

Grounding African Diaspora Studies for Community Transformation

By Dr. Carole Boyce Davies

*Director and Professor, African-New World Studies
Florida International University*

The African Diaspora is an already pre-existing globalization, though with different intent than the globalization created for oppression. A range of European policies and some deliberate migrations have therefore produced African peoples who live all over the world. And it is this international context which we have to first recognize, build on, and create usable policies for transcendence of petty limitations of all sorts (geographies, nation-state boundaries, ethnic differences etc.) and for progressive social transformation.

This recent phase of African Diaspora scholarship (1990's to the turn of the century) has been marked by at least two tendencies: The first is an African Diaspora which is not necessarily grounded in any way in terms of identification with Africa and which instead deals with the various African-derived communities around the world, studies their culture, social formations, and the like within the "branches" context. This particular brand of African Diaspora scholarship is best represented by Gilroy, who in *The Black Atlantic* (1994) deals largely with the "crisscrossing" back and forth between North America and Europe but in that process leaves out the Caribbean and Africa.

The second is one which sees the



African Diaspora in an integrated way which accounts for the relations between Africa and African communities existing in the rest of the world, identifies its various demographics; also accounts for migrations within the continent itself; the various political histories of a variety of social movements for liberation, as for example scholarship is the one with which I identify.

African Diaspora Studies however has had a long and distinguished history and in many ways represents the earliest attempts by black people to give expression to their separations, account for their history and keep alive their cultures. The entire project of what began to be known as “Black Studies” was directed at challenging the Euro/U.S.-centric bases of education under which the contemporary academy rested. Indeed, while “Black Studies” as a field assumed a certain cohesion in the wake of entry into the institutions of black students (integration) prior generations of black scholars (including Latin American, Asian and Arabic and some serious Euro-American thinkers) had consistently whittled away at the assumptions of Eurocentricity. Scholars like W. E. B. DuBois engaged in an unrelenting attack on the Eurocentric bases of knowledge and consistently advanced African peoples as worthy subjects of study. Educators like Carter G. Woodson and a range of others subsequently pursued similar tasks at the level of recognizing this “mis-education.” And, subsequently, Historians like John Hope Franklin, in *The*

Dilemma of the American Negro Scholar (1963) identified how racism and Eurocentrism interfered with the ability of black scholarship to flourish. Thus, the entire enterprise which has come to be known variously as African-American, African or Africana Studies can be defined as the interrogation of knowledge production in ways which challenged the epistemological violence (while it recognized the physical violence) that Eurocentrism visited on non-Western and Western peoples. The conclusion would be that the entire edifice of Western civilization operates on falsehood and perpetuates ignorance and misinformation as it assumed/continues to assume this Eurocentric error. While transformations have been central to African Diaspora culture, they have also always kept consistent their historical connections as well as the legitimacy of political struggle. But in this contemporary formation of African Diaspora scholarship, I think it would be important to avoid some of the mistakes of Afrocentricity, account more fully for issues of gender, and class, developing contemporary realities without relying on ancient formulations.

Further, while it is possible to export Afrocentricity like other U.S. products to other locations-Brazil, the Caribbean for example-rarely are concepts like “quilombismo” developed out of the Brazilian intellectual and activist tradition used to inform conceptually these Afro-U.S. paradigms. And approaches to understanding Afro-Latin culture, such as blanqueamiento or ‘whitening’ has as much relevance when applied to some United States context. And in this

connection it becomes important to avoid that any particular group of African descended peoples are most equipped or have all the answers to our social conditions internationally.

Still, in my view, a distinction has to be made between African-centered research, scholarship and practice. For example, John Henrik Clarke in *Who Betrayed the African World Revolution?* (1994) in which he defines “Africancentricity” as does Marimba Ani whose work Clarke identifies. He goes on to delineate various movements in African-American history, such as the Harlem Renaissance, as manifestations of “Africancentricity.” (117): “It’s our way of looking at things different from other people. It is our point of view, our window on the world, our vantage point based on our view from that window” (117). Still he identifies it as “looking and feeling,” verbal technique, a consciousness of the loss of Africa and the parallel reclamation of “what slavery and colonialism took away,” (118) and above all a “five-hundred-year struggle.” Henrik Clarke importantly critiques the attempts at narrowness in the approach but would want to see it as a “totality” of the experiences.

In the institutionalized tendencies to keep easy binaries, many other possibilities; (some of which have been in place for some time) remain unaddressed. Cross-Cultural Paradigms challenge the notion of easy binary opposition. For example a distinct Black left discourse continues to remain seriously unaccounted for in most academic contexts, including Black Studies contexts. This

may be the result of a certain 'conservative' tendency among the black intelligentsia and the U.S. history of consistent erasure of socialist alternatives. Scholars and activists such as Oliver Cox, C.L.R. James, Paul Robeson, Claudia Jones, Walter Rodney, Angela Davis, Amy Jacques Garvey remain unaccounted for conceptually in Africana discourses except in passing citations. The Black left, is often inherently trans-national because of its identification of class as that which cuts through a range of histories and geographies. Activists like Claudia Jones were able to build institutions which created alliances between Africans and Asians for example her founding of The West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian-Caribbean News in England (1958-1964) and a series of groupings which brought together a variety of peoples struggling against racism and for decolonization.

A true diaspora discourse beyond the limitations of "Black Atlantic" formulations has, as yet to account for the range of African peoples and their locations. Again, if the formulation remains an essentialized African one, then many of these people remain unrecognizable, unseen, unaccounted for. Diaspora discourses, then can also address the ways that a series of Diaspora relate, the places where Diaspora collaborate as in Afro-Indian tassa drumming in Trinidad, or the meaning of Gandhi in relation to an Afro-Brazilian political and carnival context or South African anti-apartheid and Indian decolonization struggles. Similarly, they need not operate as

competing Diaspora but as a series of relational spheres which can then identify how people are interrelated beyond the 'centricity' logic.

A fully trans-cultural paradigm, in my view, has to pursue and account for a range of relations of African peoples internationally as they interact with a variety of cultural spaces. In this con-

African Diaspora Studies ... in many ways represents the earliest attempts by black people to give expression to their separations, account for their history and keep alive their cultures.

nection, the logic of diaspora guides as it identifies as many locations as are available where African peoples reside, and tries to understand and account for their existence in these locations. In Afro-U.S. history, a number of artists have deliberately sought inspiration and aesthetic sensibilities from a diaspora interaction. Dancers like

Katherine Dunham; artists like Louis Maillot Jones and Romare Bearden. And scholars like Mercer Cook, Alain Locke, W.E.B. Dubois, Zora Neale Hurston, consistently saw their lives as connected to communities outside of the U.S. Fernando Ortiz's assertion of "transculturation" (1996) is helpful in that it sought to address the "destructive and constructive moments in histories affected by colonialism and imperialism," (Coronil, xv) and to put on the table the idea of globally interconnected particularities instead of a Western particularity. Still Ortiz as an anthropologist was trying to account for the "process of transition from one culture to another and its manifold repercussions," (xxv).

Cross-cultural African diaspora discourses, as I define them, speak to the variety of movements ushered in by migrations and the consistent reproduction of different modes of being in the world. Rather than a giant, monolithic traditional African culture, then we can assert multiple, trans-cultural presences within and outside Africa. Thus cross-cultural, trans-national discourses are also transformational ("New World Discourses") central to diaspora. Examinations of the relationships between aspects of African cultures and histories and indigenous Native American, Asian, Islamic and Western cultures as imbricated with a "range of colliding and collaborating relationships" are similarly critical. In other words, by this means we actualize the idea of related spheres beyond unicentricity.

So what connects the African diaspora?

So far the scholarship has identified:

- African origins and history
- Middle Passage and trade - i.e. the human thread of slavery
- Related cultural formations
- Race memory
- Current related conditions
- Colonialism, racism, class location, various forms of exploitation
- Anti-colonial, labor movements
- Abolition, black liberation movements, revolutions
- Resistance, uprisings, escapes, maroon communities and philosophies.

Community Transformation

By “grounding African Diaspora Studies,” we refer to developing ways of making knowledge developed in the academy serve communities deliberately. African-New World Studies at FIU, for example, proposes to develop models of Transforming African Diaspora Communities Projects which simultaneously develop our curricula as they work to transform the level of knowledge of the African Diaspora in the primary and secondary schools in South Florida and by extension in our communities. To do this, we propose to deliberately link culture, education and policy. This will in turn have a direct benefit on the social and cultural understandings of a community made up of a variety of groups (e.g. U.S. African-Americans, Afro-Cubans, Jamaican, Bahamians, Trinidadians, Afro-Brazilians, and Haitians), which

are significantly represented in the South Florida population.

We propose to administer, model and deliver curricula noted for their excellence in promoting transformative knowledge of the African Diaspora. The Transforming African Diaspora Communities Project refers to the developing of African world sense or knowledge in students and teachers and thereby of the larger national and international community. Our project will take advantage of the varieties of cultural knowledge existing naturally in the South Florida community as it provides an academic context for providing accurate educational materials on the same subjects. Above all, we see the need to keep education as a focus keeping in mind that all social transformation has to be rooted somewhere in developing knowledge of our communities, the world we live in and our global interconnectedness. African diaspora studies provides thereby the possibility of addressing global concerns as we deal directly with our communities’ needs.

Our program is being organized to pursue the following:

1. Develop a working understanding of the historical, social, political and demographic reach of the African Diaspora.
2. Develop a working understanding of issues and ideas relevant to African Diaspora Studies particularly in educational contexts.
3. Develop expertise to meet the Florida State Legislation (233.061) 1994 mandate for the teaching of African American

experience at all levels of public schooling.

4. Contrast philosophies and systems of education for males and females throughout the African Diaspora.
5. Examine specific kinds of teaching and learning in the Diaspora, for example literature learning, literacy instruction, technical training and exceptional child education.
6. Create diaspora literacy environments and plans specifically attentive to the particular needs of students of the African Diaspora, which include orality, art, music, dance, rituals, history, and media/technology.
7. Establish connections with educators within the U.S. and internationally, in large urban areas which have significant African descent populations.
8. Develop expertise in selecting and purchasing reading materials relevant to children in the African Diaspora.
9. Develop facility in using web-based technologies as teaching tools for community—children and adults; schools—teachers and students.