

# African American Studies and African Diaspora Studies: University of California, Berkeley



The Department of African American Studies at the University of California at Berkeley is an intellectual community committed to producing, refining and advancing knowledge of people of African heritage in the United States, the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe and Africa. A key component of its mission is to interrogate the meanings and dimensions of slavery and colonialism, and their continuing political, social and cultural implications.

The Department fully embraces the notion that a public institution can lead in shaping and defining disciplines, not just teaching them by investing in a strong faculty and talented and ambitious graduate students from a variety of backgrounds. Hence, their faculty is drawn from disciplines as diverse as anthropology, cultural studies, linguistics, literature, history, sociology, performance, and education. Yet, it is not simply a collection of experts from traditional disciplines; they are united by a relentless commitment to pushing the boundaries of knowledge through excellence in scholarship and pedagogy that are at once interdisciplinary and innovative.

At the University of California at Berkeley the Ethnic Studies department, which included African American Studies, began in 1970, and the B.A. degree has been offered in African American Studies since 1973. In 1975, African American Studies was elevated from program status to a department in the College of Letters and Science. As an autonomous department in the largest college at the University, African American Studies became more integral to the academic mission of the university. The department has continued its process of steady growth, strengthening, consolidating, and fine tuning all aspects of its programs on African Americans and increasing its focus on other sites across the African Diaspora. Over the last two decades, the Department has continued to be named by academic journals and research investigations as one of the top African American Studies Departments in the country based on published papers by faculty members.

The undergraduate degree program in African American Studies exposes students to the social, political, and cultural history of African-descended people in the modern world. While its primary focus is on the United States, the program's conceptual framework places African Americans within a broader global, diasporic dialogue about the evolving function of race in history as well as in the contemporary moment. With its interdisciplinary strengths in history, culture, and social and political institutions, the major provides students with skills in research, criticism, and writing that our graduates have taken to a variety of professional paths, including teaching, government and policy work, employment in mass media, professional schools (law, medicine, business), and graduate study in multiple fields.

### **African Diaspora Studies PhD**

The PhD program in African Diaspora Studies is the first such program of its kind in 1997, training students to theorize the African Diaspora and racialized Blackness across history, social institutions, culture and geographical location by recruiting the most promising and disciplinary-diverse young scholars and specifically educate them to direct the future research trajectory of African Diaspora Studies as a field. Emphasizing a rigorous interdisciplinarity, the program is particularly strong in African American and Africa south of the Sahara history; cultural studies (with emphases in literature, performance, visual culture, and creative practice); women's, gender & sexuality studies; education; sociology; and African languages. Since the inception of the Program in 1997, it has had an excellent placement rate with graduates holding postdoctoral and tenure-track positions at both large research universities and small liberal arts colleges in the US and abroad.

### **The VèVè A. Clark Institute**

As a support unit, the Department has the VèVè A. Clark Institute, a small cadre of scholars majoring (or intending to major) in the discipline of African American Studies who form an intellectual community that prepares them to meet the rigor and intellectual demands of top graduate programs, professional schools, and postgraduate careers. The program is open to students who have declared (or intend to declare) the African American Studies major and who have at least two years remaining in their undergraduate career at the University. The unit is named for VèVè Amasasa Clark (December 14, 1944-December 1, 2007), an associate professor in the Department of African American Studies who received her bachelor's at the University of California, Berkeley, completed her Ph.D. in French and ethnology in 1983 at UC Berkeley who had a sharp commitment to the field of African American and African Diaspora Studies, a discipline at she in no uncertain terms both fashioned and elevated. Fluent in French, Spanish and Creole, conversant in Wolof, and with training in literstudies and anthropology, she embodied interdisciplinarity well in advance of its present popularity; her work was at the vanguard of most consequential scholarly currents. Hence, she was most passionate about African and Caribbean literatures, Afro-Caribbean folklore, African diasporic theater, African American dance history, and critical pedagogy.

Effectively, she left her telling signature on a variety of existing institutions at Berkeley and beyond, including the forging of the doctoral program in African American and African Diaspora Studies at UC Berkeley, one of few such programs in the nation. She taught some of the department's most popular courses, including *Marasa: Caribbean Literatures by Women*, *The Negritude Movement in French African/Caribbean Literatures*, *African Women Writers*, and *Introduction to the University at UC Berkeley*.

### **Poetry for the People**

Poetry for the People (P4P) at UC Berkeley is an arts/activism program, founded by the late June Jordan in 1991 that continues to pursue Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of a beloved community for all with an academic focus on the reading, writing, and teaching of poetry, and the program also engages in bridging the gap between the university and the larger community, working with teens and young adults, schools, and community organizations, and activist projects in the greater community.