

# Honoring the UH African American Studies Program's 50th Anniversary

By James L. Conyers, Jr.

*The way I viewed African American Studies ... it wasn't just for African American students but for everybody. It was important for everybody to share in the history, the culture, the things that were important to the evolution of this country.<sup>1</sup>*

—Sylvester Turner, Mayor of Houston and AAS Alumnus



*The University of Houston's African American Studies Annual Scholarship Banquet in 2019 celebrated the program's fiftieth anniversary by bringing together those who have supported the program past and present. From left to right: Melanie Lawson; Van Rountree, Jr., Ph.D.; Crystal Edwards, Ph.D.; Kevin B. Thompson, Ph.D.; James L. Conyers, Jr., Ph.D.; Rev. William (Bill) Lawson (seated); Angela Williams-Phillips; Sherra Aguirre; Omowale Luthuli-Allen; Elwyn Lee, Ph.D.; Wilbert Taylor; Jimmie White-Luthuli; Baba Fana; and Rhea Brown Lawson, Ph.D.*

Photo courtesy of African American Studies.

**A**frican American Studies (AAS) at the University of Houston is an academic unit in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. In both theory and praxis, AAS is inclusive of the African experience from a global-Pan Africanist perspective. Yet, interpretive analysis is the anchor, which dispenses the use of sources and queries the context of the Black experience. Even more important, this unit offers an undergraduate major and minor, while providing a post baccalaureate graduate certificate program. As the oldest AAS unit in the state of Texas, this program is afforded the vibrancy of Houston's city and greater community to extend a correlate

of service learning for students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Dean Antonio D. Tillis of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences explains the importance of AAS, "Fifty years of African American Studies at the University of Houston means fifty years of contributing to the intellectual diversity on this campus through curricular and co-curricular activities that have to do with the history of people of African descent ... What it does for the community as well is it allows the community to understand the historical development, the ideology, the contributions, and culture relative to this demographic of people."<sup>2</sup>

Established in 1927 as a junior college under the Houston Independent School District, the University of Houston (UH) became a four-year institution in 1934 and a public institution in 1963. It was not until 1962 that UH admitted its first African American student, Charles P. Rhinehart, and hired its first African American campus employee in a professional position, Charles D. Churchwell, Ph.D.

In the early 1960s the United States experienced a period of protest and challenges to authoritarian domination across the country. In response, in August of 1963, America witnessed the March on Washington, and the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s iconic "I Have a Dream" speech was synchronized as a hallmark in American history. Blacks who participated in the Washington, D.C., march placed emphasis on protecting the civil rights and voting rights of African Americans.



*Supporters of Afro-Americans for Black Liberation march on President Phillip Hoffman's office to demand equality, including the addition of Afro-American Studies at UH.*

Photo courtesy of *Houstonian*, 1969, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

In the course of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, when concepts of dissent, ethics, and social query arose, President Lyndon B. Johnson, a Texan, occupied the Oval Office following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Kennedy's death was seen as a significant blow to the movement for equality, and Johnson invoked JFK's memory to call for passage of the Civil Rights Act, which he signed into law on July 2, 1964. The following year LBJ pushed for passage of the Voting Rights Act, when it became apparent additional legislation was needed to protect Black voters. Indeed, this public policy had an impact on the nation and, in turn, the University of Houston.

Ironically, African Americans in Houston experienced an alternate type of civil rights movement in the early 1960s that consisted of a silent form of protest and negotiation, led largely by Black students and brokered between African American and white business and civic leaders. Likewise, in 1964, UH celebrated the desegregation of its athletic program with the recruitment of its first African American athletes. Coach Bill Yeoman recruited Warren McVea to



*The African American Studies Book Club discusses the writings of Malcolm X in 1994.*

Photo courtesy of the UH Photographs Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

come to UH on a football scholarship, changing not only UH athletics but also athletics for universities across the South that wanted to remain competitive. Coach Guy V. Lewis offered scholarships to Don Chaney and Elvin Hayes, who became the school's first African American basketball players in 1965.<sup>3</sup>

However, the student movement that took shape after the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, referred to as the Black Power—Black Arts Movement, along with the call for Black Studies programs on university campuses, led to continued dramatic social change across the country and at the University of Houston. Through 1967, after the first appointment of an African American professional, the university prioritized the recruitment of Black students, increasing both academic and athletic opportunities available to them on campus. Following the passage of federal legislation in 1967, the University of Houston recognized its first class of African American students. Many of the Black students admitted in the 1960s were connected nationally, directly or indirectly, with the call for Black Power, as exhibited through actions such as the formation of the Committee on Better Race Relations. Later, this organization took on the cultural nomenclature of Afro-Americans for Black Liberation (AABL).<sup>4</sup>

Equally important to organizing their campus and community efforts, AABL positioned itself to support the candidacy of Lynn Eusan as the university's first African American homecoming queen in 1968. Having won the election, Eusan is believed to be the first African American homecoming queen named at a predominantly white institution in the Deep South. Yet again, this period in American historiography notices the influence of the Black Power—Black Arts Movement.

While UH celebrated the homecoming queen victory, American society remained immersed in a culture of strife



and struggle. Clouded in this period of protest and civil unrest, at the 1968 summer Olympic Games in Mexico City, USA track and field athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos exhibited their discord against the war in Vietnam by lowering their heads and raising a clenched fist on the medalist stand. In the same year, civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, leading to passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1968.

In 1969, AABL students at UH were growing impatient. AAS alumnus Omowale Luthuli-Allen recalls, “We were being impacted in such a way that our ideas were growing more and more militant every day. We were not comfortable with the idea of gradualism. We wanted something to happen right then and right now at that moment so we basically stepped on the accelerator in terms of saying that we could not wait.” Fellow AAS classmate Gene Locke remembers, “We had protests virtually every week at the University of Houston trying to demand change. We had political rallies, we had marches, we had demonstration, we had walk-outs from class, all designed to put pressure on the University of Houston to make sure it became the institution that it could become.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, AABL presented President Phillip G. Hoffman with a platform of ten demands, including the establishment of Afro-American Studies as an academic unit. This movement marks the foundation of AAS on the UH campus on February 7, 1969.



*Gene Locke played a pivotal role in the formation of AABL and the demand to expand opportunities for African American students. As a UH alumnus he remains committed to the continued success of both AAS and the university as a whole.*

Photo courtesy of Ed Schipul, Flickr.

The first offerings by AAS included Afro-American history, Afro-American literature, and anthropology. Former AAS student and Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner notes, “At that time they were pulling in different professors from other colleges to teach in African American Studies.”<sup>76</sup> Over the first decades, the faculty came from a wide array of departments that offered classes related to AAS, such as anthropology, communication, economics, education, English, history, law, and sociology.

The earliest students were among those who had fought through AABL to get Afro-American Studies, including Gene Locke, Lynn Eusan, and Omowale Luthuli-Allen. Locke had come to UH in 1965, just three years after the first Black student. He explains, “I was a part of a wave of



*While in Ghana for the study abroad program, students Lamar Johnson (center) and Desire Davis (right corner) created a fabric for display outside of the African American Studies office in Agnes Arnold Hall.*

Photo by Varsha Williams courtesy of African American Studies.

African American students who felt that we had some sort of obligation to our people to be the first to go to these integrated schools to demonstrate that we were intellectually capable and academically gifted enough to perform well at the schools.”<sup>77</sup>

Through the 1980s, the university experienced the national political posture of conservatism of the Republican Party under the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. Indeed, this era exhibited twelve years of public policy that affected federal and state student financial aid and the working and labor classes. A decade later, resurrected from this struggle – the contemporary Nadir of Black neo-conservatism – the presidency of Marguerite Ross Barnett emerged at the University of Houston in 1990. The announcement of President Barnett’s appointment marked

*AAS students began participating in study abroad to Ghana in 2003, a tradition that continues today, offering experiential student engagement opportunities.* Photo courtesy of African American Studies.





*UH President Marguerite Ross Barnett, Dean James Pickering of Humanities, Fine Arts & Communications, and Elwyn Lee, Ph.D., then Interim Director of African American Studies and now Vice President of Community Relations and Institutional Access, in the AAS offices, circa 1990.*

Photo by unknown photographer courtesy of University of Houston.

the first African American and first female named to the executive leadership of a predominantly white institution of higher education below the Mason Dixon Line. Her impact on the campus and in the greater Houston community initiated a precedent for celebrating diversity, cultivating private donors, and putting the university on the national map of urban universities. Both Lawrence Curry and Elwyn Lee refer to the administration of President Barnett as uplifting to the ecology of the campus and the city of Houston, regarding the development of AAS. Consequently, in 1994, the university advanced the idea of AAS becoming a minor offering cross listed courses to comprise this academic achievement.

Near 2001 students began asking for expanded opportunities in African American Studies. By the close of 2003, AAS's priority was to become a degree-granting program, and it began the process to petition for a B.A. degree. Unconventional in thought and practice, the idea of a degree-granting unit was foreign, strange, and almost impossible to attain. In 2003, AAS also initiated its first faculty-led summer study abroad to Ghana, West Africa. The first group of students resided in Ghana for a period of thirty-three days; it was eventful and celebrated. Today, the study abroad program to Ghana has marked over a decade

## African American Firsts at the University of Houston



Photo courtesy of African American Studies.

Year	Achievement
1962	Charles Rhinehart enrolled as the first African American student.
1964	Warren McVea was recruited as the first African American football player and scholarship athlete.
1965	Don Chaney and Elvin Hayes became the first African American basketball scholarship athletes.
1967	Charles D. Churchill, Ph.D., was hired as the first African American in a professional position.
1967	Committee on Better Race Relations formed, later renamed Afro-Americans for Black Liberation (AABL).
1968	Lynn Eusan was elected as the first Black woman homecoming queen.
1969	AABL presented its list of demands to President Phillip G. Hoffman, including establishment of an Afro-American Studies Program.
1984	Carl Lewis became the first African American Olympic gold medal winner from UH.
1990	Marguerite Ross Barnett, Ph.D., was named as the university's first African American president.
2003	AAS initiated its first summer study abroad to Ghana, West Africa.
2004	Chandi Jones was the first UH women's basketball player drafted by the WNBA in the first round.
2018	UH's AAS program received approval to offer a B.A. degree in AAS, the first urban university in Texas to do so.



of student engagement in international learning. From its inception, the process and trajectory of study abroad introduced a cultural fabric to discuss the possibilities, potential, and prospective outcome for AAS to become a degree-granting unit.

In the early 2000s African American Studies was much more than just a series of courses examining the lives of people of African descent, it was a place for finding common ground at a time when the number of Black students in some majors still lagged. Eronn Putman, an AAS alumnus who now operates her own legal firm in Houston specializing in family law, reflects on her time as a student, saying, "When I was [at UH], there weren't a lot of Black students. [AAS] was the place to be for camaraderie. This is the place we would come and we would feel included. ... I was the one Black person in that class, or one or two in that class. I was a political science major. But when I was here [at AAS], it was home, it was family."<sup>8</sup>

Other students have found AAS opens the doors to new opportunities and understandings in a variety of efforts. For example, student Crayton Gerst, who wants to produce films, explains the value of AAS, "The things that I've learned taking African American Studies courses are going to influence the kind of work that I produce. ... Film is conscious. It is cause-driven and it is challenged with task of re-picturing African people in media and in television. Africans as intellectuals ... Also things that I've learned influence the way that I move in the world, things that I value, and the things that I support."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, alumnus Kaine Hampton talks about the popularity of Black culture, especially among millennials, and how his experience in AAS prepared him to understand that: "My experience in the African American Studies program really educates, con-

textualizes, and informs a lot of my conversations surrounding programming and helping me understand fully where Blackness has been derived from, and how Blackness affects culture and the positive impacts of that, but also to fully understand what it means to appropriate Black culture. I don't know that I would be able to have those conversations and be impacted such professionally ... had I not been in the African American Studies Department at the University of Houston."<sup>10</sup>

Both students involved in the founding of African American Studies and those in the administration who carry on the tradition today agree on the necessity of the program. Gene Locke contends that AAS and other area studies programs are "academically viable and enriching courses of study that allow students to learn more about themselves, about their fellow human beings, and about where society was, is, and should be going."<sup>11</sup>

During the summer of 2018, Dean Antonio D. Tillis, Provost Paula Myrick Short, and University of Houston President and Chancellor Renu Khator signaled the pulse and vibration for support of AAS at the Board of Regents meeting in August of 2018. The regents voted unanimously to approve the AAS degree and recommended it to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) for review. After a short period, the THECB approved the AAS proposal and forwarded it to the U.S. Department of Education. In December of 2018, AAS received approval to offer the B.A. in African American Studies. This achievement marked fifty years of strategy, struggle, and sustainability.

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## Looking to the future of African American Studies

"African American history is American history; thus, African American Studies on this campus for the past 50 years has chronicled, intellectually, the political, social, economic and cultural history of Americans of African descent. Looking ahead toward the next 50 years, African American Studies as a discipline is becoming more 'Africana', which bring into the conversation cross-cultural connections between people of African descent globally. This is exciting for UH students and faculty, as the rich diversities of global Blackness will be engaged interdisciplinarily from multiple geo-cultural perspectives."

**Dean Antonio D. Tillis,**  
*College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences*

