

Afrocentricity and Commodity Fetishism: Cultural Objectification and the “New” African Diaspora

Ryan Jobson

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Deborah Thomas, Anthropology and Africana Studies
University of Pennsylvania

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Introduction

Popular renderings of Afrocentricity, characterized by allegedly “fabricated” holidays, “traditional” African aesthetics, and cultural nationalism, have been subjected to widespread criticism as a reflection of a racially essentialist movement. Figures such as Maulana Karenga, the founder of Kwanzaa, and his intellectual forebears have been denounced as black demagogues, accused of forging “the Afrocentric Idea” (Asante 1998) out of a misguided appeal for African “rootedness” in contrast to the ideals of cosmopolitanism and racial fluidity espoused by their detractors (Appiah 1992, 1998; Gilroy 1993; Walker 2001).

Nonetheless, the concept of Afrocentricity continues to bear significance for peoples of African descent, as holidays, cultural festivals, and community-based initiatives centered in Afrocentric philosophy thrive in the contemporary moment. The deconstructionist slant of contemporary scholarship, though, has been slow to accommodate Afrocentricity as a topic of study (rather than critique), so it has been reduced to ideologically polarized debates between resolute Afrocentrists and their deconstructionist counterparts.

Anthropology, which in accordance with the Boasian tradition especially champions an anti-essentialist approach to race, has likewise failed to sufficiently accommodate the Afrocentric worldview. Characterized by its Social Darwinist and colonialist origins, anthropology has been dismissed by Afrocentrists as the “most highly Eurocentric of all disciplines” (Asante 1990), further isolating the discipline from concurrent dialogues of Afrocentricity.

Historian of anthropology Lee Baker postulates that a possible reason for the lack of dialogue between anthropology and Afrocentricity “is that the Afrocentric project belies a bipolar political spectrum often demarcated by radical/reactionary, core/periphery, conservative progressive, etc.” (Baker 2000, 226) as its libratory potential is paired with essentialist, often sexist and homophobic overtones. I acknowledge that the pervasiveness of militant masculinism and heterosexism is often based on a perversion of the true philosophy of Afrocentric scholars. Still, Afrocentricity’s popular incarnations sometimes embrace such limiting ideas explicitly. In this fashion, anthropologist Leith Mullings notes that Afrocentricity has often unwittingly embraced the basic tenets of Eurocentrism, regurgitating reductionist notions of race and culture, to which I would add gender and sexuality (Mullings 2000).

Still, the lack of ethnographic research on Afrocentricity has allowed the debate to remain polarized, failing to account for the interventions of its various practitioners. Furthermore, few scholars have complicated the current discourse on Afrocentricity, which has failed to acknowledge the demographic changes in the contemporary diasporic milieu.

Thus, drawing from my personal narrative and a series of interviews with staff members of the Ase Academy, an African-centered academic and cultural enrichment program at the University of Pennsylvania, I note the diverse narratives of Afrocentricity and their implications for the construction of diasporic identity in the present.

As a fellow staff member, I do not claim to be an “objective” participant-observer, but rather an individual engaged in the same cultural processes as those I interviewed for my research. Thus, I begin by outlining my personal narrative, acknowledging my existing notions of Afrocentricity and perception of my own identity. I do not intend for this project to be holistic, but rather offer my narrative and those of my interviewees as a crucible to complicate the current discourse on Afrocentricity, and elucidate possibilities for future anthropological engagements with Afrocentricity.

Personal Stakes

Coming of age as a person of African descent in rural upstate New York, I developed a distinctly racial identity that was influenced by a number of disparate, and at times contradictory, sources. The son of a Jamaican father—who is biracial of “colored” and white Jamaican parentage—and an African American mother born in Brooklyn, New York, I maintain a personal conception of “blackness” that embraces a broad diasporic narrative. My father, who came to view himself as black amidst the rise of Black Power in the United States and Caribbean in the 1960s and 1970s, instilled in me an understanding of blackness as a cultural inheritance and inherently *politicized* worldview. My mother,

whose teenage years coincided with the achievement of civil rights legislation in the U.S., conveyed blackness as a quality rooted in struggle, albeit from a distinctly African American perspective.

Msia Kibona Clark, in her contribution to *The New African Diaspora*, notes that the recent influx of emigrants from the West Indies and the African continent has resulted in a growing population of “bicultural” African Americans, who embrace multiple diasporic lineages. Born to an African American mother and a Tanzanian father, Clark recounts the tensions and slippages that characterized her competing racial and ethnic identity:

As a product of a bicultural union, my own identity, like that of others of similar backgrounds, depends on my environment...[M]y paternal culture (Ndali) dictates that I am what my father is. This means I am expected to follow the traditions and customs of my Ndali patrilineage...In America, however, my identity...becomes political. My racial background comes with a new set of expectations and obligations. Not identifying as an African American in itself would be a political statement of where my allegiances lie (Clark 2009, 256).

While being the child of a West Indian immigrant did not carry the same expectations that Clark describes, the tension between a cultural and political identity is paramount to the contemporary diasporic experience. For me, the tension between my inherited, ethnic identities and a racialized, black identity was reconciled through my engagement with various diasporic texts and cultural productions.

As is the case for many people of African descent, my choice to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* represented a landmark moment in my development of a distinctly racial identity. At the age of 14, I consumed Malcolm’s narrative, strongly identifying with his bicultural heritage—of Grenadian and African American descent—which he reconciled through the diasporic philosophies of Garveyism and the Nation of Islam. The sense of rootedness proclaimed by both movements, centered in a physical and ideological return to Africa, respectively, was attractive for someone such as me. Being bicultural and growing up in a predominantly non-black community, I found the philosophies of Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X encouraging in their positive depictions of blackness.

Embracing the narrative of Alex Haley’s renowned work *Roots*, another text I readily consumed, I viewed Africa as the source and object of my racial identity. The philosophy of Afrocentricity, alongside that of other black nationalist movements such as Garveyism, the Nation of Islam, and its offshoot the Nation of Gods and Earths (a.k.a. the Five Percent Nation), was a useful heuristic in forging a narrative of racial subjectivity. Upon enrolling as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, I joined the staff of the Ase Academy, which as an African-centered educational program for middle and high school students in the surrounding Philadelphia area embraced the ideals of Pan-Africanism and Afrocentricity with which I personally identified.

As a college student, I would quickly revise my preexisting worldview, engaging womanist and queer critiques of black nationalism, and anti-essentialist approaches to race. Still, I maintained my unwavering commitment to the ideological intervention of Ase, which seeks to provide instruction on topics related to the peoples and history of the African Diaspora often absent from mainstream curricula. Despite my concessions regarding the limitations of certain brands of Afrocentricity and cultural nationalism, I continue to embrace the “Afrocentric” label, and thoroughly acknowledge its influence on my personal growth and pride in my racial background.

In my interactions as a staff member of the Ase Academy, I have encountered numerous, divergent approaches to the notion of Afrocentricity, and its various implications vis-à-vis individuals’ respective ethnic and cultural upbringings. Drawing from my interviews with fellow Ase staff members, I highlight the various “uses” of Afrocentricity, and its implications with respect to questions of diaspora, ethnicity, and cultural “authenticity.”

Black or Immigrant?: Afrocentricity and the “New” Diaspora

In light of the growing influx of African-descended immigrants to the United States, scholars have postulated the existence of a “New African Diaspora,” one based on voluntary migration rather than the forced migration initiated by the Atlantic Slave Trade (Akyeampong 2000; Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009). While this notion is problematic in a number of respects, as Africans were also enslaved in the Caribbean and Latin America, and the extent to which recent emigration patterns are “voluntary” is highly debatable, scholars of the African Diaspora must nonetheless make room for the aforementioned movements and migrations in the broad, interdisciplinary field of diaspora studies.

Understood as a unidirectional dispersion in its original incarnation, *diaspora*, a Greek term meaning “dispersal,” was applied to the “classical” Greek, Jewish, and Armenian diasporas prior to its appropriation by scholars of the African and African American world (Edwards 2001). In the field of anthropology, this same definition served as the operative mode of analysis for studies of the African Diaspora, stemming from Franz Boas protégé Melville Herskovits’ preoccupation with African cultural “retentions” in populations of the Americas (Herskovits 1941). Later efforts to complicate this analytical frame, including Sidney Mintz and Richard Price’s “creolization” model (1992) and Paul Gilroy’s “black Atlantic” paradigm (1993), among others (Edwards 2001, 2003; Hall 1990), have challenged the emphasis on cultural continuity as constitutive of diaspora, instead calling attention to points of difference and disjuncture in diasporic processes of movement and exchange.

While the current discourse in diaspora studies has largely omitted the question of contemporary Africa—an absence that grows more pressing amidst increased rates of immigration from the West Indies and the African continent—such migrations complicate the traditional African *American* narrative, placing the reality of a “new” African Diaspora at the forefront. Although numerous studies have addressed the unique status of black immigrant populations in the United States (Kasinitz 1992; Model 2008; Ogbu 1974, 1978; Vickerman 1999; Waters 1999), often centering on their higher rates of academic achievement in contrast to their African American counterparts, few have challenged the rigid definitions of ethnicity presented by this body of literature, or taken up such populations vis-à-vis questions of diaspora.

The 2009 edited volume *The New African Diaspora* offers perhaps the first comprehensive effort to initiate a multidisciplinary dialogue surrounding this “new” immigrant diaspora. Principally, the included essays question the relationship between black immigrants, their nations of origin, and their African American counterparts, postulating changing definitions of ethnic, national, and racial identities amidst the current process of diasporic (re)formation. Nonetheless, the dominant “model minority” discourse attributed to black immigrants has unfortunately prevented an engagement with the social and political solidarities being forged across diasporic lines.

As historian Paul Zeleza notes in his contribution to the abovementioned volume, “Our challenge as researchers in the field of African Diaspora studies is to map out these processes and promote mutual understanding through education and communication, to encourage a strategic solidarity among our communities” (Zeleza 2009, 45). Afrocentricity, however, has scarcely been explored as a source of such education and understanding, viewed primarily as an *imagined* African American narrative that excludes the experiences of recent immigrant populations.

Ethnography provides an apt medium for studies of this “new” diaspora, offering individual narratives of diasporic identity formation. Thus, in anthropology, the growing concern over questions of intradiasporic *difference* has pushed researchers to refocus the ethnographic gaze vis-à-vis peoples of the African Diaspora. As Edmund T. Gordon and Mark Anderson suggest in their seminal essay “The African Diaspora: Toward an Ethnography of Diasporic Identification,” anthropologists must challenge the racial essentialism espoused by Herskovitz and his contemporaries by “focus[ing] on the ways identities are constructed and mobilized rather than forcing peoples into preconceived notions of how they should identify or act based on our own ideas of what is significant in their pasts or in their genes” (1999, 294). Accordingly, I attempt to highlight the ways my informants construct their respective ethnic and racial identities, and their relationships to the wider diasporic community.

Again, Afrocentricity, as popularized by prominent figures such as Karenga and Asante, has received widespread criticism as a romanticized, inauthentic attempt to recover a distinctly African cultural memory. However, the interactions between domestically born African Americans and their immigrant counterparts have challenged this reductionist definition. One of my African American informants, Emanuel,¹ a University of Pennsylvania senior and New York native, describes his early attempts to navigate his ethnicity accordingly.

I think about first grade, I actually had to write a report on where my family came from or what my cultural background was, right?...And I was like, “I don’t know where I’m from, what am I supposed to do?” And I tried to explain to my teachers that because of slavery I had no idea...That’s when it became clear to me, I was fundamentally different from not only my white counterparts but some of my diasporic counterparts who were from various places on the African continent or from the Caribbean who could trace their legacy back to a nation-state other than the U.S.

In this fashion, Emanuel encapsulates the classical debate between Afrocentrists and their critics. Presented at once with a temporally distant rendering of precolonial African cultures, signified by “traditional” clothing and cultural practice and the immediate experiences of contemporary African migrants, Afrocentricity is often critiqued on the grounds of authenticity. In this respect, the ability of immigrants to trace their ancestry to a particular ethnic or national tradition on the African continent or in the West Indies is often viewed as inherently more authentic than the “imagined” endeavor of African Americans.

However, this depiction of Afrocentricity unfortunately strays from its definition as conveyed by its foremost theorists. As Asante notes in *The Afrocentric Idea*, “Afrocentricity is very specific in its reliance on self-conscious action. To say, for example, that Afrocentricity has no role in Africa because the people there already have an African perspective is to misunderstand the practical dimension of Afrocentricity” (1998, 19). Both Asante’s words and the experiences of my informants suggest that we push the debate surrounding Afrocentricity beyond the limiting discourse of authenticity (Jackson 2005) to acknowledge its wider implications for African Americans *and* African-descended immigrants in the contemporary diaspora. Emanuel’s personal definition of Afrocentricity, accordingly, rejects the essentialist label it is often ascribed, remarking, “[F]or me [Afrocentricity] has always...been a focus on thinking about blackness critically,” rather than embracing a rigid, temporally ossified notion of blackness.

¹ All informants cited in the essay are provided pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Another of my informants, Ermias, a student of East African descent, similarly describes his efforts to reckon with his ethnic identity in a predominantly African American population.

For a while I actually felt distant from my blackness; I actually felt more African just because as a kid growing up, a lot of my black American peers made it clear to me that I was different, so I felt othered [*sic*] at times. But when I started to embrace my blackness more as I got older, became more knowledgeable, more educated about how identity is shaped, I began to define it for myself. In high school is when I really began to identify with both my American blackness and my African descent.

The transition Ermias describes, from a primarily ethnic to a racial identity, is paramount to the “new” diasporic experience. While the predominant literature on the subject has portrayed the interests of African Americans as in conflict with those of continental African and Caribbean Americans, social scientists and diaspora theorists must further elucidate the contextual nature of diasporic identities, which at a given juncture may privilege ethnicity, race, or nationality. Additionally, the conditions by which diasporic solidarity is realized, as was the case when African immigrant and African American groups joined to protest the 1999 slaying of Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo by New York City police, are deserving of further study, indicating potential sociopolitical allegiances across the diaspora. Fittingly, Ermias recounts an experience in which he was able to reach a level of mutual understanding with his African American peers.

In high school I was in an African-centered Rights of Passage program...and it was through that group [that] I really began to embrace my blackness and learned a lot about what it means to be a black man...A lot of what we did in the types of events or activities [and] things that we were involved in usually were African-centered. For example, we celebrated the Maafa, we had an annual Maafa commemoration to honor the slaves who have died during the Middle Passage, we did a Kwanzaa celebration and gala each year, and then throughout the year we would learn a lot about African and African American history.

Ermias directly cites the philosophy of Afrocentricity—as the achievement of self-conscious action through a cultural and historical consciousness of the African diasporic experience—as a primary impetus behind the articulation of diasporic community. This process, cast as a dialogue between his experiences as a person of East African origin and the African American historical narrative, displays the practicability of Afrocentricity as a crucible for the project of mutual understanding Zeleza outlines.

Here, Brent Hayes Edwards’ metaphor of diaspora as *décalage*—a French term meaning “jet lag” that he borrows to describe the linguistic, cultural, and temporal slippages observed in the various articulations of diaspora—provides a useful frame of analysis. Employing Stuart Hall’s engagement of “articulation” for its dual meaning, both to “join together” and to “give expression to,” Edwards reminds us to eschew the taken-for-grantedness of reductionist conceptions of diaspora espoused by Herskovits

and others (2003, 14). Rather, as he suggests, “the cultures of black internationalism can only be seen *in translation*” (2003, 7), as diaspora is forged across critical points of difference—be they national, ethnic, linguistic, or otherwise.

Still, despite the breadth of Edwards’ historical and literary analysis, the question of diasporic futures, its contemporary ideological significance and political potential, remains absent. In other words, how will such processes of translation be effected? What Ermias’ experience demands, then, is an engagement with Afrocentricity as one of many parallel movements seeking to put the work of diasporic translation into *practice*. While we must interrogate the ideological limitations of certain brands of Afrocentric thought, the literature on Afrocentricity and diaspora studies have resisted this dialogue, instead reducing the debate to an increasingly polarized binary of essentialism-deconstructionism. Conversely, as Ermias suggests, the “essentialist” discourse of Afrocentricity is not unaccommodating of ethnic diversity or the malleability of individual identities. Rather, in this instance, it provides a common ground upon which diasporic fissures are confronted and ultimately transcended.

As anthropologist Jemima Pierre observes, the recent scholarship on African-descended immigrants has unfortunately upheld essentialist notions of ethnicity alongside seemingly contradictory deconstructionist approaches to race, as “the discursive use of Black/African immigrant ‘ethnic and cultural distinctiveness’ is in fact predicated upon a repackaged ‘culture of poverty’ discourse that serves to perpetuate stereotypical understandings of United States–born Black experiences and identity formations” (Pierre 2004, 144). Ironically, while Afrocentrists are indicted by their detractors as essentialist ideologues, the practical application of Afrocentric philosophy that Ermias recounts avoids the pitfall of ethnic absolutism that Pierre describes. Through Ermias’s understanding of African American history and the nature of racial oppression, a sentiment of respect and fraternity usurped the myth of African American cultural deficiency. Again, he recalls:

For a long time I struggled in my identity, just because I never felt like I was a part of the black American group, and it didn’t really make sense to me, because by others outside of that group, I was still labeled as someone who is black American. So, for a long time I struggled with it, trying to find my identity, and then at home I was hearing things from my parents and they would encourage me to stay away from black Americans, mainly off of stereotypes that they have about black Americans. So for a long time I struggled with that until I got into high school and I got into this program, it was like a brotherhood with brothers from all around the city who went to different high schools, who were different people, but we came together in this program to grow, to learn about our African culture, African and African [American] history.

The framework provided by Afrocentricity, then, continues to proffer opportunities for the development of a diasporic consciousness. The current moment of deconstructionism, however, has prohibited a

comprehensive engagement with the contemporary applications of Afrocentricity among its individual practitioners. What I suggest, then, is further engagement with the philosophy and practice of Afrocentricity among scholars of diaspora, who must simultaneously critique its limitations and complicate the monolithic renderings of Afrocentricity that pervade the academy and mainstream public imagination.

In the section that follows, I accordingly take up the oft-discussed question of “traditional” African commodities such as kente cloth, decorative masks, clothing, jewelry, etc., which has often reified the aforementioned debate surrounding “authenticity” in academia. Highlighting the experiences of my informants, and their own perceptions of such commodities, I seek to highlight my informants’ agency as consumers in this process of intradiasporic exchange, a facet of the debate that scholars have been reluctant to address.

The Diaspora Will Not Be Commoditized

Ethnographer Paul Stoller’s research on African immigrant street vendors in New York City, published in numerous essays and in the acclaimed 2002 monograph *Money Has No Smell: The Africanization of New York City*, provides an intimate portrait of the commodification of African culture(s) in the diaspora. Drawing from more than six years of fieldwork conducted in the 1990s, Stoller follows the rise of “Malcolmania,” the (re)popularization of Malcolm X—emblazoned memorabilia coinciding with the release of Spike Lee’s biopic *X* in 1992, and the concurrent increase in African American demand for “African” cultural objects, spurred by the influx of Afrocentric discourses described above.

Stoller puts forth his ethnographic narrative from the perspective of the African immigrant vendor, but unfortunately is forced to speculate about the level of conscious complicity on the part of African Americans. As he writes in the prologue of *Money Has No Smell*:

The West African merchant, who is a Muslim, refers to the statues and the masks as “wood.” For him art is simply a commodity, like any other, that he hopes will bring a good return in the New York market... The American merchant presents his masks and statues as products of a personal journey: the objects embody narratives of travel and adventure. For some shoppers these narratives render the “primitive” more attractive, comprehensible, and interesting—if not authentic. (Stoller 2002b, vii)

Thus, for Stoller, the African American cultural moment of the early 1990s is a (mis)adventure in cultural inauthenticity. Whether evidenced by a misinterpretation of Malcolm X’s true historical personality in his posthumous cultural iconography (Coombe and Stoller 1994; Reed 1992), or the

celebration of Kwanzaa, created to “commemorat[e] the historical and cultural linkages of Africa to Africa America” while ironically being exploited for profit by West African street vendors (Stoller 2002a, 41), African American consumers are presented as unsuspecting participants in the sale of unassumingly “inauthentic” African cultural commodities.

However, as my informants—who include continental Africans and Caribbean Americans as well as African Americans—describe in their interviews, Stoller’s preoccupation with inauthenticity shortchanges the agency of individual participants in this process, rendering questions of affect and emotion irrelevant. Nonetheless, following my challenge to the monolithic understanding of Afrocentricity levied above, I note how the consumers in the relationship Stoller depicts define their relationships with the abovementioned commodities.

Donovan, an African American Penn alumnus from Pennsylvania, recalls his own participation in the hoopla of Malcolmania that Stoller describes.

I remember reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* right before I came [to Penn] as a freshman, and the movie came out a couple years after I had been at Penn, so that awakened a certain political consciousness. Around that same time Public Enemy was out, KRS-One was out, Brand Nubian, so it was really through a lot of those musical artists and activists, and that genre of conscious hip hop, [that] I became aware of different things. So, for a while I was really attracted to the Five Percent Nation of Islam, not knowing what it was, but just knowing that there was some hidden knowledge, there was some sort of mystery that was gonna help me become stronger in terms of my own identity as being a positive black influence which I thought was necessary.

Contextualizing the Malcolmania phenomenon in the contemporaneous trajectory of hip hop and the religious discourse of the Nation of Islam and its offshoot movements, Donovan places the commodity culture of the moment alongside a specific political consciousness and development of a diasporic identity. Noting the positive psychological influence of the iconography and political ideology of the moment, as put forth by hip hop artists and texts such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, he highlights the personal, emotional significance such commodities held in the development of a positive image of blackness. Furthermore, with regard to more traditionally “African” objects such as masks and other forms of artwork, he notes:

I do have a lot of African artwork in my house. I have a lot of masks hanging up on my wall, and a lot of visual images because I wanted my kids to see that, I wanted my kids to grow up in a place where they could see different artifacts and know that they came from someplace that they’re connected to. And we may not even ever be able to find that direct connection, but there’s an appreciation for that.

In acknowledging that African Americans may never attain a “direct connection” to the African continent, which, in a Garveyesque turn, is often mistakenly viewed as the endgame of contemporary Afrocentricity, Donovan effectively explodes the dichotomy of authenticity/inauthenticity that Stoller proposes. Instead, the commodities he describes—which are acquired primarily for their symbolic meaning and influence in the development of a historical consciousness that places the origin of African Americans “someplace”—serve as an appeal for “rootedness” (Gilroy 1993) in the formation of a diasporic sensibility.

Here I am reminded of David Scott’s critique of earlier anthropological studies of diasporic populations, which, in their preoccupation with the accuracy—or authenticity—of the historical memory of Africa and enslavement, have failed to note the way in which myth or revisionist memory influences the development of a particular worldview. He notes, “What would be at stake here is less whether one can measure the extent to which this diasporan community...retains an accurate memory...than the ways in which this figure, slavery...enables (or prevents) the establishment of positions in a cultural and political field” (Scott 1991, 279). Accordingly, I engage Donovan’s words not as an inauthentic attempt to resurrect a lost African ancestral heritage, but as a means of navigating his own subjectivity as an African American man.

Cultural critic and anthropologist John Jackson complicates notions of racial authenticity in *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*, proposing racial *sincerity* as an alternative framework to the rigid confines posed by authenticity:

As much as they add tools to the theoretical arsenal of anti-essentialism...critiques of racial authenticity may also be anchored in the very same kind of objectifying and thingifying that they attempt to debunk, relegating people to the status of racial objects as much as authenticity tests themselves do...With sincerity as a model...one recognizes that people are not simply racial objects (to be verified from without) but racial subjects with an interiority that is never completely and unquestionably clear (Jackson 2005, 17).

Employing the theoretical lens of Jackson’s racial sincerity, one is able to engage Donovan’s affinity for African cultural commodities as a *sincere* engagement with a particular historical narrative, one which is clearly attuned to the points of disjuncture posed by the forced displacement of Africans throughout the Atlantic slave trade.

Emanuel, similarly, describes his relationship to African cultural commodities and iconography as an African American. Specifically noting the way in which his continental African counterparts challenged his own engagement with such commodities, he explains:

My parents are Christian...so they would dress me up as King Solomon for Halloween. But what it meant to be King Solomon in my Afrocentric household just looked different. So there was [a]

dashiki, purple cloth, [etc.]...Also, I was in classes with kids who were quote, unquote “actually African”...And they were like, “We don’t wear that, what do you got on right now?” And so it was strange because it marked me in a particular sort of way [with] parents who came out of the civil rights moment...It represented something for my parents. I’ve always lived in a house where we’ve had kente cloth, where I went to churches where on certain Sundays during the year almost everyone would dress up in dashikis. I think for my parents it represented pride for a place that they had never known, that they’d never seen. I thought that was kind of powerful.

Here, Emanuel explicitly references the ideological slippages between Africans and African Americans that Stoller highlights. However, despite the criticism of his continental African counterparts—who described his rendering of Africanness as inauthentic, since they, as “actual Africans,” did not wear similar clothing—he maintains that the articles of clothing he wore held a formative influence on his own self-identity. The visceral and emotional ties to specific objects that Donovan and Emanuel describe are regrettably scarcely acknowledged in the prevailing discourse of commodification. Instead, stemming from Marx’s rendering of commodity fetishism in his magnum opus *Capital*, commodification has often been cast as a process that can “potentially evacuate human agency” (Ralph 2009, 83) rather than one shaped and influenced by individual agency.

Even Marx, the seminal theorist of commodity fetishism, describes commodities as “*sensuous things* which are at the same time suprasensible or social” (165, my italics). If Marx himself called attention to the overtly sensuous nature of commodities, one wonders why modern applications of his theory so often place questions of emotion and viscosity at the margins. With respect to Afrocentricity and Afrocentric commodity culture, I suggest that this intervention is especially pertinent upon considering the sustained “silencing” (Trouillot 1995) of African diasporic peoples both historically and in the contemporary moment.

While the aforementioned debate surrounding authenticity often reifies continental Africans and their immediate descendants as the “authentic” bearers of African culture, Kobina, a Ghanaian American informant born in the United States, challenges this assumption. Describing his views in light of his travels to Ghana, he explains:

Every time my mom goes to Ghana or I go to Ghana I just buy Ghanaian clothes, traditional clothes. I’ve been to the original wood carving villages where things are authentically made...[But] at the end of the day they are symbols, nonetheless. I guess in terms of arguing the level of authenticity [between objects produced in Ghana and those produced in the U.S.], to me I see that as just another pointless divisiveness, it defeats the purpose of why you would acquire that symbol in the first place...I don’t really see it in those terms, and to me it’s not a symbol that is supposed to show any type of hierarchy in terms of its worth, it’s more so a symbol that should be acquired in remembrance and paying homage to where these things come from originally.

In asserting his own claim to “authenticity,” with respect to the existing debate, Kobina effectively dissociates the question of origins—in this case, the origin of particular African cultural commodities—from its symbolic meaning for peoples across the diaspora. Thus, while he acknowledges the history of such objects, locating the roots of specific traditions in particular spatial locales, he also views the process of commodification as one that does not remove the symbolic meaning of such objects altogether. Here, he corroborates the views conveyed by the two African American informants featured above, choosing to privilege the emotional meaning attributed to said commodities above the reductionist discourse of in/authenticity.

Beverly, a Caribbean American informant who was also born in the United States, relays a similar experience, recalling her semester of study at the University of Ghana-Legon. Again, questioning the notion of a continental African stranglehold on “authentic” African commodities, she explains:

I racked up when I was in Ghana, and I’m just drawn to [the African] aesthetic. [In the U.S.] I do more jewelry that is reminiscent of African culture, I’m not really pressed to buy a dashiki per se, but I might buy a dashiki-looking item particularly not from folks who are charging four-hundred percent mark-up, when I’ve been to Ghana and I know where you get this, I know it would cost me three dollars to get a seamstress to make it there.

Citing her experiences in Ghana, the “source” of such cultural iconography, Beverly agrees that she seeks items that are “reminiscent of African culture,” not a definitively “authentic” connection to the African continent as much of the scholarship on the topic would suggest. However, she additionally calls attention to the economic facet of this system, one that Stoller presents as unique, “insider knowledge” of African vendors.

Conversely, Beverly displays that she is fully aware of the attempts by African vendors to profit from their appeals to authenticity as people of direct continental African origin. Nonetheless, she acknowledges that African cultural commodities remain attractive to her explicitly diasporic sensibility as a self-professed “African, most immediately born in America, raised by Caribbean immigrants.” Her attempts to explore her “Africanness” through such objects, then, are not merely self-absorbed, as she additionally notes, “it’s an economic thing. I’m always down to support black business and black causes, so in that sense I’m okay with whether it’s on the continent or here [in the U.S.].”

As Yvonne Jones notes in her ethnographic essay on African American cultural nationalism in Louisville, Kentucky, “African-American cultural nationalism has become enjoined to commoditization and entrepreneurship, creating distinct markets in local neighborhoods and in some instances challenging the dominance of white and Asian-owned businesses in black communities” (1997, 116). Beverly’s observation attests to this phenomenon, in which the sale of African cultural commodities

remains intimately tied to processes of community development and cooperative economics in addition to the processes of self-actualization described by Donovan and Emanuel.

Here, as I suggest earlier in the discussion of Afrocentric philosophy, we additionally must engage the process of African cultural commodification as a site of diasporic articulation, and a medium of solidarity, rather than conflict, between members of the “old” and “new” African Diasporas. As my informants speak to collectively, the prevailing academic discourse on Afrocentricity and cultural commodification in the diaspora has failed to engage the affective experiences of diasporic peoples themselves. While this study is offered merely as exploratory, I offer their narratives as a critique of “high theory” in diaspora studies, which, driven by the ideological misgivings of a select group of scholars, has marginalized topics deemed paradoxical to their personal philosophical beliefs. Through further ethnographic engagements with peoples of African descent, which must highlight the quotidian narratives of the African diasporic experience, I believe academics may ultimately merge the production of scholarly theory with the everyday theories offered by diasporic subjects themselves.

Conclusion

Presented with the case of the “new” African Diaspora, Africana scholars across academic disciplines are revisiting fundamental notions of race, ethnicity, and *culture* in the contemporary diaspora. In placing this shift amidst the postmodern turn in anthropology, one recognizes that classical notions of “cultures” as geographically bounded entities are being replaced with cultural movements and circulations, initiating a “deterritorialization” of culture, as “[i]n a world of diaspora...old-fashioned attempts to map the globe as a set of culture regions or homelands are bewildered by a dazzling array of postcolonial simulacra, doublings and redoublings, as...familiar lines between ‘here’ and ‘there,’ center and periphery, colony and metropole become blurred” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 10).

Afrocentricity, however, as an academic discourse and cultural practice, has remained absent from this discussion, typecast as a remnant of racially essentialist modernity, and in conflict with deconstructionist notions of race and diaspora. As my analysis illustrates, grounding our engagement with Afrocentricity among its everyday practitioners effectively revises many of the prominent concerns regarding its ideological limitations. While I fully endorse the feminist critiques of Afrocentricity as fundamentally masculinist (Ransby 2000), I maintain that we must complicate this uniform definition of Afrocentricity, noting the feminist and queer interventions in Afrocentric discourse being enacted by the women and members of the LGBT community who personally engage in Afrocentric practice.

Finally, in my discussion of Afrocentricity and cultural commodification, I seek to outline an alternative frame of analysis concerning the relationship between Africa and its diaspora. While the prevailing discourse surrounding this relationship remains rife with assertions of inauthenticity and what I term *diasporic pessimism*—characterized by the current rise in scholarship denouncing the prescience of contemporary attempts to (re)articulate linkages between the diaspora and African continent—I offer this study as a potential insight into the futures of diaspora as an active, politicized community. Principally, we must revisit this relationship in inciting scholarship in diaspora studies and diasporic peoples themselves toward new dialogues and diasporic connections.

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