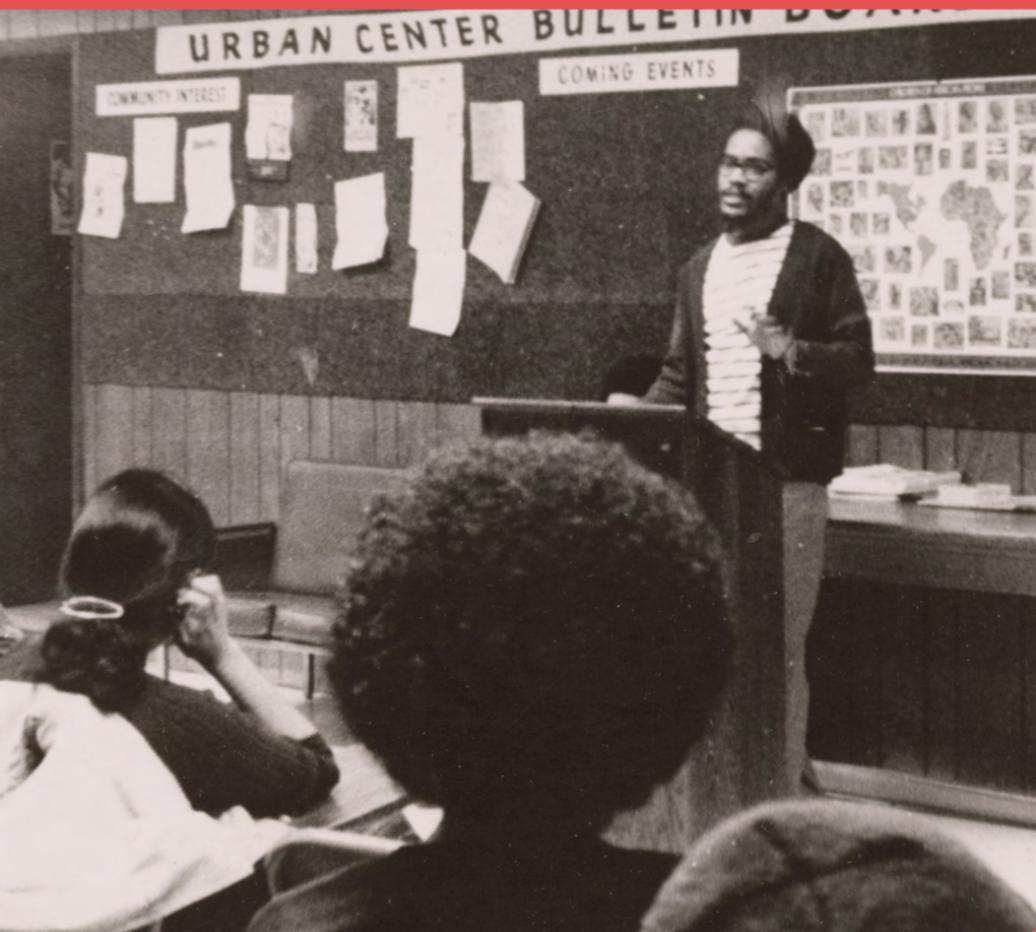


Africana Studies, 1969–2019: A History of Imagining Otherwise



An exhibition at the
Vassar College Library
marking the 50th anniversary of
the Africana Studies Program
at Vassar College



September 19 through
December 22, 2019

Cover: *Photograph of Walter Rodney
speaking at the Urban Center, circa 1975*

*Africana Studies,
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Preface

The Vassar College Library is proud to present this exhibition as part of the yearlong celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of Vassar's Africana Studies Program. Although there have been multiple commemorations marking the decades since the program was founded, the 50th is special. Indeed, it's the Golden Jubilee. But more than it being a nice round number, a number that says, wow, it's been a while, 50 years seems like history. 1969 is part of the nation's collective past, as is evidenced by the recent remembrances of events like the Stonewall uprising, the moon landing, and Woodstock. Here at Vassar, 50 years is enough time to have gained some perspective—on the program, the college, and Africana Studies as a discipline.

The purpose of the exhibition is to illustrate the range of activities undertaken by the Africana Studies Program, and the impact of the program on the college. Themes and highlights include the program's early years at the Urban Center in downtown Poughkeepsie, study abroad and at home, the student experience, academic and cultural events, and community involvement and

activism. Limitation on space forced us to leave out or only make small mention of a number of critical people, issues, and events. But we hope that this exhibition will stimulate further discussion and exploration of the history of the program and its legacies.

The material in the exhibit was drawn from multiple collections, but primarily from the Africana Studies Program records housed in the Archives & Special Collections Library. Because of the relatively contemporary nature of this exhibit, some items came from the records still in the Africana Studies offices. We have also used other materials to fill the gaps, such as our *Vassar Miscellany* and *Vassar Quarterly* holdings, posters and photographs from our College Relations collection, and brochures, programs and flyers from our modestly labeled “Subject Files,” which contain a wealth of miscellaneous printed materials related to college events, issues, locations and individuals. We have tried, whenever possible, to include originals, though in some cases it was necessary to rely on facsimiles reproductions.

The driving force behind this exhibition was Professor Quincy T. Mills, who will be leaving

Vassar at the end of the next academic year. It has been a privilege and a genuine pleasure working with him. He will be sorely missed by me, my colleagues in the library, and the rest of the Vassar community.

Many thanks are deserved by the many other people who contributed to this exhibition. Abrianna Harris (VC 2021), helped Professor Mills with the selection of materials. She spent many hours in the Special Collections reading room, combing through boxes, flagging items, and judging their suitability. Rachel Finn managed the programming for the exhibit opening and consulted on the physical layout. Gratitude is also extended to Vassar’s Andrew Ashton (Director of Libraries), Ronald Patkus (Associate Director for the Libraries for Special Collections), Dean Rogers (Special Collections Assistant), Sharyn Cadogan (Digital Production Manager), and George Laws (Director of Publications).

LAURA STREETT

Digital Archivist and Access Librarian

Africana Studies at 50: Imagining and Reimagining Vassar College

In 1968 and 1969, Black women students at Vassar College set the stage for the Program in Black Studies, later named Africana Studies, to take shape. From their ideas, fortitude, courage, protest, and vision, the Program in Black Studies was constituted, Black faculty were hired to guide the ship, and students began to see themselves in the curriculum, but more importantly to see the world in new ways. For fifty years, Africana Studies has represented a field of study, a lens of visibility, and an anchor for Black students coming into their intellectual selves. To celebrate fifty years of an academic unit is to celebrate the struggles and joys of successive groups of young people figuring out who they are and want to become while transforming a college charged with helping them accomplish this objective.

The general historical narrative of the Black experience at Vassar tends to begin and end with the matriculation of Anita Hemmings and the

takeover of Main Building on October 30, 1969. These are certainly two major events in the history of Vassar, and the latter is critical to the foundations of Africana Studies. Indeed, they point to a long history of defiance. Yet, the lives and legacies of a people and a program are much more expansive. Looking back at Africana Studies over fifty years is to look back at how students and faculty looked forward. It is to understand their visions of the futures of freedom at Vassar and beyond. More concretely, we see an ever changing idea of the politics of normalcy. There are various answers to what it meant to be a Black student at various historical moments, but at its root, all college students want to learn, grow, mess up, experiment, hang out, be heard, hear, help, heal, and graduate. Looking back at Africana means that we do not get stuck at the start in October of 1969, but rather to see its range of manifestations.

The beginning of Black Studies at Vassar was part of a larger vision of social justice. Demands and protests are usually last resorts. Black women at the college, and across the country, initiated conversations, which turned to petitions, which turned to demands, which turned to occupation.¹ In May of 1968, Black students at Northwestern had

occupied the Bursar's Building to dramatize their call for policy changes to admissions, financial aid, the curriculum, counseling, and the University's complicity to *de facto* segregation in Evanston. In the same month, closer to Vassar, Columbia University's Student's Afro-American Society (SAS), the Barnard Organization of Soul Sisters (BOSS), and Harlem residents protested the construction of a gymnasium in Morningside Park that would have limited community access and was seen as an example of the University's disregard for Black people. Students occupied Hamilton Hall to amplify their voices. A call for Black Studies programs and more Black students and faculty were academic components of students' ideas for how to remake institutions of higher education.² The takeover of Main Building was a bold dramatization of student power, the demands though were a visionary statement on the futures of freedom and what a normal, everyday, Black student experience should be. The story is both in the action and the ideas.

While students provided a list of demands, and described them as such, it is critical that their clarion call not be reduced to a moment of radical performance, but be perceived rather as a creative vision for the futures of freedom. Vassar

President Alan Simpson initially did not accept the students' demands because he could not see and likely did not want to see their vision. As historian Marta Biondi notes, the preamble read: "We refuse not only to waste four years of our lives, but to jeopardize four years of our lives becoming socialized to fit a white dominant cultural pattern. For the Black student to be asked to submit to such acculturation is to ask the student to willingly accept his own deculturalization—his own dehumanization. We refuse to have our ties to the black community systemically severed; to have our life styles, our ambitions, our visions of our selves made to conform solely to any white mold."³ Their proclaimed refusal to buy into stock perceptions of integration draws on the legacies of Black southern teachers in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Those teachers had been able to give students their intellect, support, creativity, and care; they just lacked resources. The Vassar protesters understood that integration by way of proximity to white students, which was what Brown recommended, would neither solve racial inequality nor increase Black students' self-esteem. Staying connected and in concert with Black communities was a factor in how they



Photograph of Brenda Carpenter (VC 1974) tutoring at the Urban Center, 1970/1971

saw themselves, not the mere organization of segregation. To be sure, their list of demands was not as expansive as the preamble suggests—the demands focused on campus-related issues— but like most declarations, the preamble provides the bigger picture for the grievances. The faculty knew what to do.

The founding of Black Studies is unique in that it began, not on campus, but rather in the community. The vision to house the Program in the city of Poughkeepsie (initially on 317 Mill Street and one year later moved to 218 Winnikee Avenue) illustrates a future of Africana Studies based on a radical belief that colleges and univer-

sities should serve not disavow local communities. Milfred Fierce, the Program's first director, was charged with leading the way. Africana Studies provided a model for Vassar in how to be engaged and in partnership. Just imagine groups of students loading a school bus painted red, black and green to travel to 218 Winnikee Avenue for an evening class with local residents. The Vassar catalogue marked which courses were taught at the Urban Center and which were taught on campus. In the inaugural year, 1969-1970, all 100-level courses in the Program were taught at the Urban Center, and seventeen of the twenty-two course offerings were held at the Center. Student could take Black Studies 104, "The Ideology of Nationalism with the Third World" on Tuesdays from 3-5 p.m.; 222, "Black Music" on Thursdays from 7-9 p.m.; or 315, "Psychology of Being Black in White America" on Wednesdays from 3-5 p.m.⁴ The one-day-per-week, two-hour time slot *and* evening scheduling accommodated the structure of getting students from campus to the center on a regular basis, the school schedule of local youth, and work schedule of local adults.

Strikingly, the front of the building did not identify Vassar College. The lack of a VC logo

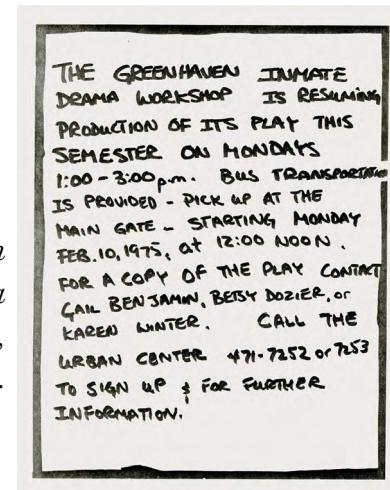
might have made a college marketing professional cringe, but the Urban Center was no marketing stunt or PR strategy. On the one hand, college administrators were not completely keen on the idea from the start. On the other hand, the Urban Center was a model of education that sought to include people without the opportunity to reside on a college campus and focus on academic study. Advertising the 'good work of Vassar' had no place in the center's vision of radical education.

Now, imagine eleven or twelve year olds who lived on or near Winnikee who might have ventured inside this center. They encountered books by Black authors from the African diaspora, lectures on wax (such as Malcolm X's "Message to the Grassroots"), music, and some of those students who rode over on the bus. Those Vassar students tutored Poughkeepsie youth in reading, math, and most certainly the Black experiences in the African diaspora. Ed Pittman '82, Senior Associate Dean of the College for Professional Development, was one of those students. "Growing up on Winnikee Avenue in the early 1970s—before ever imagining myself a Vassar student—I encountered the Urban Center's walls and shelves full of Black art, books and aesthetics," he remembered.

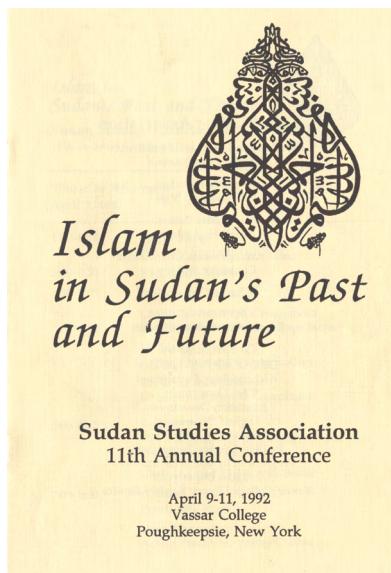
“As a pre-teenager, I saw Black Vassar students giving back and the center was one of the sites where black consciousness began to impact my view of the world.”⁵ Dean Pittman was not alone, as surviving photos illustrate Vassar students working with youth inside the Center.

The faculty in Black Studies did not sponsor lectures, house books, and offer tutoring sessions in the Urban Center simply to provide community service. They maintained a dual internal and external mission of thinking about Vassar students and the larger Black community. Indeed, for many Black students in predominately white colleges and universities, the line between insider and outsider has always been murky. The Program has been an intellectual home for all students looking to see the world from the margins. The faculty has worked to increase access to Vassar for Black students. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s Africana faculty called and wrote letters to admitted Black students to welcome them and encourage them to attend the college. The faculty were involved in pushing the college to develop an affirmative action policy. The impact and reach of the Program has extended far beyond the students who declared an Africana Studies major.

*Green Haven
Inmate Drama
Workshop flyer,
1975.*



In fact, the Program and its faculty have transformed the college and a diverse set of students. The Green Haven Prison Program reflects this larger transformation, moving the college and its students to engage marginalized communities. Before mass incarceration was termed “slavery by another name” or the “New Jim Crow,” faculty in Africana Studies facilitated conversations between Vassar students and incarcerated people. In 1979,⁶ Larry Mamiya, Professor of Africana Studies and Religion (1975-2014), began doing volunteer work as an educational liaison at the Pre-Release center Program at the Green Haven Correctional Facility. He helped the inmate counseling staff



*Program from
the 11th Annual
Sudan Studies
Association
conference, April
1992*

facilitate weekly student-inmate discussion groups in English and Spanish and recruited faculty and community volunteers to assist. He noted, “The goal is to educate the inmates about various aspects of community life outside the walls and to educate the students about prison life and some conditions existing in American Society.” For nearly three decades, Vassar students traveled to Green Haven to take class with incarcerated students to discuss structural inequality, injustice, and a host of other pressing issues.

Professor Mamiya was no stranger to fighting

for social justice. Before teaching at Vassar, he had been a community organizer in Harlem. He was also member of the Student Interracial Ministry, which joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s Southwest Georgia Project in 1966. He took these experiences to graduate school at Columbia in his study of religion in African American life. He embodied the spirit envisioned by the Black women students who imagined a college where racial justice was ingrained in the curriculum. As a faculty member and director of Africana Studies, he fought hard and often on behalf of faculty and students.

The Africana Studies Program stands out in yet another way: it houses the Arabic language and culture courses, which is unique among similar programs across the country. Swahili was regularly taught in Black Studies programs as well as the Urban Center. Africana Studies hired Constance Berkley (1972-2002) in 1972 to teach courses on Islamic culture. She specialized in Afro-Arabic/Islamic literature and culture, primarily in Sudan. She saw her teaching and research as a charge to explore the “truth of African people and their relationship to world culture.”⁷ While her contract was not renewed

for the 1975-1976 academic year, she returned not long after and in 1988 assumed a fulltime position as Lecturer in Africana Studies. A “Sudanist,” as she referred to herself, she served on the board of the Sudan Studies Association and hosted its annual conference in 1992 at Vassar. Given her scholarship, she would likely be baffled at contemporary questions about why Arabic is in Africana Studies. From the late 1980s throughout the 1990s, she had proposed to offer Arabic language courses without much success. The description for her “Elementary Arabic” course read: “Arabic is the major language of Africa; it is the language of scholarship for pre-colonial Africa and for more than a billion contemporary Muslims. This course will focus on acquisition of the fundamentals of the Arabic linguistic system through the use of organized writing, reading and conversation exercises. Two hours of language lab per week.”⁸ She successfully instituted and coordinated an Africana Studies sponsored Junior Year Abroad program at Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco. Just as Professor Berkley was moving into retirement, acting Dean of Faculty, Barbara Page, approved the inclusion of Elementary Arabic in the curriculum beginning fall 2003. Page

expressed gratitude to Berkley for her foundational work and stated that there had been “a strong student response in pre-registration and we expect to be able to build an Arabic language program.”⁹ That day would come.

Upon learning of the passing of Professor Berkley in 2014, Africana Studies Alum Daniel Alexander Jones ’91 wrote affectionately to the Vassar Quarterly that “Her sun-soaked office boasted a tall map of Africa, illuminated Arabic sayings, glorious stacks of books and papers, and a photograph of her late father. She listened and responded to our hopes and fears, our heartbreaks and epiphanies with preternatural focus and insight. She’d sometimes offer a Medjool date with her words of wisdom: “The nature of freedom is elusive... If you want to live, you must always be compassionate. It has not always been this way. Protect yourself by being vulnerable...”¹⁰ Daniel’s reflections on Professor Berkley are indicative of the ways Africana faculty have encouraged students to imagine and act. In fact, Daniel was instrumental in establishing the Ebony Theatre Ensemble in the late 1980s as a student at Vassar.

Professor Mamiya retired in 2014, the same year Professor Berkley passed away. Just five years

later, Professor Mamiya died as well. The ships are passing, with many rivers to cross. While many faculty in Africana Studies have contributed greatly to the vibrancy of the Program and have enriched the lives of students, I highlight these late professors to honor their lives and their work for the college. The legacies of Professors Berkley and Mamiya are directly imprinted in the core of the Africana Studies Program. In fall 2007, Africana Studies inaugurated the Arabic language correlate sequence, just four years after it offered its first course in Elementary Arabic. Vassar has Professor Berkley and Africana to thank for providing all students the option to study the Arabic language. While the work to institute a Prison Studies correlate in Africana Studies began before Professor Mamiya's retirement in 2014, it was not formally established until the 2015-2016 academic year. The correlate includes an experiential learning requirement. Students can fulfill this requirement in various ways, but one way is to take a course in the Taconic Correctional facility taught by rotating Vassar faculty. Coordinating this new correlate sequence is, Jasmine Syedullah, Africana Studies' first Program-only tenure track hire, effective fall 2019.



Program Faculty and Staff, circa 1974/1975. Pictured left to right: Melanie Payne (secretary), Constance Berkley, Patricia Kaurouma, Barbara Paul-Emile, Norman Hodges, and Joyce Bickerstaff.

The Africana Studies directors and faculty have mentored one-hundred, forty-one majors, and countless non-majors across fifty years. More students interacted with the Program through coursework and programming than as declared majors. The Africana faculty have worked tirelessly to provide a new normal for Black students, specifically, and all Vassar students generally. This ever-changing new normal is a curriculum that treats people of African descent as subjects

who have guided and made contributions to the world rather than objects of study. The faculty has aimed to provide programming that speaks to the African diaspora. Norman Hodges (1969-1998) and Joyce Bickerstaff (1971-2014) were instrumental in developing the Program's curriculum on campus, assisting admissions to help boost Black student enrollment, and establishing the annual Third World Festival during Black History Month. The sponsored lectures, research forums, trips to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, international study trips to Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Jamaica were all structural foundations necessary to foster a comfortable place to think, challenge and be challenged, create, and dream. Professors Milfred Fierce, Melvin Wade, William Sterling Hall, Norman Hodges, Patricia Kaurouma, Larry Mamiya, Joyce Bickerstaff, Obika Gray, Gretchen Gerzina, Judith Weisenfeld, Tim Longman, Lisa Paravisini, Ismail Rashid, Lisa Collins, Kiese Laymon, Zachariah Mampilly, and Quincy Mills have all directed Africana Studies with clear goals: to help students see the world through the eyes and experiences of people of African descent, to encourage them to be active in fighting for equity, and to inspire them to make their path.

While the faculty have and will continue to provide leadership and support, students will offer the creativity and imagination for the futures of Africana Studies, and indeed the futures of freedom, in search for an existence that accounts for the whole of people's lives.

QUINCY T. MILLS

Director of Africana Studies (2016-2019)

NOTES

- 1 Claudia Thomas, *God Spare Life* (WME Books, 2006). Thomas '71 recounts this history of the takeover of Main Building and its precursors in 1968 and 1969 at Vassar.
- 2 Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Stefan Bradley, *Harlem Vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Stefan Bradley, *Upending the Ivory Tower: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Ivy League* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

- 3 Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, 22.
- 4 Africana Studies Vassar Catalogue: A Thirty-Year Retrospective, 1969/70 – 2001/02. Africana Studies Program Collection, Box: Miscellaneous 6, unprocessed, Special Collections, Vassar College (hereafter cited as AFRS Collection).
- 5 Edward Pittman, *Recollections*, Buildings and Belonging Project, Vassar College, 2018.
- 6 Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black People from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).
- 7 Veronika Ruff, “So Long, Farewell, Auf Wiedersehen,- Goodbye,” *Vassar Quarterly*, vol. 98, issue 3 (Summer 2002).
- 8 Constance Berkley Course Schedule, Box N, Folder: Faculty Retreat Fall 1989, AFRS Collection.
- 9 Africana Studies Annual Report, 2003-2004, Judith Weisenfeld, Director, Box 1, Folder: Africana Studies Misc. Business ’03-’04, AFRS Collection.
- 10 Daniel Alexander Jones, “Letters,” *Vassar Quarterly*, vol. 110, issue 2 (Spring/Summer 2014).

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Vassar College

