

## **“What’s at Stake?” Re-defining African American**

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Let me first of all thank Drs. Marta Moreno Vega and J. Michael Turner for inviting me to participate in this GALCI conference on “Re-defining African American.” As I understand it, the central concerns of the conference revolve around questions of inclusion or exclusion as they relate to the recently-arrived people of African descent in the United States who have come from Central and South America and the Caribbean as well as the continent of Africa. How do these recent arrivals fit within the construct and definition of African American? Do the differences in language, culture, ethnicity and nationality that they bring with them limit their ability to be admitted to the African American group? Are they even interested in being thought of or related to as African-American? Are members of the African-American group willing to welcome them into the African-American family? Or are they distrustful because of their differences or resentful of African and African descended people from abroad who are seemingly taking better advantage of the opportunities created by African Americans in their centuries-long struggles for freedom and justice in this land?

These are real questions that the recent migrations of African descended people to the United States have posed for the future development of people of African descent in this country. We should note, however, that these are questions that are faced whenever new immigrants enter a society of established socioeconomic and political formations. We are concerned about redefining the term African American because we are interested

in maximizing the potential that a unified African-based population can have rather than having the perceived differences used to divide and exploit us. What's at stake, then is, in the final analysis the future of African descended people in the United States, economically, politically, socially and culturally. Said another way, the challenge before us is to turn our diversity into a strength to advance our collective interests rather than have it become a source of division and weakness.

Three years ago, the Schomburg Center completed and made available to the public a major project on African American migration entitled In Motion: The African American Migration Experience. Comprised of a major on-line website, a companion book, a teacher's kit and an exhibition, the project sought to document the major movements of people of African descent to, within and at times out of the United States. Initially, conceptualized as a project revolving around four or five major migrations, it eventually evolved into one that documented 13 distinct major migrations of people of African descent. Five of the 13 dealt with people migrating to the United States, seven documented movements within the United States and one traced the history of African Americans moving from the United States to foreign lands. Significantly, of the 13 migrations, only two were forced — the transatlantic slave trade and the domestic slave trade. All of the other eleven were voluntary.

The centerpiece of the project was the *In Motion* website. Comprised of over 25,000 pages including over 16,000 pages of text and over 8,000 images, it is structured around each of the 13 migrations. In each instance a popular narrative essay based on a

scholarly paper by a leading authority in the field traces the history of the migration. An average of 100 captioned photographs and other visual images are used to illustrate the narrative. Primary research documents, original maps, scholarly articles and books on related themes, a bibliography and lesson plans for teachers round out the resources available for documenting and interpreting each migration. A general image archive supplements those used to document each migration.

A brief review of the treatment of the transatlantic slave trade is a useful context for framing the discussion of the contemporary (post 1970's) migrations of African peoples which will be the focus of this presentation.

It is generally acknowledged, based on current scholarship that between 10 and 12 million people of African descent survived the Middle Passage and settled in the Americas. Less well known is the fact that between 1492 and 1776 or roughly the first 300 years of the so-called European colonization of the Americas, 6.5 million people crossed the Atlantic and settled in the so-called New World — North, Central and South America and the Caribbean. Of those 6.5 million pioneer migrants, only 1 million were European. The other 5.5 million were Africans of diverse ethnic, religious and national backgrounds.

Of the 10-12 million transported to the Americas in the transatlantic slave trade, only some 500,000 ended up in the United States. They, too, were of diverse ethnic, religious and national backgrounds — Yoruba, Etik, Fon, Musfin, traditional African

religions, etc. By 1860, the original 500,000 enslaved African immigrants had developed into a population of some 4 million people. Significantly, these people of African descent had transformed themselves into a new people, a new African American people. Unable to live traditional African lives as Fon, Etik or Yoruba, they entered into new biological, social and cultural relationships across ethnic or religious lines. Added to their mix were representatives of diverse Native American groups as well as virtually all of the European groups that were part of America's colonial enterprise. The African American group created out of this amalgam of African, Native American and European peoples is likely the most American group in American society. Because all of America's people are part of the African American group.

While the transatlantic slave trade was officially abolished in 1808 in the United States, the illegal slave trade continued to bring enslaved Africans to the United States into the 1860's. After the war, relatively few continentally born Africans migrated to the United States. African-descended people from the Caribbean region continued to find ways of migrating here. Puerto Ricans and Cubans of African descent such as Arturo Alfonso Schomburg came in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. African-descended immigrants from British and French Caribbean islands, though restricted as immigrants of African descent, found loopholes in colonial laws to gain admission as part of British or French immigration quotas. Upwards of 100,000 Caribbean immigrants entered the United States between 1899 and 1932 when more restrictive laws virtually closed the door to Caribbean immigrants. Jamaicans, Barbadians, and Trinidadians, as well as Haitians settled in the States and tried to create new lives for themselves. Puerto Ricans,

Dominicans, Cubans and Panamanians also headed to the United States during the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Nowhere was the new diversity of the African presence in the United States more pronounced than in New York City, especially during the Harlem Renaissance. New York City, which only had a population of 60,000 people of African descent in 1900, could count some more than 350,000 African-descended people by 1930, the largest in the nation. A significant percentage of them had immigrated from Africa and the Caribbean and come to New York during this period including African dancer, Asadata Dafora, Jamaicans Marcus Garvey and Claude McKay, Trinidadian pilot Hubert Julian, and Virgin Islander J. Raymond Jones. Each of them aligned themselves with African descended peoples from the United States and other parts of the African diaspora for social, political, cultural and at times familial purposes.

Significantly, try as they may to retain their unique ethnic identities, most of these African-descended immigrants also began to become integrated into new African American movements and identities. The Garvey Movement, for instance, was comprised of black folk from throughout the Americas as well as throughout the United States. Other “African American” groups and organizations such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the Prince Hall Masons and the African Blood Brotherhood included Afro Caribbeans as well as native-born African Americans. The point is that after slavery, like during the era of slavery, immigrating African-descended populations became part of the African-American community even as they struggled to retain ties

with their societies of origin. By the second or third generation, however, most had become fully integrated into the African-American community.

Congressman Charles Rangel, for instance, is of Puerto Rican ancestry. Herman “Denny” Farrell is of Panamanian descent as was Dr. Kenneth Clark. Basil and David Paterson trace their roots to Barbados, and Carlos Ledesma, founder of the West Indian Day Carnival, was from Venezuela. All are or have been an acknowledged part of the African-American community in New York and the United States.

Three of the components of the In Motion website deal with the contemporary migrations of people of African descent to the United States since the 1970’s: The Contemporary Haitian Migration, The Caribbean Migration and the Contemporary African Migration. These three sites provide considerable information on the socio, economic and cultural backgrounds to the migrations. They tell you where people are migrating from and why. They tell you where they are migrating too. And they tell you some of the impacts of their presence, their laboring activities and their cultural and social practices on their new communities of residence. I will focus the remainder of my remarks on the contemporary African immigrant population in hopes of raising questions that are relevant to the discussion of issues facing all of the new African-descended populations in the United States.

Beginning in the 1970’s, significant numbers of continentally born Africans started to migrate to the United States. As former colonial powers — England, France

and Portugal — closed their doors to African immigrants, many turned to the United States. Since 1970, more than 1.7 million people claimed sub-Saharan African ancestry. Refugees are counted among this new African immigration influx — over 40,000 Somalis, close to 21,000 Ethiopians and an estimated 18,500 Sudanese among others. From 1990 to 2001, 100,000 African refugees (10% of all refugees) were admitted to the United States. The overwhelming majority of these immigrants are not refugees, however. In contrast to their slave trade forbears, the new immigrant populations come from throughout sub-Saharan Africa. They are from Southern and East Africa as well as West and Central Africa. Nigerians are the number one sub-Saharan African community followed by Ethiopians and Ghanaians. A highly urban population, more than 95% live in metropolitan areas usually in close proximity to traditional African American and Caribbean immigrant communities. The Senegalese are concentrated in New York; the Nigerians in Texas, the Somalis in Minneapolis/St. Paul. The new African immigrants are also a highly educated African population. Indeed, they are the most highly educated population in the United States. Almost half of the new African immigrant population holds bachelors degrees or higher whereas only 26% of native-born Americans do. The most substantial part of African immigration is linked to the “brain drain” not poverty.

Many immigrating Africans coming from independent African nations are attempting to retain their ethnic identities within their national groups. Many are retaining strong links with their home communities on the continent and building economic and other bridges between themselves and home. However much they resist transforming themselves and being transformed by their new American environment,

however they are being transformed. Ethnic and class barriers that existed among groups within their countries on the continent are being lowered and eradicated in the U.S.

Within their national groups they are transforming themselves and being transformed by their new environment as they create new families, new community groups, new religious practices, etc. These transformations are being made more complex by the simultaneous arrivals (since the 1970s) of African peoples from Haiti, the Caribbean and Central and South America. All of these new African immigrant populations like those from the continent are negotiating their relationships with each other and white America as well as the African-American descendants of the pioneer 500,000 enslaved Africans who make up 90% of the more than 35 million people of African descent living in the United States.

Among the questions posed by your theme is how are the new African and African-descended populations getting along with their new neighbors? How are new immigrant African-descended populations relating to one another as well as to African American, white Americans and other new immigrant African groups? We could dwell in the negative reports of frictions, jealousies, resentments and at times outright conflicts that have surfaced between the various groups. We could talk about the

- We could talk about the perceived problem of African and other immigrant populations exploiting job & educational opportunities created for African Americans.
- We could talk about the struggle for jobs & job displacement.
- We could talk about African-American resentment of African entrepreneurial success.
- We could talk about problems of communication that have emerged between these diverse peoples.

- We could talk about territorial/turf residency struggles.
- We could talk about the perceived disrespect that immigrants have for African American traditions of struggle.

All of these issues have arisen from time to time whenever immigrants, regardless of race, interact with older residents. And they are issues that arise whenever immigrant populations arrive in places where established African-American communities exist. Media coverage of these encounters tend to focus on the conflicts frequently at the expense of the new transformation and integration experiences that are taking place between old and new African communities and across ethnic and national boundaries, and cultural and class lines that are part of these new political, economic, cultural and social group formations.

Migrants' intentions of returning to their homelands notwithstanding, the social situations in which they find themselves dictate that they will, willingly or not, enter into new relationships and new processes of social and cultural transformation not unlike what occurred with their forbears during slavery. Nowhere is this more evident in the United States today than in New York City. And in New York City, the most complex laboratory of African and African Diasporan social and cultural transformation is in the Borough of Brooklyn. New York has the largest African immigrant population in the United States. In addition, large new Caribbean and Haitian immigrant populations have moved there adding to the mix of new immigrants of African descent who have taken up residence in close proximity to each other and to older African-American communities in New York City. Ethnic and national enclaves of immigrant populations have frequently

formed in these communities, but equally significant, immigrants have crossed ethnic and national boundaries to create new family lives, business relationships, etc. Nigerians are marrying Jamaicans, African Americans are marrying Trinidadians, etc. and creating New World African families. Immigrant musicians from Africa, the Caribbean and/or Haiti are hooking up with African-American musicians and creating new African diasporan musics. Immigrants are forming ethnic or nationally based organizations among themselves but they are also actively participating in established and newly formed organizations and institutions that address their needs and support their objectives.

It is in times of racial crisis in the city, however, that the blurring of lines between the African-American community and the new immigrant populations is most prevalent. When Senegalese immigrant, Amadou Diallo, was killed in a hail of police fire, people of African descent, irrespective of their status, ethnic or national backgrounds, joined in the protests against this latest instance of police brutality. When Haitian communities demonstrated in protest against the ouster of their Pres. Jean Baptist Aristide, Caribbean immigrants and African Americans joined in. When hurricanes devastated communities in the Caribbean, African American and Africans have joined in the relief effort. These types of mobilizations across ethnic and national boundaries signal the forging of new pan-African or African diasporan bonds among these diverse African people. These emerging alliances bode well for the future of African and African Diasporan transformations in the United States in the future. African peoples of the slavery era

transformed themselves into one people — African American people — during slavery.

The stage has been set for still another transformation in the twenty-first century.

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