and the events derived from them can be replicated and depended upon through time.

~Sheila McKoy, “The Limbo Contest”



FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

Within communities of the African Diaspora, time is never simply linear, it is cyclical. Whether through the contours of traditions created, passed on, revised, and made anew; the collective memories of suffering, protest, and praise; the creativities that emerge from revolution and resilience; or musings of the future and possibilities to come, *Black Diaspora Time* has a way of connecting those of African descent to the past, while at the same time shaping our present and infusing our conceptions of the future.

Sheila McKoy’s notion of “limbo time”—the cyclical ways Black people are collectively bound to tradition, to one other, to our ancestors, and to our future—aptly characterizes the presence of Africana Studies at Williams College. On the surface our existence appears to be linear, and our origins derive from our formal establishment as the Afro-American Studies Program in 1969 and progress to our current status as the Department of Africana Studies. A closer look, however, indicates that our presence is actually much longer. Archival explorations reveal that Black ancestors—including students, alumni, and staff—hoped for Africana Studies, and they paved the way for our presence well before Joseph Harris (the College’s first tenure-line Black faculty member) was hired, and long before we officially ‘began’ in 1969.

To consider fifty years of Africana Studies at Williams College, then, is to recognize the ways that the formal study of people of African descent that was institutionalized in 1969 is tied to longer, deeper histories of Black Williams, where the ebb, flow, and “limbo time” of Black experience at Williams made plenty good room for what Africana Studies has since become. It is also to note that Black Williams did that creative work well before Africana Studies was formalized as a course of study, and will likely continue to inform who and what Africana Studies will be in the years to come.

Commemorating the presence of Black Studies within a historically white space is no small feat. While fifty years is quite short in Ultimate Time and in the history of Williams College (which was founded in 1793), it is no less a momentous occasion. The presence of Africana Studies at Williams College reveals as much about the folks who fought to cultivate space in our highly selective curriculum as it does about an institution willing to make room for its inhabitants to learn about Black people in a most intellectually rigorous way.

We therefore celebrate fifty years of Africana Studies, an interdisciplinary field of study that emerged during the 1960s Freedom Movements, and that expands our knowledge of the vast experiences of people of Africa and the African Diaspora. Commemorating Africana Studies at Williams College is a recognition that, even in the rural hills of Berkshire County, Massachusetts, Black Lives have always and continue to matter.



THE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS EXHIBIT

The exhibit theme, **FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS**, celebrates the formal presence of Africana Studies at Williams from 1969 to 2019 while denoting cyclical time in our history, where tides of student, staff, and faculty have had unique impacts upon the study of the Black Diaspora. The exhibit is designed to do five things: 1) to note the ways in which the “souls of Black folk” have left a permanent imprint on this particular Berkshire space; 2) to reveal Africana Studies’ role in helping to make that imprint; 3) to account for a work of building community that requires continuous tending; 4) to recognize the at time thorny relationship Black Williams (and Africana Studies) have had with this institution; and 5) to remember the people and moments that have been instrumental to the life of Africana Studies at Williams College.

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS is not just a celebration, it is a commemoration in six acts: **Student Activism**; **The Department of Africana Studies**; the academic interventions of the **Sterling Allen Brown ‘22 Professorship and Gaius Charles Bolin Fellowship**; the thirty-year presence of **The Davis Center** (formerly the Multicultural Center); the **Ancestral Ties** that bind us together through space and time; and considerations of **Black Futurity**, or the what will be-ness of Blackness. These acts are simultaneously linear and cyclical. These acts represent the ways that, as it is within Africana experience broadly, Blackness is beautiful, stark, suffering, joy, timed, timeless and elusive in its naming, embodiment, and complexity.

Exhibit Structure

Each of the six acts are designated by specific colors, deep red for student activism; black for the Department of Africana Studies; green for the Brown Professorship and Bolin Fellowship, purple for the Davis Center, golden yellow for ancestral ties, and a combination of red, black, and green for black futurity. Each act has a wall component and a corresponding case of archival materials which are also color-coordinated. The exhibit itself also harkens to McKoy’s framing of “limbo time” in that it is simultaneously linear and cyclical. The cases and wall components are staged to reveal the interconnected, ongoing nature of Africana Studies which at the very least requires a dynamic engagement between and among the six acts.

ACT 1 | STUDENT ACTIVISM

To consider student activism among Black students at Williams College is to recognize that their organizing efforts did not occur in a vacuum. In the late 1960s, the Freedom Movement was well underway, the first Black Studies Program was created at San Francisco State University in 1968 after a five-month student strike, and Black Studies programs and departments were being ushered in across the country in response to Black students’ collective actions. The members of the Williams Afro American Society (WAAS) who occupied Hopkins Hall in April 1969 were like many of their Black peers throughout the United States, who called for the formal study of

Black life and experience in their collegiate curricula and desired to see themselves represented in every corner of the academy.

Act 1 recognizes the ways that the ongoing presence and labor of Black students have pushed Williams College to become the diverse, dynamic community it strives to be. It highlights the important role that student experience has played in transforming Williams and the ongoing nature (and necessity!) of student organizing, where the experiential is always intertwined with the intellectual.

Archival contents: *Black Williams*, Williams Afro-American Society, 1973; excerpt, “Black Williams: A Study of Black Students in a White College,” 1974; *The Horn*, 2009; excerpt, WBSU Yearbook, 1988; “Black Students at Williams, 1889-1993”; “Black Williams,” *Williams Alumni Magazine*, 2003; “The Revolution Continues” 2011 and 2016.

Archival themes displayed throughout the exhibit:

- Ongoing nature of student activism;
- Cyclical forms of student activism as simultaneously old and new;
- Connections between the field of Africana Studies and student activism.

ACT 2 | THE DEPARTMENT OF AFRICANA STUDIES

Africana Studies began in 1969 as Afro-American Studies and was created to “focus on the history and culture of the Afro-American community—its roots in Africa, its experience in America, the difficulties it faces as an increasingly urban minority, socially and economically underprivileged, and the nature of the problems with which it confronts white America” (*College Bulletin*, 1969/70).

Africana Studies has always been interdisciplinary in its scope, has grounded intellectual engagement with activism and experiential purpose, and has compelled students to find unique perspectives from which to pursue and make their own contributions. Africana Studies has also helped bolster the presence of Black faculty at Williams, and has universally moved Black history, experience, and knowledge from the margins of academia to its center.

Though it initially drew its teaching faculty from different departments, Africana Studies is now a freestanding department with its own faculty, programming, and curriculum. And, even as its name has since changed to incorporate the experiences of Black people throughout the Diaspora, its centering on Black history, experience, and knowledge has remained the same.

Archival contents: “Williams Reports,” 1980; The Chairs of Africana Studies, 1969-2019; handwritten meeting minutes, Afro-American Studies Committee, 1977; Syllabus, “Afro-American History,” fall 1974; *On Campus*, 1998; *The Williams Journal of Afro-American Studies*, 1988; various photographs featuring Africana Studies faculty and students (1973, 2008, 2011, and 2017); Kente stole.

Archival themes displayed throughout the exhibit:

- Curricular expansion and intervention;
- Robust academic programming;
- Faculty presence.

ACT 3 | THE BROWN PROFESSORSHIP AND BOLIN FELLOWSHIP

Act 3 identifies recipients of the Sterling Allen Brown '22 Professorship (created in 1998) and the Gaius Charles Bolin Fellowship (created in 1985). The faculty hired into these positions have had a tremendous impact on the intellectual life and curriculum at Williams College. Students and alumni fondly recount the effects of encountering graduate students at the earliest stages of their professional careers and revel in the opportunity to take courses with some of the greatest academic minds, including Manning Marable, Katie Geneva Canon, Cornel West, and Wahneema Lubiano (among others).

On the one hand, these lists are indicative of the ways Williams College has historically struggled to retain critical masses of Black faculty presence, and these visiting faculty opportunities have allowed Williams to fill important curricular gaps. On the other hand, these lists speak to the ways Williams has been quite successful in recruiting Black faculty and reflect its broader commitment to changing the Williams academy, for the faculty hired into these positions have gone on to do transformative work in their respective fields, including especially Africana Studies. Both opportunities are named in honor of two Black alumni, both have advanced Black faculty recruitment and retention efforts, and both have transformed the intellectual life at Williams College, as well as the academy at large.

Archival contents: Letter from Joseph E. Harris to Henry Flynt, 1975; "Williams College Sterling Allen Brown Celebration Program, 1997; Spectrum Magazine announcement of Sterling Brown Visiting Professor Cornel West, 1999; postcard from Katie Cannon (former Sterling Brown Professor) to Rhon Manigault-Bryant (former Bolin Fellow and current AFR faculty), 2014; Gaius Bolin Commemoration logo and photo, 2016; *Nia* September 1974, featuring photograph of Sterling A. Brown '22 and Alison Davis '24 and peer counselors Darrilynne Arnelle '76, Pamela Carlton '76, Deborah L. Gould '76, and Lezli. H. White '75.

Archival themes displayed throughout the exhibit:

- Celebrating two of our many distinguished alumni;
- Transforming the curriculum;
- Transforming the academy.

ACT 4 | THE DAVIS CENTER

The Davis Center (formerly the Multicultural Center) celebrates its now thirty-year presence on campus and exemplifies Williams College's efforts to create a co-curricular, communal space. This act highlights "The DC's" role as an activist hub for students, as a sacred space for Black members of the Williams community, and as a key collaborator with Africana Studies in its efforts to intellectually ground student experience.

Perhaps when W. Rod Faulds, then acting Director of the Williams College Museum of Art commissioned Faith Ringgold's "100 Years at Williams College, 1889-1999," he knew the extraordinary story of Black Williams. Ringgold's work is emblematic of The Davis Center, whose charge (among other charges) is to care and make room for Black students of Williams, as well as Black faculty, Black staff, Black alumni, and Black members of the Williamstown and broader Berkshire communities.

Faith Ringgold's acrylic paint on canvas with printed fabric is more than a piece of art—it is a living archive that visually depicts the dissonance that is Black Williams and Williams College. This canvas does more than tell the story of Gaius Charles Bolin, member of the class of 1889, and Williams College's first black graduate. It also tells the story of the women and men, the faculty and students, the maids and servants, the community members, the children, the food and drink, and the laborers and the belabored who make up Black Williams. Ringgold effectively stitched memories, and in a profound way, helped tell a story that never gets old: whether in times of joy or in times “when it wasn't always roses” a single Black life at Williams is never a lone life.

Archival contents: The DC, Established 1989, Rededicated 2012 program, 2012; photograph negatives, MCC Open House, 1998; MCC Facilities, 2005-2006, photographs of Morley Circle old and new (1897, 1994, and 2018); The First Decade of the Multicultural Center program, 1999; Jenness on Moving Day, 1996; Picture Key, Faith Ringgold creation, “100 Years of Blacks at Williams.”

Archival themes displayed throughout the exhibit:

- The DC as activist hub;
- The DC as sacred space;
- The DC and Africana Studies as longstanding collaborators.

ACT 5 | ANCESTRAL TIES

Act five reminds us the dynamic nature of Black experience, including that which binds the living and the dead together through space and time. Through an explicit engagement with Sheila McKoy's understanding of *Black Diaspora Time*, this section highlights the ways that losing members of our community has a lasting and deep impact that can be felt well beyond the moments they occur.

The mask at the center of this portion of the exhibit, which is taken from a 1976 Black Student Union program “A Celebration of Us” is unidentified within the holdings of the Williams College Archives and Special Collections. Yet, it has been used in various programming and informational materials by students, staff, and faculty, for nearly thirty years, and especially in instances to commemorate members of our community who have transitioned to the ancestral realm. While it is unclear from where the image derived, it has a lasting significance within communities of Black Williams inhabitants, and is an important visual reminder of the ways that time is never simply linear, it is cyclical.

Archival Contents: Ernest Brown (1947-2012); Leslie Brown (1954-2016); Reginald E. Gilliam, Jr. (1944-2012); Alanna Joy Haywood (1972-1993); Michael Knight (1956-1987); Stephen Sneed (1949-2018); Preston Washington (1948-2003); Nakesha Williams (1970-2016); letter from Reginald Gilliam to “Black Brothers and Sisters” re: the death of Arthur Logan, 1973.

Archival themes displayed throughout the exhibit:

- The multi generational impact of loss within Black Williams;
- The importance of collectively remembering our ancestors;
- Ongoing ties between the living and the dead.

ACT 6 | BLACK FUTURITY

This act considers the possibilities of, or the what will be-ness of Blackness. This section of the exhibit can be interpreted as a conclusion, but, in keeping with the exhibit’s larger focus on the cyclical nature of *Black Diaspora Time*, this end can also be seen as a beginning.

To consider the future necessitates an understanding of and critical reflection upon the past. It also requires an ability to imagine that past anew, unfettered and unbound by the histories that would seek to ensnare us with apathy, blight, and despair. Even as it is informed by the histories of presence—among faculty, staff, students, and our global Black Williams community—this portion of the exhibit is intentionally undefined. It is our hope that visitors will use what they see, have seen, and hope to see, alongside what they know, have known, and wish to know, in order to conjure possibilities. As such, this portion of the exhibit invites participants to contribute to that imagined future by sharing their reflections on a single question: “*Of What Black Futures Do You Dream?*”

Archival Contents: “Wild Seed: An Octavia Butler Riff Meal” by Isaiah Blake ’21; photograph, *Africana Concentrators* 2013; photograph “Black People Walking,” (2018); “The Weight of it All” by Rocky Douglas ’19; Program, “The Souls of Black Folk: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Century of the Color Line,” 2003; photograph, “Solidarity,” 1973; “The Carefree Black Girl” portfolio by Sarah Brathwaite (‘16) and Kaya Gingras (‘16), 2015; photograph, Black Ephs Football team members with Coach Al Pearman, 1988.

Archival themes displayed within the exhibit:

- The intertwined nature of remembering the past, reflecting on the present, and considering the future;
- Visual symbolism of the blank canvas, to guide those unborn and newly born.



ARCHIVAL ABSENCES AND CURATORIAL CHOICES

Archives always tell their own stories, and a notable thread in the archival materials is the overwhelmingly American scope of its contents. This is certainly an important theme because of the particularities of African American experience and Black experience in America. And yet, this singular thread does not fully attend to the broader, diasporic nature of *Africana Studies* at Williams College and to the people who have made up Black Williams. The exhibit’s attention to and framing of “Black Williams” broadly defined is thus a mechanism for painting a broader picture of *Africana Studies*.

Another set of curatorial choices that guided the content selection was to lift up the ways in which Black women—who were notably absent in the archival materials—have left their mark upon *Africana Studies* and Black Williams. The selection of the Faith Ringgold poster to acknowledge the longstanding relationship between *Africana Studies* and the Davis Center, for example, is to note the ways that an outspoken Black feminist artist used her standpoint to visually render Black experience at Williams College. To commemorate Michael Knight’s (‘77) passing with a poem written by Laylah Ali (‘91) is to intentionally, yet subtly, engender the archives.

In all, this exhibit is curated with an eye of critical reflection, candor, and remembrance of the complex ways Africana Studies has been positioned in the history of Williams College, which includes filling archival gaps wherever possible. This exhibit candidly acknowledges that Black experience at Williams College is echoed solidly, though not exclusively, in Africana Studies. As Shana Redmond suggests, “the African diaspora proves to be a political project of affiliation and camaraderie that unites members via historical condition and deliberate choice.” It is in that spirit that we celebrate Africana Studies, and recognize that regardless of one’s affinity with or participation in Africana Studies, as a community we are nonetheless collectively bound to central role that the intellectual study of Black experience throughout the Diaspora has played at Williams College. **For Such a Time as This: Fifty Years of Africana Studies at Williams College, 1969-2019** is an exhibit that encourages us to collectively remember.



PIVOTAL MOMENTS, 1968-2019

- **1968:** (April 11) The Williams Afro American Society (WAAS) hosted “Where Do We Go from Here,” a forum where they “presented a series of proposals for needed curricular and administrative change,” including MLK Scholarships, a Black area studies program, a visiting professor or lecturer, and that current faculty revise their course syllabi to incorporate material on black men.” WAAS eventually met with President Sawyer to share their proposals.
- **1969:** (March 12) Dissatisfied with “administrative inertia,” WAAS created a list of fifteen demands, which they gave the administration until early April to respond. The demands were grouped into three categories: 1) the creation of Afro-American Studies; 2) a call for various forms of administrative support for Black students, including “the establishment of an Afro-American Cultural Center”; and 3) an emphasis on admissions and improving recruiting efforts of Black American and African students.
- **1969:** (April 4) WAAS occupied Hopkins Hall to prompt direct administrative action. There were two fairly expeditious responses to the occupation: the creation of Afro-American Studies by faculty vote and the authorization to hire an expert in Afro-American Studies, and subsequent hiring of Williams College’s first tenured Black faculty member Joseph E. Harris, who arrived with tenure in the History Department.
- **1969-1970:** (academic year) Afro-American Studies offered its first “Courses of Instruction,” which included fifteen to twenty classes housed in departments such as history, economics, and political science.
- **1972:** (February 24) WAAS called “for a boycott of the college snack bar” in response to “racist attitudes of some of the college employees as well as overall disorganization and discrepancies as it related to the amount distributed to individuals.” (Williams College Afro-American Society Press Release, Boycott, February 24, 1972).
- **1972:** (September) The Williams Afro-American Society changed its name to the Williams Black Student Union (WBSU), “which seeks to provide a new orientation for Black conception of its identity and role at Williams.” (*Record Advocate*, September 26, 1972).
- **1973:** (October) Sterling Allen Brown (’22) returned to Williams and offered a public reading and lecture. Recordings are housed in Special Collections.
- **1977:** (February) The Committee on the Academic and Social Life of Black Students at Williams was chartered, and “met regularly to discuss admissions policy, academic

counseling, black-white relations, and the selection of junior advisors.” (Black Williams: A Written History, 54).

- **1980:** (November 1) “Two shrouded figures burned a cross in front of Perry House Saturday night in view of about 40 students attending Homecoming parties...” The result was terror and rage, as well as a rally that drew over 1200 students, faculty and staff. The perpetrators were never apprehended. (*The Record* “Cross Burning Shocks Campus,” November 4, 1980).
- **1982:** the BSU was “temporarily homeless” due to office reallocation in Mears and before moving into its permanent location: Rice House. (Black Williams: A Written History, 65).
- **1984:** Michael Knight ‘77 returned to Williams as visiting professor of Theater, and directed the first all-black production of Jean Genet’s *The Blacks*.
- **1986:** (spring) Created in the fall of 1985, the first Gaius Charles Bolin Fellowships were awarded to Roland Anglin and Wahneema Lubiano.
- **1987:** The Alison Davis 1924 Lectureship was established. It is hosted annually by the Davis Center.
- **1988:** (April) Occupation of Dean’s Office by Coalition Against Racist Education (C.A.R.E.) yielded the creation of The Multicultural Center, which opened in the summer of 1988.
- **1989:** (summer) Installation of “100 Years of Blacks at Williams” by Faith Ringgold.
- **1993:** Death of Alanna Joy Haywood (’93) in North Adams, MA. The official cause of death was meningitis.
- **1995:** (September) Afro-American Studies sponsored campus-wide symposium on the centennial of Booker T. Washington’s “Atlanta Compromise” speech.
- **1996:** Sankofa, Williams College’s student step team, was formed by five women from the class of 2000: Melina Evans, Mya Fisher, Dahra Jackson, Maxine Lyle, and Samantha Reed.
- **1997:** (October 25) Sterling Brown Celebration was hosted by Williams College in Washington, D.C.
- **1998:** (fall) Establishment of Sterling Brown ’22 Visiting Professorship.
- **2000:** Afro-American Studies changed its name to African-American Studies.
- **2004-2005:** Joy James was recruited to Williams to lead the African-American Studies Program. With her arrival also came the ability to hire and tenure directly into African-American Studies.
- **2005-2006:** National searches led to the hiring of Erica Edwards and Stéphane Robolin, the first assistant professors hired into African-American Studies.
- **2006:** African-American Studies changed its name to Africana Studies to account for the diasporic scope of Black experience in the Program and in the field.
- **2006-2016:** Hiring opportunities led to the recruitment of Africana-Studies’ current faculty, including Professors Neil Roberts, James Manigault-Bryant, Rhon Manigault-Bryant, Rashida K. Braggs, and VaNatta Ford. The establishment of this critical mass led to increased programmatic stability, exponential growth in student participation, and the expansion of the curriculum by more than forty courses.
- **2017:** (December 14) By faculty vote, the Africana Studies Program became the Department of Africana Studies.
- **2019:** Africana Studies commemorates fifty years at Williams College.



CATALOGUE

Archival and Library Holdings

The materials included in this exhibit derive from the holdings of Williams College Archives and Special Collections and Sawyer Library, and include: the Afro-American Studies Program Records, the Black Student Union and Afro-American Society Records, the Marcella Peacock Collection, the Leslie Brown Papers, the *Williams Record*, the *Gulielmsonian*, the *Williams College Bulletin*, the *Alumni Review*, and minutes of the Williams College Board of Trustees.

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