

Memories and Connections: Thoughts on Intellectual and Institutional Links between African and Black Studies in the Reconstruction of African Identity

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The paper will account for the distance, isolation and growing ignorance between African and African-American experiences and realities across the Atlantic. Black identity and nationalism in civil rights era was forged through trans-Atlantic and Pan-African solidarity. Both African and African-American intellectuals and institutions were critical players in Pan-African nationalism and sustenance of civil rights struggles across the Atlantic. Indeed, in the second half of the twentieth century, the struggles for emancipation and civil rights were conducted through movements that closely linked Africa with its diaspora and invited active participation on both sides of the Atlantic to challenge Eurocentricism and imperialism. However, in the 1970s onwards, these Pan-African links were supplanted by vertical dialogue between western, especially white, 'experts' of Africa and Africans; a dialogue that was skewed in favour of Africanist paradigms and knowledge because of the obvious unequal distribution of intellectual resources in favour of racially privileged researchers in the North. This shift was also matched by the preponderance of negative themes about Africa, an increasing amount of ignorance in the west of the realities in Africa and the treatment of Africa as a mere object of curiosity and theory testing.

This paper will locate the growing ignorance of African realities in the rise and dominance of Africanist Africa, its disengagement from Black Studies, the marginalization of African-American and African scholarship (conducted by black scholars) in Euro-American scholarship and the de-emphasis of radical and Black intellectual traditions in the mainstream study of Africa. Africanist Africa is defined as a body of knowledge about Africa produced, dominated and transmitted by largely white scholars (plus a cohort of conservative black intellectuals) who have assumed the expert position on Africa. Their knowledge emphasizes a warped image of Africa often refracted through the modernization gaze. It perceives and explains African experiences by analogy, emphasizing what Africa ought to be, not what it actually is. It is Afro-pessimist in orientation, and is more concerned about Euro-American foreign policy interests in Africa than the welfare of and social struggles waged by Africans against the abuses of the neo-colonialism and a local comprador ruling class. Given the warped presentation of Africa, marginalization of black radical contribution to the study of Africa, and the preponderance of isolated themes that regularly skew the canon and content of African studies, the paper will conclude that African-American image of Africa feeds more on this warped presentation than on balanced realities on the continent. This skewed presentation has fostered ignorance and intensified the decline of Pan-African solidarity. As a remedy, the paper will propose enhancement of direct horizontal dialogue between African and African-Americans instead of the vertical dialogue between Africans and Africanists that has so far failed to yield sustained positive presentation of Africa's achievements and failures, gains and losses.