

## Exploring the Historical and Evolving African Diaspora: Research Challenges and Opportunities

By James B. Stewart

The exploration of historical and continuing cultural, political, and economic linkages between Africans in Africa and Africans in the Diaspora (pan-Africanism) has always constituted a core dimension of Africana Studies. There are, of course, multiple approaches to the examination of this important subject matter, but collectively, the growing body of research exploring various facets of the African Diaspora is significantly enriching discourses about race, identity, patterns of oppression and exploitation, resistance strategies, and other issues critical for weaving a comprehensive intellectual tapestry and guiding collective liberatory actions.

Some emerging approaches to the study of Diasporan populations outside the U.S. show particular promise for complementing the large body of scholarship examining experiences of Blacks in the U.S. As an example, the “Afrogenic” framework articulated by Sylvia Walker (Walker, 2001) resonates with Molefi Asante’s “Afrocentricity” (Asante, 1988). Walker’s volume is the product of a 1996 international conference and includes not only a wide array of academics, but also creative writers: journalists, filmmakers, and political and cultural activists, just the type of assemblage that reflects both the multi-disciplinary tradition of Africana Studies, as well as its commitment to linking scholarship and advocacy for social change.

Walker (2001) characterizes the volume as “the beginning of a comparative analysis of African Diasporan societies and phenomena from an Afrogenic perspective that focuses on African and African Diasporan agency, participation, and contributions” (38). For Walker (2001), “Afrogenic simply means growing out of the histories, ways of knowing, and interpretations and interpretive styles of African and African Diasporan people” (8). The Afrogenic approach to the study of the African Diaspora is contrasted with those that impose “Eurogenic” meanings (Walker, 2001, 29).

The African Diaspora in the Americas projected by Walker (2001) is “a vast, multi-dimensional puzzle in which some of the pieces were brought from Africa and have maintained recognizable identities, and other pieces were created in the Americas based on Afrogenic conceptual foundations” (39). This prioritization of the original involuntary formation of the Diaspora is consistent with the foregrounding of historical analysis in most Africana Studies scholarship. From this vantage point Walker (2001) insists, “the comparative study of African Diasporan societies and their roles in their nations . . . highlights significant commonalities in both sociocultural forms and in the underlying principles that give them meaning” (41).

May’s (2007) study of Anna Julia Cooper suggests how new Afrogenic interpretations may emerge from innovative comparative analyses. Analyzing Cooper’s treatment of the Haitian Revolution in her dissertation, “France’s Attitudes Toward Slavery During the Revolution” (“France’s Attitudes”), May insists that Cooper’s treatment of the agency of enslaved Haitians distinguishes itself from previous studies. Highlighting the agency of people of African descent, as opposed to their victimization, is one of the most critical demarcations between Africana Studies and the study of Blacks in traditional disciplines. Cooper presents a lucid and path - breaking critique of emergent monopoly capitalism and its dependence on colonial exploitation that precedes and anticipates C. L. R. James’s classic treatise, *Black Jacobins* (James, 1963). When “France’s Attitudes” is juxtaposed to Cooper’s more well-known treatise, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*, we see the extension of her

original focus on Blacks in the U.S. to the wider Diaspora, paralleling developments within contemporary Africana Studies. Thus, Cooper provides a precedent for undertaking the type of comparative historical Diasporan research advocated by Walker (2001).

At the same time, contemporary Africana Studies (including Diaspora Studies) is challenged to move beyond corrective historical analysis to confront current threats to survival and development imposed by global political, economic, and social conditions. Twenty-first-century globalization poses both challenges and possibilities to mobilizing different African-descended collectives. As noted by Walters (1993), “in the Diaspora, the contradiction of possessing more than one identity has never been resolved and will not be as long as the basic identity of Africa continues to be the footstool of the world and African people . . . are everywhere subordinated” (387). New insights regarding the contemporary contours of collective identity can be generated, as Myers (1992) has argued, by focusing on the “history of the spirit/mind analysis of individuals through autobiography and biography” (p.15) and through ethnography and folklore. Consistent with the transformative goals of Africana Studies, such research could inform a variant of what Bulhan (1985) has described as a psychology of liberation that gives “primacy to the empowerment of the oppressed through organized and socialized activity with the aim of restoring individual biographies and a collective history derailed, stunted, and/or made appendage to those of others” (277).

Despite monumental barriers, possibilities for fostering a modern collective identity in the Americas that encompasses many cultural collectives are expanding. The U.S. will play a vital role in this process as the geographical space in which the largest number of different Diasporan collectives is congregating. What might be termed the “re-ethnification” of African-descended populations in the U.S. is proceeding via increased immigration from various African, Caribbean, and South American countries. Diaspora Studies can facilitate the understanding of the re-ethnification process and its many implications. This research could, in turn, lead to new forms of empowerment and political mobilization including virtual (Internet-based) networking.

The scrutiny of identity dynamics must, of course, pay particular attention to tendencies within various popular culture genres, e.g., music and sports. To illustrate, the emergence of blends of reggae and hip-hop could signal the emergence of shared experiences and interpretations. The extent to which this occurs could be ascertained through studies of the political messages embedded in lyrics. Within sports, behind the highly visible competition between domestic U.S. Black and Jamaican sprinters is the phenomenon of interaction of teammates at U.S. institutions of higher education, including historically Black colleges and universities. Interrogation of the extent to which such relationships serve as catalysts for composite identity formation could prove extremely illuminating.

Beyond deconstructing issues of history and identity, Diasporan Studies can generate new perspectives on how the transformation of the global economy is altering individual and collective economic and political empowerment options. As an example, the migration patterns, mentioned previously, are largely driven by economic factors and have major effects on both the receiving metropolises and countries of origin. In the latter case, negative effects include “brain drain” (e.g., Jamaican nurses). On the positive side, immigration increases access to financial flows via remittances. Although examination of these phenomena is important and interesting, consistent with the tradition of Africana Studies, Diaspora researchers must take an historical and macro-level approach to understanding contemporary global economic developments. Here, the work of Nobel laureate Sir W. Arthur Lewis provides a useful point of departure. In examining the possibilities for promoting growth in so-called “developing countries” after World War II,

Lewis emphasized the importance of building infrastructure and avoiding overdependence on international trade. From this vantage point, contemporary underdevelopment in many countries of origin of Black immigrants reflects, in part, results of the failure to follow Lewis's guidance. This suggests the need for additional research that critically assesses contemporary economic policies in home countries. Lewis (1978, 244) believed "developing countries could grow rapidly, irrespective of what might happen to the developed countries, provided that among themselves their pattern was one of balanced growth." Whether such a scenario is still feasible is a question that Diaspora researchers could usefully explore. Recalling the previous discussion of identity dynamics, the exploration of economic policy options should reflect the multi-disciplinary mandate of Africana Studies, for as Lewis (1985, 121) cautioned: "economics is not enough . . . Economic progress will help decisively, but racism has its own deep psychological springs that must be drained directly."

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