

**Emerging Directions in African and African-American
Diaspora Studies**

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-- Percy Hintzen

Reggaetoneros are often referred to as “ghetto philosophers,” who have opened up a “poetic aesthetic of the ordinary” and consider themselves spokespersons and advocates of the barrios.
-- Zaire Dinzey-Flores

Black student organizations and Black Studies Programs played a major role in nurturing radical movement leaders, electoral political leaders, and black cultural artists who were crucial to the Black Arts and the Black Power Movements. -- Donna Murch

We must rethink the role of Africa in African Diaspora Studies, moving beyond the “Middle Passage model” in which Africa is merely a site of origins and in which Africans are ancestors, not contemporary actors.
-- Bayo Holsey

Rutgers sponsors cutting-edge, interdisciplinary conference designed to commemorate and reflect on the state of a discipline

In November 2009, the Center for Race and Ethnicity at Rutgers University organized a one-day conference to commemorate the forty year anniversary of the founding of Africana Studies at Rutgers and to reflect on how the field of African-American and African Diaspora studies has transformed disciplines, departments, and higher education over the last four decades.

Scholars from disciplines ranging from psychology to history to sociology gathered to take stock of the state of the field—to discuss emerging directions in scholarship on Black culture, politics, and experiences across the globe, and to assess the contours, opportunities, and limits of African Diaspora and African-American Studies today. Highlighting their own scholarship, panelists discussed the development of African-American and African Diaspora studies in relation to 21st century Black experiences, the role of music and aesthetics in shaping Black identity and defining possibilities for social transformation, and the differences and commonalities in the Black experience across national contexts from Colombia and Guyana to Liberia and the U.S.

RETHINKING THE BIRTH OF BLACK STUDIES AND AFRICAN DIASPORA STUDIES

Opening the conference, Edward Ramsamy (Africana

Studies, Rutgers) reminded the audience of the integral role of students and scholars of color in the recognition of Black Studies as a legitimate field of inquiry. As he eloquently noted, “the margin had forced the center to change.” Donna Murch (History, Rutgers) added historical depth to this point by discussing her forthcoming work on the rise of the Black Power movement in Oakland and how Black Studies was, at once, an outcome of this movement and helped to produce it.

In Murch's discussion of her new book, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California*, she highlighted how Black southerners migrated to the California Bay area, in part, to provide quality, desegregated education for their children. These migrants and their children were instrumental in the development of Black Studies in institutions like Merritt Community College in the 1950s and 1960s. As she observed, Black student organizations and Black Studies Programs played a major role in nurturing radical movement leaders, electoral political leaders, and Black cultural artists who were crucial to the Black Arts and the Black Power Movements.

Yohuru Williams (African American History, Fairfield University), author of *Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power and Black Panthers in New Haven*, and



Yohuru Williams, Fairfield Univ.

other books on race, civil rights, and pedagogical approaches to teaching U.S. history and Africana Studies, added further to this discussion of the enduring intersections of scholarship and social change. Black studies, he noted, was born of activism, and this history of activism continues to be an inspiration for radical scholarship.

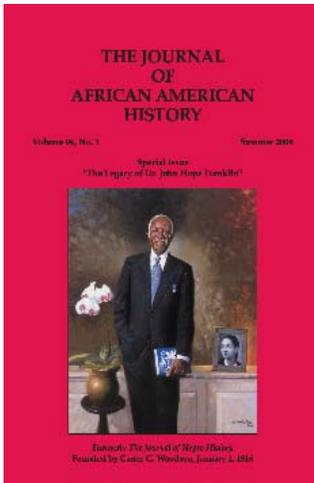
THE SPATIAL CONTOURS, INTERPRETIVE LIMITS, AND INTELLECTUAL OPPORTUNITIES OF A WIDE-RANGING FIELD

In the 40 years since the birth of the field, Black Studies has developed global dimensions that have radically altered the



V.P. Franklin, UC-Riverside

nature of conversations across a variety of academic disciplines--producing scholarship that is far-reaching in its scope and impact. V.P. Franklin (History and



Journal of African-American History

Education, University of California-Riverside), editor of the *Journal of African-American History* and author of a number of scholarly articles and books on African-American history and education, describes the field's current reach--using the breadth of scholarship in the journal as an example. Containing scholarly articles on topics ranging from Garveyism in Guatemala to Georgia's African population to the League of Colored Colored Peoples in London and Guyana, the *Journal of African-American History* exemplifies the current global, transnational reach of African Diaspora Studies. In this context, Bayo Holsey (Cultural Anthropology and African & African American Studies, Duke University), author of *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana*, discussed the need to rethink the role of Africa in African Diaspora Studies, moving beyond the "Middle Passage model" in which Africa is merely a site of origins and in which Africans are ancestors, not contemporary actors.

Further interrogating the relationship among black diasporic peoples across the globe, Percy Hintzen (African American Studies, University of California, Berkeley), whose broad-ranging work

explores topics from colonialism and globalization to Blackness, and diasporic identity formation, asked, "Why is there a comfort for people of African descent in spaces created by Black people—from the favelas of Rio to the townships of South Africa?" Hintzen's work, including *Problematizing Blackness: Self-Ethnographies by Black Immigrants to the United States*, suggests that Blackness was a project of colonial violence, but over time it became fundamental to the process of identity formation for people of African descent whether they resided in South America, Europe, North America, or Africa. In this view, the diaspora becomes the foundation for a universal Black self-recognition against the pervasive "non-recognition" of the Black subject amidst colonial violence. Hintzen's observations catalyzed a new thread of discussion--in which panelists and audience members examined, on the one hand, the shared experiences and feelings of familiarity among people of African descent and on the other hand, the differences and misrecognition that these feelings of familiarity can sometimes mask.

Naa Oyo Kwate (School of Public Health, Columbia University) turned attention to place, health, and the black experience in New York City, provocatively asking, "How does social position affect black health?" Her research, including articles on topics such as "*The Association between residential exposure to outdoor alcohol advertising and problem drinking among African American women in New York City*," evaluates the impact of geography, place, and other factors upon the health of Black residents in New York City neighbor-

hoods. Kwate's observations--illuminating the reach of Black studies into public health--showed how higher fast food restaurant density and high availability of alcoholic beverages correlated to higher drinking dependency and ill health among Black women residents. Like several other presenters, Kwate's work revealed the ways in which science, technology, health and medicine have become a fundamental lens shaping the construction of racial categories and hierarchies. Many agreed that African Diaspora Studies can develop in the future by nurturing deeper engagement and research into these areas. Citing the resonant example of African Americans' increasing interest in and use of genetic genealogy testing, Alondra Nelson co-editor of *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life* (Sociology, Columbia University) described

how Africans have been turning increasingly to genetic testing as a way of "discovering" their roots, even as countries like Liberia have been advertising their connections with notable African Americans (like Whoopi Goldberg) who have identified such countries as their genetic "home." In this context, the process of tracing African heritage becomes a way of promoting tourism, attracting foreign investment, spurring development, and building connections between North American Black people to their "native" countries. Nelson has written widely on these new dimensions of the African-American imaginary--and the intersections between race, genetics, digital culture, and medicine. These works (Kwate, Nelson) highlight the ways in which science, medicine, and genetic genealogy testing are reshaping how we understand, imagine and practice diaspora.



Percy Hintzen, UC-Berkeley



Alondra Nelson, Columbia



Bayo Holsey, Duke Univ.



Naa Oyo Kwate, Columbia

MUSIC AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE: CULTURE, SOCIAL CHANGE, AND PERFORMANCE AS INTELLECTUAL INQUIRY

From James Brown to John Coltrane, from Michael Jackson to Beyoncé, and from gospel to disco, a number of outstanding scholars highlighted the ways in which Black music has been a powerful force for historical transformation and social change, and a continuing powerful genre for expressing Black identity. In the U.S. context, music often functions as an embodiment of the African-American experience. Music -- from Jazz to Disco -- also functions as a versatile and potent form of criticism. Envisioning Black music as a poetic of historical memory, Daphne Brooks (English and African-American Studies, Princeton University), author of



Daphne Brooks, Princeton Univ.

Bodies in Dissent: Performing Race, Gender, and Nation in the Trans-Atlantic Imaginary and of numerous articles on race, gender, performance and popular music culture, argued that music is an orientation in time; she suggested that musical artists can offer new ways of understanding the experiences of African Americans and their struggle to achieve social justice. Other panelists pointed to the integral role that music has played in propelling social change over the past decades in the Americas—a fact that necessitates greater attention to the aesthetic qualities and social effects of Black sound. Using Michael Jackson as an example, Brooks observed that Black artists should be considered both archivists and archives. In a related vein, Carter Mathes (English, Rutgers University) highlighted saxophonist John Coltrane's shift from melodic to dissonant sound and wondered how scholars could reconcile the revolutionary radical sound that

emerged during the “New Black Movement” of the 1960s with the collective Black consciousness of the period. Foreshadowing his forthcoming book, *Imagine the Sound: Modalities of Radical Struggle in Post-Civil Rights Black Literature*, Mathes observed that the new sound of the sixties required new forms of listening—a radical sound for a new era. What then should we make of disco? Countering views of disco as a kind of stagnation and artificial music, Alice Echols (American Studies/History, Rutgers) made the case for understanding disco as a global music—a transatlantic form which owed much to African-American artists sampling from both African and European music. Echols new book on the topic is titled, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Re-making of American Culture*.

The African Diaspora has given rise to different regimes of meaning and uses of music, with some genres gaining far greater visibility and recognition within the diaspora than others. Michael Birenbaum Quintero (Postdoctoral Fellow, Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University and the Musicology Department at Peabody Conservatory), author of the forthcoming *In the Name of Difference: Networks, Urban Experiences and Affirmative Actions of Blackness in Columbia*, offered observations from his ethnographic encounters in Colombia—intended to illustrate the diversity of intersections between music and Black identity. He spoke of Marcos, an Afro-Colombian, who learned English studying liner notes and tape covers from popular



Michael Birenbaum Quintero, Johns Hopkins Univ.

African American hip-hop artists like MC Hammer and Dr. Dre, and who asked Quintero, “Do Black Americans know about us?” The question illuminated differences in the circulation of different kinds of

music, provoking a spirited discussion about disparities, imbalances and the possibilities for misrecognition within the African diaspora. Similarly, Zaire Dinzey-Flores (Sociology and Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies, Rutgers University), whose work examines the racial politics of space in Puerto Rico, explored the social significance of the globally popular Reggaeton sound that has emerged out of the stigmatized housing projects in Puerto Rico. As she notes in a recent publication, *De la Disco al Caserío: Urban Spatial Aesthetics and Policy to the Beat of Reggaetón*, Reggaetoneros are often referred to as “ghetto philosophers,” who have opened up a “poetic aesthetic of the ordinary” and consider themselves spokespersons and advocates of the barrios. In positioning themselves as “Black” through visual aesthetics and racial performativity, they have helped to make the reality and discourse of Blackness more socially visible within Puerto Rico.

POLICY CHALLENGES AND THE ROAD AHEAD

A final thread in this riveting conference focused on the road ahead for Black Studies—a field which today transcends the boundaries of any single department or discipline, and one where scholarship can illuminate the public policy challenges we still face. This concluding panel asked:



Louis Prisock, Colgate Univ.

How does African-American Studies develop in relation to 21st century Black experiences and perspectives? Louis Prisock, author of *If You Love Children, Say So: The African American Anti-Abortion Movement* (Sociology & Anthropology, Colgate), explored the challenge that African American conservatives and conservatism present to the notion of Black collectivity and Black consciousness in the 21st century.

Focusing on a case study and analysis of African-American conservative belief—those against Affirmative Action, or those opposed to abortion, for instance—Prisock pointed to need for scholars of Black studies to understand this complexity of African-American perspective and the mixed legacy of the U.S. civil rights movement especially in charting the scholarly course ahead.

Other members of this panel discussed the ways that African Americans--despite the significant gains of the last forty years--continue to struggle against racial inequality and political disenfranchisement. Lisa L. Miller (Political Science/Acting Director, Center for Race and Ethnicity, Rutgers) discussed the balkanization of black political struggle and its effects on collective political mobilization across state and local boundaries. For example, she noted, African American residents living in

Philadelphia and Camden struggle against many of the same injustices but are nonetheless unable to tackle these issues collectively because they live in two separate states, separated by the legendary Delaware River, and must fight political battles in different state capitals. Miller, the author of *The Perils of Federalism: Race, Poverty, and the Politics of Crime Control*, observed that African-American studies could help “unveil these political mechanisms and make the unrecognizable experience recognizable.” Mia Bay, who is leading a new scholarly collaboration entitled *Towards an Intellectual History of Black Women*, continued the discussion of geographical boundaries and mobility. One of her current research projects traces the social history of segregated transportation and discusses the legacy of racialized and gendered exclusion--whether in the railroad cars of the 1850s, in contemporary racial profiling on

American highways, or in the plight of New Orleans residents who attempted to flee Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Travel, Bay observed, continues to pose great challenges to American democracy, equal opportunity, and racial equality.

CONCLUSION

The day-long conference provided a fascinating microcosm of how African-American and African Diaspora Studies have changed over forty years--offering as well a glimpse of the challenges to the field, and new directions of Black studies into psychology, sociology, political science, public health, music, history, anthropology, and numerous other arenas. The lively exchanges among outstanding scholars confirmed that, as an intellectual framework, diaspora studies enriches and enhances the study of Black life and experience in the 21st century.

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- Facilitating research and enriching education on matters of race and ethnicity in contemporary life in America, in New Jersey, and the world
- Promoting collaborations and fostering cross-disciplinary seminars and discussions on topics from immigration and work, to ethnic politics and racial classification, from preservation of cultural identity to its transformation, and including questions of poverty, discrimination, advancement, integration, and privilege
- Identifying critical areas for future research and supporting race and ethnicity research and policy development.

