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EDMUND T. GORDON  
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## The African Diaspora *Toward an Ethnography of Diasporic Identification*

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*This article offers an analysis of theoretical models developed around the concept of the African Diaspora. These models either concentrate on essential features common to various peoples of African descent or focus on diaspora as a condition of hybridity characterized by displacement and “dispersed identities.” The authors, calling for ethnographic attention to processes of diasporic identification, argue for a shift in focus toward analysis of the processes through which individuals identify with one another as “Black” or “African.”*

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### *Who Is Black?*

EDMUND T. GORDON, ONE OF THE AUTHORS, spent almost ten years living on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua in a small port town called Bluefields. There he lived among the “Creoles,” an African Caribbean people of approximately 20,000 who inhabit that market town and a series of smaller villages scattered along Nicaragua’s southern Caribbean coast. A young, Black, politically active, male intellectual, a product of the vexed racial politics of the United States and the nationalist Black power politics characteristic of large sectors of its Black community, Gordon had specific expectations coming to Nicaragua from the United States of the late 1970s. He carried with him a political common sense—a “good sense”—of a centered Blackness that appropriated not only the name (Black) but the essentialism of the white supremacist ideology of the “one drop rule.” This was also a globalized notion of Blackness—the African Diaspora as community and identity. On the basis of phenotype he assumed commonalities of racial experience and cultural practice and consequently the global unity of all peoples of “African descent” on the one hand and absolute Black differentiation from whites and “near” whites (mestizos) on the other. Thus armed he arrived on Nicaragua’s Caribbean coast expecting to find in its Black “Creole” community a centered African Diasporic identity and race-based politics.

What he found was very much more complex. Identity politics certainly operated in the Creole community. However, not only did he have inadequate knowledge of the

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local, national, and international structure of power relations from within which Creole politics were formed, but he did not know or understand that there was no unitary, stable racial or cultural identity from which Creole politics were invariably waged.

Creoles definitely had a Black diasporic identity. There were Creoles who identified as Black and saw a relation between themselves and others in the Black Diaspora, especially Jamaican and U.S. Blacks. Some claimed African origins for the group. However, there were many others in the community for whom this was not at that time a relevant aspect of their identity as Creoles. Some insisted that Creole origins were to be found in England, that they were just as white as they were Black, and that they had an “Anglo” culture. Others asserted that Creoles came from Jamaica and intermarried with the coast’s indigenous population so that they were neither white nor Black but “mixed” between Blacks, whites, and Amerindians.

For most Creoles the salient features of Creole subjectivity were not stable; they varied over time, positionality, and context. Listen to the varying ways in which Creoles talked about their identities and heritage when Gordon asked them to recount their history as a people. A fairly well educated and middle-aged civil servant from Bluefields said,

It’s two version that they [the old people] had how we Creole people reach here. One is that we came as slaves when a ship was—you know they come when they used to sell the slaves. And they had, like, a shipwreck or something like that, and the slaves came into the north part of the Atlantic coast and they mixed up with . . . amongst the Indians, and that’s how Creoles got here. And they have another version that is not exactly [the same]—that they had a auction, see like, then brought the Black people as slaves to work here in the Atlantic coast. And they gave the specific case of Corn Island where they had native people here working as slaves then. And that’s how they come in.

On the other hand, an elderly employee of the Moravian Church claimed,

You had king, you know. The king was Miskito. Miskito people. Originally, I say, from England. England had a lot to do with it. [Gordon: Who was from England?] Both the Indians and the Creoles. Both of them. [Gordon: Were originally from England?] That’s right. [Gordon: So the Miskito and the Creoles came from England to here?] That’s right. [Gordon: So then they came from England to what, to Jamaica and Cayman and then from there to here?] Exactly, because all . . . most of those poor people that died [previous generations of Creoles]. They still believed that here supposed to be for England. They still have that belief up until when they died.

A close friend from Corn Island claimed to have been taught the following as a youth:

The teaching on that was . . . telling us that we descend from people from Caymans and from Providence. And you, you know, try to follow that up and, and they would carry you right back to Scotland, you know. They would trace you right back to Scotland and Englishman. That is what I knew about my [ancestors.] We thought. At least I thought the Englishman was like me because that is what they taught me, that I was descended from Englishmen.

A teacher from the Moravian High School, an expert in traditional Creole dance, stated,

We call ourselves Creole and people say if you are Black you come from Africa. But we are, Creoles, a very mixed group. Many of us that you see here, our ancestors is—we don't find them in Africa. We find them in different parts where Africans were. For instance, many of our people on the North [Puerto Cabazas] are Jamaicans or from Limon. Many of our Black—we don't have any pure Black people here in Bluefields.

Given this variety of ideas concerning their origin and identity, are Creoles part of the "African Diaspora"? On what basis can one presume to call them an African diasporic people if many do not claim that they are? Is an academic "truth" concerning their origins more correct than their lived one? In what sense are people whose ancestry is undeniably mixed—for example, Blacks in the United States, Nicaragua, and Honduras—more African than something else? Are there criteria other than continuities from Africa which can serve as the basis for diasporic identity? In sum, who are the members of the African Diaspora and what makes them members?

This article offers an analysis of theoretical models developed around the concept of the African Diaspora as related to questions of race, culture, and politics. In tracking various attempts to identify and define the African Diaspora we argue for a shift in focus that concentrates not so much on essential features common to various peoples of African descent as on the various processes through which communities and individuals identify with one another, highlighting the central importance of race—racial constructions, racial oppressions, racial identification—and culture in the making and remaking of diaspora. Following this line of thought, we call for *ethnographic* attention to the process of diasporic identification. To date the most critical gap in the theorization of diaspora is the lack of studies that attend to the ways particular communities and individuals draw cultural and political inspiration from one another to imagine themselves as "Black" or "African." Rather than assigning identity and positing how people should participate in the making and remaking of diaspora, we must investigate how they actually do so. In keeping with this plea, our article ends as it begins: with a brief ethnographic example that we hope sheds light on the complexities of race and the politics of diasporic identification.

### *Conceptualizing the African Diaspora*

The African Diaspora as popularly conceived is a denotative label for the dispersed people removed/exiled from a common territorial origin, sub-Saharan Africa. The term *diaspora* itself was probably not used to refer to peoples of African descent until the mid-1950s, when it began to be employed by intellectuals involved in pan-Africanism and the effort to raise consciousness and create solidarity among Blacks across the globe (Shepperson 1993). Nevertheless, the themes and ideas encapsulated by the term *African Diaspora* had been developed long before the term itself came into fashion. Indeed, the attempt to identify, define, and characterize a transnational identity of peoples of African descent had already been an important feature of Black scholarship.

As initially constructed in the pan-African political ideologies of Delaney, Blyden, Garvey, Du Bois (1973), Padmore (1956), and others, what identified the universe of African and African-descended peoples—what we now call the African Diaspora—was Blackness or negroness: that is, a phenotypically constructed and ascribed racial identity indicative of sub-Saharan African territorial origin and simultaneously biological difference from lighter-skinned populations. Outside of “racial” Blackness, for these intellectuals membership in the Black world was determined by common experiences of racial terror and marginalization based on internationally held racist ideologies of Black inferiority. These pan-Africanists struggled for but did not assume a shared notion of history, consciousness of origins, or commonality of identification on the part of those presumed, on racial grounds, to be part of the international community of Blacks (Drake 1993:462).

Melville Herskovits (1990), Zora Neale Hurston, and others, following the pioneering work of Carter G. Woodson (1968) and especially W. E. B. Du Bois (1970), recognized the problematic status of race as an analytical category and focused on culture as the key element in the analysis of the Black world.<sup>1</sup> The Herskovitsian notion of African cultural survivals and their persistence in all communities of African descent, coupled with Boasian notions of cultural relativism, became the basis for a new theorization of what was soon to be called the African Diaspora. It became conceptualized not simply as a racial entity but as a cultural community dynamically uniting Africa and its communities in displacement through commonalities of African cultural practice and worldview. These ideas have remained prevalent over the last three decades in the work of Anglo scholars like Mintz and Price (1976) and Thompson (1983). They also provide the theoretical underpinning for nationalist Afrocentric scholarship (see Ani 1994; Asante 1988) so influential in the U.S. African American community’s conceptualizations of its identity as based in African culture.

It is important to recognize that from its beginnings the African Diaspora as a theoretical project has been political. It was originally constructed in opposition to still vital racist ideologies that depicted Blacks in essentialized terms as biologically “negroid”; as a people without culture, without significant history or national or territorial connection; as having nothing cultural or intellectual to offer to “modernity”; and as racially inferior, marginal, and uncivilized. The term itself began to be employed at a particularly fertile moment in the civil rights and pan-African movements by intellectuals and activists striving to increase racial consciousness and solidarity in confrontation with racism and colonialism. Contemporary constructions of the diaspora retain their political vitality as a response to dominant ideas about African American peoples which depict them as nothing more than cultures of poverty and dismiss them as culturally pathological (e.g., Lemann 1986a, 1986b; Moynihan 1992; Murray 1984). Even if the body of work on the African Diaspora has been characterized as “objective” and “apolitical” (as in the case of Herskovits), it has emerged from and sustained a tradition of oppositional scholarship (Jackson 1986) and provided the foundations for a cultural politics of identity among peoples of African descent in the Americas.

Despite the undeniable intellectual and political achievements facilitated by this formulation of the diaspora paradigm, there are those working from what can be

broadly termed a “postmodern” perspective who question it. Authors such as David Scott (1991), Kwame Appiah (1992), and Stuart Hall (1988) argue that prominent theories of Black cultures and identities rely on forms of racial or cultural essentialism that collude with Western understandings of race, culture, and nationalism. They claim, with much basis, that the “Afrocentric” aspiration to construct an “authentic, natural, and stable rooted” African identity (Gilroy 1993a:30) and that “racial” self results in an ethnic absolutism that reifies the very categories of racial oppression. They also assert that these notions valorize a male, patriarchal subject and thus exclude many who identify as Black but do not fit the essentialist criteria (such as women, homosexuals, people of mixed descent). For their part, they offer alternative means of opening up our understanding of the African Diaspora as an intellectual project.

Many of these critics have turned to the notion of “hybridity” for resolution to these problems in theorizing the Black Diaspora. In fact, *hybridity*, along with terms such as *syncretization* and *creolization*, has come to stand for a particular trend in this field, a trend that has been specifically formulated against the ontological essentialism of Afrocentric formulations of the diaspora.

Stuart Hall has been a principal figure in this camp, mounting scathing critiques of the Afrocentric perspective. Speaking about ethnic movements in Europe (but also with Afrocentric postulations in mind), he states,

The new nationalists are busy trying . . . to play the highly dangerous game of ethnic cleansing. . . . Here real dislocated histories and hybridized ethnicities . . . are subsumed by some essentialist conception of national identity . . . which recasts cultural identity as an unfolding essence moving apparently without change, from past to future. [1993:356]

He thus suggests that contemporary national and ethnic politics negate the conditions of displacement and mixing through which diasporic identities and cultures have been formed. In contrast, Hall prefers to think of diasporic cultures and identities as hybrid:

These hybrids retain strong links to and identifications with the traditions and places for their “origin.” But they are without the illusion of any return to the past. . . . They are not and never will be unified in the old sense, because they are inevitably the products of several interlocking histories and cultures, belonging at the same time to several “homes”—*and thus to no particular home*. [1993:362, emphasis added]

Hall conceives diaspora not simply as a condition of displacement but as the formation of a particular kind of identity that dwells in or on several places at the same time.

Kobena Mercer produces a theoretical version of diaspora as hybridity that places even less emphasis on the search for identity in territorial, cultural, or racial origins. In a general sense, he uses the term *diaspora* as a noun to refer to “the domain of disseminated and dispersed identities originating from an initial loss of one” (1994:30), to the conditions of displacement and necessary entanglement with “white” culture through which Black culture (outside of Africa) has been forged. He also uses the term as a kind of adjective, speaking of “diaspora identity,” “diaspora aesthetics,” and a “diaspora perspective” to suggest that peoples living in displacement develop particular kinds of culture and consciousness characterized by processes of hybridization.

Mercer constantly attacks efforts to assert cultural or racial authenticity and celebrates the creative mixing of traditions, the appropriation of dominant “master” codes toward subversive aesthetics and political ends. For Mercer there is no unified Black community, and Blackness is an open signifier complicated by the divisions of class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

However, while Mercer’s perspective offers a powerful critique of racial and cultural essentialism and calls necessary attention to the fissions within Black communities, it “has been insufficiently alive to the lingering power of specifically racialized forms of power and subordination” (Gilroy 1993a:32). Moreover, by treating diaspora as a condition of or trope for hybridity, this perspective offers us few avenues to explore the particularity of the African Diaspora in contradistinction to other diasporic and subaltern peoples with distinct racial, cultural, or territorial identities. Finally, its failure to address questions of class and racial power suggest a free play of identity formation that makes extremely difficult the location of a standpoint or -points from which politics can be waged against the continuing onslaught of essentializing racial and class oppression.<sup>2</sup>

The work of Paul Gilroy (1991, 1993a, 1993b) represents a middle ground between the ontological essentialism of Afrocentrism and the antiessentialism of diaspora as hybridity. In his elaboration of what he refers to as an “anti-anti-essentialist” perspective on these issues, he addresses the question of the unity and commonality of the African Diaspora (or, in his terms, the Black Atlantic) as a theoretical and political *problem* rather than as an ontological given rooted in a presumed racial essence or mythological origin. For Gilroy, diaspora refers to the (historical) dispersal of African peoples through enslavement, the creation of similar yet different Black cultures in the New World, and the (contemporary) effort to imagine a shared sense of peoplehood in confrontation with persistent systems of racialized terror.

Gilroy’s use of the term *Black Atlantic* in favor of *African Diaspora* reflects his attempt to analyze the formation and transformation of New World Black cultures without assuming the centrality of African cultural continuities. He tackles the question of the roots (or rootedness) of the African Diaspora by focusing not on shared racial or cultural essences and origins but on similar, sometimes shared, experiences of racial subordination and struggle. For him, the “special bitterness of New World slavery” constitutes not only a set of historical experiences through which Black culture(s) were forged but a recurrent inspiration for tradition, understood as the “living memory of the changing same” (1993a:198). Gilroy appears somewhat ambivalent about Africa itself as a site of cultural origin and political imaginings. On the one hand, he argues strongly against a form of pan-Africanism that posits a “mystical unity outside the process of history or even a common culture or ethnicity which will assert itself regardless of determinate political and economic circumstances” (1991:158). As an alternative, he tentatively suggests that “it may be that a common experience of powerlessness somehow transcending history and experienced in racial categories[,] in the antagonism between white and black rather than European and African[,] is enough to secure affinity between these divergent patterns of subordination” (1991: 158–159; see also 1993a:80–81).

On the other hand, he notes that struggles against racial subordination

have, since the very first day that slaves set out across the Atlantic, involved radical passions rooted in distinctly African history, philosophy and religious practice. Traces of these formulations remain, albeit in displaced and mediated forms, even in the folk philosophies, religion and vernacular arts of black Britain. [1991:159; see also 1993a:80–87]

We suspect that Gilroy does not delve too deeply into sticky questions of the “African” nature of Black cultures because he wants to examine diaspora in terms of consciousness and identity, as a transnational form of community and solidarity that is actively forged and transformed. In so doing, he highlights not just “roots” but “routes” (Gilroy 1995; see also Clifford 1994)—the movement of people, practices, ideas, and commodities across national boundaries—as a constitutive component of Black thought, culture, and politics within and beyond particular nations. Gilroy discusses not only international organizations and movements (Garveyism, pan-Africanism), religions (Rastafarianism), and the travels of intellectuals such as Delaney and Du Bois (Gilroy 1993a) but also less formal but no less political processes such as the circulation of commodities that “have carried inside them oppositional ideas, ideologies, theologies and philosophies” (Gilroy 1991:157). He is particularly interested in how forms of Black culture (especially music) encode distinctive epistemologies and aesthetics that run counter to the presumptions of modernity and provide the possibility of political struggles that transcend the boundaries of nation. Through calling attention to both the “roots and routes” of diaspora, as well as the similarities and differences among various peoples of African descent, Gilroy attempts to steer between the two polarized fields in contemporary Black thought—the mystical essentialism of Afrocentric notions of the African Diaspora and the celebratory pluralism of hybrid notions of diaspora (Bottomley 1991:311).

Gilroy’s work foregrounds the theorization of diaspora as a problem of politics and identity. In order to make this point clear it is useful to distinguish two senses of *diaspora*: (1) as a conceptual tool or referential term denoting a specific group of people and (2) as a term to denote a certain kind of identity formation, the feeling of belongingness to a community that transcends national boundaries. In practice, the two come together, for the very development of diaspora as a conceptual tool, as we have seen, has been part and parcel of a political project whose objective is the creation of solidarity among peoples of African descent. Nonetheless, we want to distinguish between them so as to advocate more extensive and nuanced accounts of diaspora as a form of identity formation.

In using diaspora as a conceptual tool authors usually denote dispersed groups of African descent, descendants of peoples removed from the African continent who are racially Black. To speak of diaspora in this sense should immediately raise the question we pose for the Creole case at the beginning of this article: How do we recognize a member (individual or group) of the African Diaspora? The answer is complex and variable but typically relies on an understanding of racial categories and constructions, whether externally imposed or self-ascribed. This point should not be used to debunk the validity of the notion of a specifically African or Black Diaspora. While it is true



that race is a social construct, it is also a social fact whose effects are undeniably real. An analysis of who belongs to the African Diaspora cannot ignore race but must investigate processes of identity formation, analyzing forms of racialized classification and subordination as well as the creative efforts of people living through such systems to formulate and reevaluate their own sense of self.

Like any sense of peoplehood, Black identities are formed and transformed in relation to other identity constructions. They necessarily confront a field of racial ideologies that differentiate between people on the basis of phenotype and ascribe to them particular, often pejorative, biological and cultural qualities. While these ideologies vary over time and place, they resonate with previous meanings and transcend national and regional borders. As Wade argues,

There are different racisms, but . . . they are linked in historically varied ways to that history of colonial encounters. The meanings attributed even nowadays to “black” or “white” in South America, the Caribbean, South Africa, Europe, the US and also Australia are not independent of each other nor of that history. [1997:21]

This does not imply that Black identities are derived from dominant racial constructions but that they necessarily engage them in the effort to imagine a discrete sense of peoplehood. On this note, we should point out that white identities are also constructed in relation to other group identities, even if “white” people have acquired differential power to create and disseminate racial constructions.<sup>3</sup> At any particular location, peoples of any descent creatively engage and contest local, regional, national, and global ideologies of racial difference.

In attempting to discern how Black peoples construct their own identities, Gilroy’s work serves as an inspiration by providing fresh insight into how processes of travel, communication, and cultural exchange create forms of community and consciousness that subvert the norms of race, nation, and capitalism. However, Gilroy himself tends to collapse the two notions of diaspora noted above (conceptual tool, identity formation), in the sense that he privileges those aspects of diasporic practice and identification that support his political project against nationalism and ethnic absolutism.<sup>4</sup> In his polemic against Afrocentrism, Gilroy fails to explore the power that imaginings of Africa hold within various constructions of diasporic identity. If diasporic identity is created and re-created through routes, it is also imagined in roots. Africa serves as the key symbol for the particularity of Black identities, not just for a set of Afrocentric intellectuals but a wide variety of peoples who identify as Black. Such oversights suggest that the study of diaspora necessitates ethnographic investigations of identification processes among diverse Black peoples, investigations of how individuals and groups conceive and participate in a diasporic community or identity.

We thus advocate an “ethnography” of diaspora, conceived not simply as the ethnography of various communities of African descent but, rather, as an ethnography of various forms of diasporic politics and identification. Such a project might begin with the following questions: How do particular individuals and groups imagine themselves as members of a Black community beyond the confines of national or regional communities? With what peoples, regions, and movements do these individuals or

groups most closely identify or align themselves? What role does the figure of Africa itself play in these imaginings and attachments? What are the local conditions that help shape diasporic identifications as racial and cultural politics? The answers to these questions will differ significantly among different regions, groups, and even individuals. Moreover, the practices and politics of identification can vary tremendously: from the appropriation of U.S. soul by Afro-Brazilians in a recognition of themselves as Black (Hanchard 1994); to African American quests for roots in an African past; to the international inspiration of civil rights, Black power, and anticolonial struggles (Drake 1993); to the global popularity of reggae and hip-hop (Browning 1998; Gilroy 1991). In every case, wherever and whenever cultural forms and identity practice are coded as Black they engage and contest an ideological field that links racial or cultural difference to national and transnational claims of citizenship and modernity.

### *Diasporic Identification(s) among Garifuna in Honduras*

We want to extend our argument by discussing processes of diasporic identification among Garifuna, a distinct racial and cultural group residing on the Atlantic coast of Central America. By all accounts, including their own, Garifuna are the products of the racial and cultural interchange between indigenous Caribs and marooned Africans on the island of St. Vincent in the early 17th century. After a protracted struggle with the British over control of St. Vincent, in 1797 the Garifuna were deported to Central America, where they have reproduced and transformed a unique language, culture, and identity. Beginning in the 1950s, large numbers of Garifuna have migrated to the United States, residing in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Miami. The movement back and forth of people, ideas, and commodities has had a profound impact on conceptions of Garifuna culture, identity, and politics in Honduras (England in press).

Anthropologists have debated the origins of Garifuna cultural practices, emphasizing either an Amerindian heritage (Taylor 1951), an African heritage (Coelho 1981), or creative adaptations to modernization (Gonzalez 1969). However, in racial terms Garifuna have been perceived—by anthropologists and laypeople alike—as predominantly Black or African, even if the meaning of that ascription has changed over time and place (Anderson 1997). Scholars have paid little attention to Garifuna conceptions of their own racial heritage and identity. Some evidence indicates that Garifuna have at times emphasized the indigenous component of their ancestry (Gonzalez 1988). Other evidence—such as Garifuna participation in Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association in the 1920s (Hill 1990:997–998; Lewis 1988:88)—suggests that at different moments they have adopted a Black racial identity. Further research on these issues will likely reveal that Garifuna have historically shifted between stressing indigenous or Black racial identities within the context of particular local, national, and international political struggles. In contemporary Honduras, where Mark Anderson conducted fieldwork between 1994 and 1997, Garifuna clearly stress their Blackness in presentations of individual and collective identity. They embrace the term *negro* as a common term for self-reference because, as many say, the color represents them on a global scale. In the following discussion we trace different modes of diasporic identification

among Garifuna as they struggle to define their position within the Honduran nation-state and the “modern” world.

Since the mid-1970s Garifuna have created organizations such as the Organización Fraternal Negra de Honduras (OFRANEH) and the Organización de Desarrollo Comunitario Etnico to promote their political and cultural rights in the face of exclusion and discrimination within the Honduran state and civil society. Horacio Martinez, former president of OFRANEH, defines Garifuna as “an afro-american nationality that has its own culture, its own traditions, its own language and its own religion” (Centro de Documentacion de Honduras 1991:10). Following the emphasis on cultural difference, traditional life, and communal solidarity, Garifuna activists articulate autochthonous claims that include recognition of a primordial status within the nation, recovery and titling of lands and territories, promotion of Garifuna language and culture through bilingual or intercultural education, direct political representation in the national congress, and recognition of traditional forms of social organization. This program aligns Garifuna with other indigenous groups of Honduras, with whom they have affiliated in the panracial Confederation of Autochthonous Peoples of Honduras.

Despite their assertion of primordial claims and a recognized history of intermixture with indigenous peoples, Garifuna activists and intellectuals emphasize the Black or African components of their identity. The careful use of the term *autochthonous* (*autóctono*) as opposed to *indigenous* (*indígena*)—with its connotations of biological Indianness—allows Garifuna to make primordial claims while maintaining a racial distinction. Recent Garifuna scholarship (closely aligned to the political movement) self-consciously situates Garifuna within the African Diaspora (Centeno Garcia 1996; Cristano Melendez 1995; Lopez Garcia 1993; Suazo 1996). This is achieved through a variety of means, only a few of which can be addressed here. First, accounts of Garifuna origins focus on the African male, who escaped from slavery and “took” Carib wives, as the central agent in the historical drama. The phenotypical Blackness of the group becomes assured because the progeny of the mixture of African men and Carib women “preserved the color and physical features of their fathers” (Lopez Garcia 1993:11). Second, Garifuna scholars, while noting that the Africans were forced by necessity to adopt indigenous language and material practices, highlight the African origins of Garifuna religion, music, dance, and cosmology and claim that Garifuna occupy a unique status as a group of New World Blacks who maintain an African culture intact (Arzu 1995). Finally, these authors frame accounts of their culture and history within the context of the African Diaspora, discussing contemporary African cultures, scholarship on Blacks in Africa and the Americas, and struggles against racial oppression. Centeno Garcia, a founding member of OFRANEH, dedicates his work to “Blacks of all countries united in the ancestral culture” (1996).

The articulation of Garifuna as bearers of an authentic tradition inherited from Africa by no means exhausts the meanings that Blackness takes within Garifuna communities. While many Garifuna participate in the understanding of subjectivity promoted by political organizations, they simultaneously draw on contemporary Black cultural production from elsewhere, particularly the United States, to express individual and collective identity. Patterns of consumption and style, especially among young men,

are heavily influenced by trends within Black communities elsewhere. From dreadlocks to shaved heads, baggy pants to backward caps, basketball jerseys to Nike high-tops, Garifuna fashion displays a self-conscious Black aesthetic. The music they prefer includes soul, reggae, dance hall, and hip-hop and some of their favorite films, often sent by video from relatives abroad, depict the lives of inner-city African Americans (such as *Boyz 'N the Hood*, *Menace II Society*). Even their speech has become peppered with phrases such as “chillin’ ” and “nigga.’ ”

What does this everyday process of cultural exchange, this traffic and play in Blackness mean? Some observers assume that it represents a process of acculturation to Afro-North American norms that threatens Garifuna tradition and identity (Ghidinelli and Massajoli 1984). This view understands the primordialist vision of Garifuna identity as the only authentic mode of being Garifuna, denying the possibility of creative political or cultural expression. Garifuna have, in fact, created a whole new genre of music, Punta Rock, which combines traditional rhythms and drums with electronic instrumentation and lyrics sung (or rapped) in Garifuna, Spanish, or English. Garifuna Kids, a New York Punta band extremely popular in Honduras from 1994 to 1997, used this music as a vehicle for promoting Garifuna culture and identity while embracing the style and performance of a Black masculinity familiar to students of hip-hop (Perry 1998). Moreover, the consumption and imitation of U.S. African American culture itself takes on new meanings when analyzed in terms of identity struggles in the Honduran context.

Tony, a young man with a particularly keen interest in what he called “things Black American,” responded to a question about why Garifuna pattern so much of their style after African Americans by saying, “Black power [using the English phrase]. That is the Black power we bear [*llevamos*].” These practices do not negate Garifuna identity but perform it as part of a larger Black identity associated with resistance to “white” norms. The association with Blackness via the United States also confers a status as modern within Honduras, a country both dominated by the racial or cultural norms of mestizo nationalism and beleaguered by a Third World status as underdeveloped, poor, and backward. Referring to the popularity of certain trademarks such as Nike, Fila, Boss, and Tommy Hilfiger—themselves associated with Blacks—Tony noted, “We feel higher up when we wear brand names. For the mestizos it’s something strange . . . and it’s just now they’re beginning to imitate, imitate how Garifuna dress.” In appropriating the signs of Black America, Garifuna participate in its First World modernity and thereby elevate their own individual and collective position within Honduras.

The previous comments, though brief, point toward the existence of (at least) two competing notions of Blackness among contemporary Garifuna: that of a traditional people, bearers of a primordial Africa, and that of a modern people, participants in a global Black popular culture. Rather than simply celebrate this diversity as evidence of multiplicity or hybridity, we advocate analyzing it as the production of distinct, if overlapping, modes of diasporic identification connected to particular political struggles. In the first instance, the appeal to African authenticity—a form of diasporic identification concerned with roots and recovering the Black self—helps solidify group claims to primordial difference in the state politics of ethnic recognition and mobilization. In the second instance, the appropriation of Black culture from abroad—a form

of diasporic identification concerned with routes and remaking the Black self—helps elevate the position of Garifuna in the everyday politics of status and race. That Garifuna, collectively and individually, participate in both forms of diasporic identification points not just to “real dislocated histories and hybridized ethnicities” (Hall 1993:356) but to the construction of multiple standpoints from which to confront multiple forms of racialized oppression.

One of the most intriguing features of this example is that while Garifuna bear an ongoing history of geographic dispersal, racial mixture, and cultural syncretization, current transnational processes—the movement of people, culture, technologies, and ideologies—foment the essentialization of Black racial identities. The reification of Blackness is evident in both the Garifuna political movement—clearly influenced by pan-African and Afrocentric ideologies—and a youth culture that performs a racialized identity through Black popular culture from elsewhere. One young man claimed that Garifuna dress like African Americans “for the simple fact of being Black” [por el simple hecho de ser negro]. Clearly, however, the affirmation, expression, and even recognition of that so-called fact has been influenced by the increasing prominence of Blackness in the globalizing popular culture of sports, music, dance, and fashion. We suspect that ethnographic investigation would reveal that at this historical moment many people otherwise ambivalent about a Black racial identity, particularly in Latin America, have increasingly come to embrace it as a result of these processes.<sup>5</sup>

This is indeed the tendency in Nicaragua’s Creole community. The Creole voices presented in the beginning of this article are representative of historical processes of identity formation which can best be described as multiple and contradictory. Elsewhere Gordon (1998) has argued that, among other crosscutting identities, Creoles have inhabited three transnational identities simultaneously (Black Caribbean, Anglo, and indigenous), with the popularity and political salience of each varying historically.

During the 1980s strong Creole opposition to the Sandinista government fostered strongly anticommunist and pro-U.S. sentiments in the Creole population. In these circumstances major sectors of the Creole population emphasized their Anglo origins and cultural practices. With the fall of the Sandinista government in 1990 the focus of Creole political struggle changed. In their present circumstances Creoles fear their loss of influence and possible extinction as a result of out-migration and mestizo immigration. Under these circumstances Creoles have increasingly looked to a racialized Black identity as a standpoint from which to wage their struggles against the Nicaraguan state and the country’s dominant mestizo population.

The renewed prominence of Creole Blackness is clearly associated with the claims to modernity that the central position of Blackness in global popular culture affords. As with Garifuna, Creole youth, particularly males who have traveled to the United States and returned, drape themselves in the trappings of Black countermodernity, characterized by clothes, music, dance, language, body movement, sports, and so on.

Contemporary Creole Blackness also celebrates its authenticity and “autochthony” through celebration of its African and Caribbean roots. In just one example, this is demonstrated in many of the lyrics of the most popular Creole musical group of the 1990s, which fully appropriated reggae style and Rasta politics:

Africa, she is the heart of love,  
 Because she stays through all the problems she solves.  
 Africa is our mother's land  
 If it isn't so then where the hell I'm from. [Ellis and Mayers 1989]

Another striking example of the current global process of the reification of Blackness is in the realm of Creole organizational politics. During the late 1980s and early 1990s most of the established leaders of the Creole community of Bluefields, many of whom had actively denied their Blackness only a few years earlier, came together to form the Association of Black Nicaraguans. Its founding statement of objectives clearly reflects a Black standpoint and the influence of global pan-African and Afrocentric politics:

Instill in Black People a sense of pride and satisfaction in being Black and identified as such, opposed to the use of other epithets (Example: Creole, Negro, Colored).

Defend and Promote the cultural heritage of Black People.

Create among Black People an awareness of their overall situation on the Atlantic Coast and the need to join efforts in order to constantly improve self-situation.

Promote friendly relations with similar organizations of Black [*sic*] through out the world. [Association of Black Nicaraguans 1987]

### *Conclusion*

While the examples of diasporic identification presented here need to be developed more fully to include a range of crosscutting subject positions of class, gender, nationality, and ethnicity, they help clarify several of the key themes developed in this article. First, the cases of the Creoles in Nicaragua and Garifuna in Honduras—as peoples of mixed descent—remind us that racial identities are not given in nature but are constructed, ascribed, affirmed, and denied. The creation and expression of these identities occur under local conditions yet take on diasporic dimensions when the people involved share symbols of a global Blackness. Second, they demonstrate that processes of diasporic identification make reference not just to a common sense of origin but to other Black communities dwelling in displacement. Third, processes of diasporic identification should not be viewed simply as the creation of a shared sense of collective identity that transcends national boundaries but should be analyzed for their political meanings and effects related to local, national, and transnational struggles.

An ethnography of diasporic identity formation allows us to focus 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. Such ethnography is a critical first step in the elaboration of politics that take seriously Black people's own conceptualizations of their worlds and their place within them. It provides the only viable basis upon which we can construct politics that combat the specifics of racialized oppression.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup>The life and work of Du Bois reflects the tensions of simultaneously deconstructing the notion of race while articulating a standpoint through which particular subaltern subjects of racial constructions—in this case “Blacks”—can wage a politics of racial solidarity. For recent debates on Du Boisian thought and legacy, see Appiah 1992, Bell et al. 1996, Chandler 1996, and Liss 1998.

<sup>2</sup>This notion of diaspora as hybridity springs from a particular understanding of politics as change by fusion, articulation, and alliance and arises out of the peculiar circumstances of Britain during the 1980s when various peoples (of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian descent) began to align under a notion of Blackness that seemed for a moment to transcend their otherwise competing and disparate racial or cultural identities. That this project dissolved into particularistic understandings of racial and cultural difference (Brah 1996) points toward the need for analytical attention to specific forms of racism experienced by differently racialized groups.

<sup>3</sup>For a recent review of the proliferation of literature on “whiteness,” see Hartigan 1997.

<sup>4</sup>Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic remains confined to the anglophone world of the English-speaking Caribbean, Great Britain, and the United States, excluding numerous Black Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking communities in Latin America and Brazil.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Sansone 1997 for a discussion of the influence of globalized Black cultures and styles on the identities of youth in Afro-Bahia, Brazil.

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