The Argument

In this presentation I attempt to go beyond much of what could be called “the cultural essence theses” of black diasporic studies and identity. In this case, I am asserting, or aiming to place more prominently in the schema of black diasporic scholarship, the significance of the political dimension of the phenomenon. I am by no means seeking to replace or discredit cultural themes – which are important - in the definition of the black diaspora, but mainly to give a more central focus on political-economic factors in their inter-relationship with the cultural, and how such political-cultural inter-relationship determines or explains the identity and developmental potentiality of what we term “the Black diaspora”. In social scientific terms, I am suggesting a more inductive or empirically based approach, to complement or perhaps even enrich the already brilliant but principally deductive-theoretical studies that pervade the landscape of black diasporic scholarship.

The ideas generated here resulted from my experience in participating in various Caribbean Studies Association (CSA) and other conferences in recent years, where I encountered a preponderance of literary interpretations of the terrain constituting the Caribbean and black diasporic studies. What struck me was that too many of the presentations in this genre were not only much devoid of empirical or even historical content which social scientists regard as critical, but involved an almost exclusive focus on explanation through thought and discourse, or the assumption of what some cultural theorists call “discursive praxis”. It is suggested here instead, that there is the need to re-establish the centrality of political praxis in all this, if we are to arrive at a real workable understanding of the important dynamics of change and transformation processes in the typically disadvantaged universe constituting the black diaspora.

Now what is this “black diaspora”? In short, we are referring to the post-Columbian experience of inhabitants of the so called New World or Black Atlantic. The main geographic locations of this black diaspora outside of Africa are, in historical order, are the Caribbean, Latin America, North America, and Europe. Labor migrations, forced or voluntary, played the key historical role in constituting this diaspora. Following the abolition of New World slavery in the 19th century, a second migratory wave particularly in the early 20th century saw what the Jamaican folk humorist, Louise Bennett, called “colonizing in reverse” when a large exodus of Caribbean people migrated to Europe and North America to, as Bennett put it, “populate the seat of the empire”.

Although this talk is about the black diaspora in general, the focus is on the Caribbean which could at least for the moment be viewed as a microcosm, or prototype, of
experiences embracing the black diaspora as a whole. However, I am not trying to make the great leap as to suggest that the Black diaspora represents a singular “imagined community” as Benedict Anderson (1983) might have put it. Our argument proceeds from our observation that the black diaspora comprises a multiplicity of different real (concrete) communities in which is commingled a variety of different ethnicities, races, and nationalities – a peculiar universe comprising not only Africanist traditions and practices, but interactive traditions from other cultures, particularly European, Indigenous, and Asian. Beyond the imaginings and the assumptions of “transcendence”, we still have to deal with different, often self conscious, nation states within this universe: a truly contested and often contentious terrain.

The Literature

The cultural-essentialist character of the literature tends to mute the political. But other problematic aspects develop within it. A prominent example in this regard is the tendency to assume an integral uniformity about Black diasporic identity. This assumption resonates in the works of black intellectuals ranging from Marcus Garvey in the 1920s who perceived Africa and Blackness as a seamless demographic space that is unconditionally interested in the reception of black peoples from wherever they are spread throughout the world. Also, modern scholars such as Paul Gilroy (1993) and Charles Mills (1998) contemplate blackness as basically an integrated whole in direct contrast with a similar holistic conceptualization of white Europeanized identity.

However, it cannot be taken for granted, as these cultural studies theorists have done, that in the black diaspora experience the commonalities among the different racial, ethnic and class sections of the particular political-racial formation will always and necessarily over-ride the differences and discontinuities between and among them. Thus, Gilroy’s suggestion that the idea of the black diaspora always “transcends constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” would seem somewhat overstated; instead, the very idea of the black diaspora must itself be defined in large part by these ethnic-cultural differences. At the very least, an understanding of these differences must figure in the very nature and conceptualization of the black diasporic formation.

Another problem arises with the conception of creolization or hybridization which is said to represent the central element in Caribbean and black diasporic identification. The idea of the “creolization” or “hybridization” process is portrayed in the literature as representing another kind of transcendence of geographic and demographic space. Shalini Puri, in her critique of this mainly post modern literature on the subject, suggests that hybridity is used here to represent some kind of “epistemological principle”. It supposedly transcends this space by amalgamating all ethnic-cultural differences in a singular unique and homogeneous cultural product in the Caribbean and black diaspora.

But on the other hand it seems to me that the process of creolization or hybridity goes beyond ethnic-cultural dynamics to embrace political-class considerations as well. It reflects the peculiar predominance or even hegemonic influence of the (usually ethnically
or racially mixed) middle classes which are indeed the most creolized section of the Caribbean and black diaspora social structures.

Another problematic issue in the conceptualization of black diasporic identity in literary and cultural studies is that the main objective here is what is called “discourse”, rather than interactive social and political practice. Thus, Edouard Glissant (1999) speaks of the creolization process in terms primarily of discourse on linguistic exchanges, while Brent Edwards (2003) conceives of black diasporic practices themselves basically in terms of literary expressions and translations.

Identifying the Political

By “the political” we are talking about the coexistence of a variety of conscious groups struggling for power and control over a particular domain or territorial space (including transnational locations). It represents a situation in which conflicts, force, and violence flourish in the course of struggle. The political represents power relationships between groups or communities, and is also played out both at national and international or global levels. The phenomenon of economic globalization, for example, brings into being since Columbus a kind of global plantation framework characterized by the political and ideological domination (or hegemony) of a small white or light complexioned class, over a typically darker complexioned mass of people around the world, with blacks always as the most disadvantaged group.

Active participants in resistance and rebelliousness against hegemonic groups come mainly from among these disadvantaged groups. Within this perspective, therefore, the Black diaspora is more properly conceived in terms of counter-hegemonic struggle. This struggle is pursued at both political and ideological levels of praxis.

Caribbean plantation society is a microcosm of black diasporic identity, and could be best described as a politicized racial formation with both distinctive and overlapping class, race, color and ethnic entities. Briefly defined, the concept of “ politicized racial formation” refers to a particular socio-political space in which power considerations loom large in race, class and human relationships. Within this system, states and governing regimes tend to distribute resources unequally along racial and class lines and usually to the benefit of the dominant racial section.

This formulation differs only slightly from Omi and Winant’s (1986/89) conceptualization of “racial formation” to characterize such starkly racial societies as the United States and South Africa under the Apartheid system. Their formulation incorporates the political, particularly in their suggestion that race biased inequality in resource distribution is the principal project of the state within the particular racial formation. Our formulation asserts the priority of the political by viewing the decision toward the imposition of racial, social and economic inequality as a deliberate political strategy towards the maintenance of political power and hegemonic control.
The identity most often sought within the black diaspora is not simply a racial-cultural (black African) identity, but basically a political identity that is recognizable internationally and globally. Even beyond the political, the identity sought by the people of the black diaspora is nothing short of the very humanity that equally applies to us, as it is to the rest of mankind.

The Politics of Resistance

Conflict is inherent in the very inception of conquest of the New World beginning with Columbus’ and European contact with the indigenous (Indian) peoples since 1492. From that inception, European use of force and brutality met native mass resistance. The historical legacy of such resistance and rebellion persisted up to the twentieth century as exemplified in the defiant creation of Black villages in opposition to white planter pressures everywhere following emancipation in the Caribbean, and not least in political struggles for democracy and independence between the 1940s and 1960s. The success of the Haitian revolution (1791-1804) influenced a generation of similar rebellious and revolutionary struggles throughout the hemisphere, inclusive of the slave rebellions in America between 1800 and 1831, and the Latin American revolution for independence from Spain in the early 1900s.

What both determines and defines this conflict situation is the prevalence of both divisive and overlapping ethnic, cultural, color and class sections within the diaspora.

Although the African villages in the Caribbean after emancipation became the centers of Africanist cultures, these were significantly influenced by Europeanized values, thereby creating a hybrid or “creole” cultural frame of existence. This hybrid (African-European) process of what is called “creolization” of culture in the New World is today seen in Caribbean musical expressions like Reggae and Calypso, as well as in Caribbean religious life styles like Voodoo and Rastafarianism. Both Voodoo and Rastafarianism marry African traditions and beliefs with Western Christian influences. Some of the richness of this Caribbean hybrid experience, particularly reggae and Rastafarianism, has become internationalized or globalized.

Modern manifestations of political conflicts and violence in the black diaspora often assume aberrant proportions inclusive of militarization, criminal gangsterism, and genocide. Throughout Africa political and military violence have affected the lives of millions, particularly in such countries as Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Congo, and the Sudan within recent times. Political (including militarized) conflicts involving ethnic or communal divisiveness, criminal gangsterism and narco-trafficking, are endemic in the Caribbean, in such countries as Haiti, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and Surinam. And genocide of major proportions, involving hundreds of thousands of people, has occurred in Rwanda and Burundi, and is still on-going in Darfur in Northern Sudan.
Conflicts in the black diaspora maintain a certain pattern which significantly contributes to the understanding of black diasporic identity. Speaking of the Caribbean, perhaps the most significant trend here is the shift from the more racial (black-white) conflict situation (from slavery since the 16th century to de-colonization struggles between 1940s and 1960s), to one involving a more ethnic based focus (since independence in the 1960s). At the same time, much of the class confrontational focus in the conflict situation is usually obscured in the process, and most often subsumed within racial and ethnic contexts. But the class situation has never totally disappeared. African slave resistance in the Caribbean was invariably a confrontation between a dominant planter class and a brutally subordinated black working population. Similarly, racial conflict situations in Africa, as in the Zimbabwe case for instance, usually pit a minority wealthy white owner class against a vast majority of dispossessed black African workers and farmers. Conflicts involving prominent ethnic dimensions are also usually instances of a subordinate dispossessed or marginalized population, against the more wealthy “ethnic dominant minorities” as Amy Chua (2004) put it.

Black diasporic resistance embraces the entire range of political violence activities, from passive resistance to rebellion and armed attacks with varying levels of intensity and success. It is carried out basically by what is discerned here as vehicles of resistance inclusive of political, social, cultural and religious organizations and movements. Mass activism such as spontaneous uprisings and defiant opposition is also included in this scheme. The vehicles of mass resistance are counter hegemonic in their political strategies and ideological orientations. The various traditions of mass resistance in the black diaspora are witnessed historically through what could be called their “demand profile”, that is, the collective articulation of demands for significant social change. Resistance traditions at the structural level involving spontaneous collective action and political and social organizations are usually complemented and reinforced by cultural forces mainly in religious, intellectual and musical involvements in the struggles for change.

Culture in the service of politics

Cultural organizations have become politicized in the continually tempestuous terrain of the black diaspora. Africanist religious forms, for example, have oscillated between passive resistance or refusal to cooperate with the established and alien powers that be - whether colonialism (the Caribbean) or white domination (US, Brazil, and South Africa) -, to the more extreme forms of resistance such as guerilla warfare (Latin America), rebellion (Guyana, Jamaica), and revolution (Haiti). Cases in point include the voodoo involvement of Boukman in mounting guerilla warfare in the early part of the Haitian revolution, the Rastafarian involvement in the extensive Rodney riots in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean during the 1960s, the biblical inspiration of famous leaders of black rebellions in the United States, including Prosser, Vesey, Walker and Turner in the early 19th century, to Martin Luther King and the SCLC in the mid 20th century, and the inspiration of liberation theology in the leftist rebellions throughout the Caribbean ranging from Grenada in the 1970s to Haiti in the 1990s.
Music, song and dance have also been used as instruments of political resistance in the black diaspora. The Brazilian Copeira, for example, a stylistic dance originating from Angola and Mozambique, is in fact a martial arts war dance, used by black slaves as a military preparation for guerilla warfare against the slave masters. Also, Brazilian Samba dance and music reflect the defiance of an under-privileged people against the more privileged classes, and therefore a struggle against class oppression as evidenced by a history of police harassment and repressive tactics against the economically impoverished exponents of this genre. Samba survived and evolved basically through the adoption of what could be termed marronage resistance tactics, its escape routes being disguised participation in the more culturally or nationally accepted Candomble and Carnival (Fryer, 2000).

Political culture

Spontaneous activism is soon co-opted or eclipsed by political and social organizations which then become a more concerted and efficient framework for the articulation of grievances and political demand. This organizational framework usually becomes catalytic to political and ideological movements (nationalism, pan-Africanism, and variants of Marxism the most prominent. Political and social organizations in the black diaspora are dynamic and interdependent. Often the one grows out of the other in dialectical forms of development. Thus, the nationalist Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) of Garvey was an initial inspiration for the opposing organizational form, the Marxist African Blood Brotherhood (ABB). Many ABB leaders started off as members, supporters or champions of the UNIA and its causes. Similarly, the reformist People’s Nationalist Congress (PNC) in Guyana emerged in 1958 as a break away movement from its original home, the Marxist PPP. This dialectic also applies to the relationship between the Black Power movement and the NAACP in the US civil rights struggle of the 1960s.

The underlying political demand of black protest and struggle – whether through spontaneous activism, organized resistance, or political protest via religious or musical expression – could be summarized in terms of either (a) liberation from domination and alien (or foreign) control, (b) improvement in economic and material conditions, (c) self determination and sovereignty over one’s natural, political and economic environment and resources, (d) peaceful coexistence, equality and solidarity with other peoples and cultures, or (e) some combination of all of these objectives. These perspectives are common to both black Nationalism and Marxism (as such there appears to be no absolute contradiction between these two political philosophies). Historically, black leaders have constantly shuffled backwards and forwards between Nationalism and Marxism, as exemplified in the leadership of the ABB members, the Black Panther Party, the Caribbean Left including the Working People’s Alliance (WPA) in Guyana, and New Jewel Movement (NJM) in Grenada in the 1970s.
The Solidarity Dynamics

Solidarity is continuously being demanded in the process of struggle, particularly against outside destabilizing pressures, and also towards the realization of developmental change within the diaspora. The various modes of resistance – spontaneous activism, organized movement, and religious and musical expressions – usually require cross-cultural or multi-ethnic solidarity in the quest for change. But the attainment of such solidarity between potentially conflictual groups has always been problematic, mainly because of the obstacles put in its way by those forces that benefit from fragmentations and divisions among groups and communities. The struggle for power and control of resources, often calls forth a protracted conflict between the forces of divisiveness and the forces of solidarity and community. But how is solidarity negotiated or attained within such a contentious and divisive process?

The dynamics involved in the movements or shifts between violent and non violent struggles, and between nationalist and Marxist or socialist ideological responses – in fact, the complex struggles towards the realization of greater democratization processes – generate efforts to reach out beyond particular niches, towards collaboration with other participating ethnic and racial groups. Advancing democratization processes unleash a variety of contradictory tendencies involving movements both within and across ethnic and class divisions, as well as external (foreign) interventions. The processes of both divisiveness and collaboration among groups become inevitably locked in a symbiotic interrelationship in struggles towards democratic developments in ethnic divided societies. Understanding how these combinations persist or deteriorate is critical for the development of both theoretical and practical insights into sustaining political solidarity in this contentious universe.

This combination or alternation between fragmentation (divisiveness) and solidarity among protest groups and movements is more clearly exemplified by the three most outstanding historical episodes of struggle for political change and transformation in the black diaspora: (1) the decolonization struggle in the Caribbean (1930s to 1960s), (2) the civil rights struggle in the America (1960s), and (3) the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa (1950s-1990s). The Caribbean decolonization struggle, originally led by the People’s National Party (PNP) in Jamaica, the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) in Guyana, and the People’s National movement (PNM) in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1950s, split and splintered into myriad varieties of factions, mainly because of foreign (particularly British) destabilizing pressures; yet the simultaneous solidarity across the ethnic and communal divide within these states, and from international supports particularly among Caribbean diaspora groups in New York and London, helped to sustain these essentially nationalist movements toward the eventual attainment of political independence.

The ideological basis of political solidarity in the black diaspora was significantly buttressed by other factors such as shared experience and demands for resource control and redistribution. Ideologies such as nationalism and socialism act as both a cement and a guide to these disadvantaged groups and movements in the struggle. The idea of
communitarian socialism (e.g., ujaama), usually overlooked in the literature on diasporic identity, was widespread in African and Caribbean societies during the 1970s, and advocated as means towards the mobilization of peoples within and across communities and ethnicity in a variety of development projects.

The Caribbean experience of multi-ethnic solidarity was exemplified most forcefully in 1953 in Guyana, when Africans and East Indians developed a strong alliance in struggle against British colonialism, under the aegis of the then nationalist/Marxist People’s Progressive Party (PPP). This multi-ethnic political alliance was powerful enough to win the first democratic elections in Guyana (1953) by a landslide. The British responded swiftly by suspending the democratic constitution, dismissing the PPP government from office, incarcerating the leaders, and engineering a divide and rule strategy which ultimately led in 1955 to and ideological cum racial split in the party and nationalist movement.

Multi-racial/ethnic linkages are also reflected in the origins of the Jamaican born Rastafarian movement which expresses strong beliefs in the majesty and biblical authority of Africa. Evidence of its multi-racial/ethnic roots, according to V.J. Prashad (2001), is indicated by the significant influence of East Indian, particularly Hindu, life styles and fashions - such as vegetarianism, smoking herbs, and wearing dreadlocks within Rastafarianism. Similar multi-ethnicity is evidenced in Caribbean Carnival or Brazilian Mardi Gras. Both Soca and Chutney music, for instance, prominent in Caribbean Carnivals and air waves, are extraordinarily creative multi-racial expressions, involving as they do the mixing of African, East Indian and African American rhythm to form a unique and highly infectious beat - a great tourist attraction.

However, the relationship between the fragmentation process and the solidarity process is basically an asymmetric one, with the former appearing to be the dominant tendency over the latter up to this stage in the black diasporic historical experience. Realizing political solidarity out of this dominant ethnic differentiating process is definitely an up hill struggle. The best result so far is the attainment of what could be termed “strategic multi-ethnic/racial solidarity” rather that the often anticipated historical progression towards more and more developed forms of multi racial unity in struggles towards political change and revolutionary transformations (see Abraham, 2007).

Explaining Black Diasporic Identity

The black diaspora displays several closely inter-related trends and tendencies, the most important of which are (a) the tendency towards both differentiation and recombination on the part of activist groups characterized by either ethnicity, economic and social class, or community, reflecting varying patterns of conflict or cooperation among them; (b) the politicization of cultural and social processes, reflecting group interaction and participation in negotiating political demand, and struggles towards empowerment and change; (c) consistent resistance (whether violent or non violent) against the forces or obstacles in the way of expanding the range of freedom in the political and social system,
and (d) the constant search for resources that augment political solidarity between and among the different, sometimes incompatible, sometimes complementary, forces for change and transformation within the diaspora.

On the theoretical level, we recognize in this process that the modernist notions of enlightenment and collective emancipation still represent significant motivating factors in the ongoing struggles towards greater freedom and equality in these underdeveloped parts of the world. Therefore, conceptualizing the black diaspora in purely post-modernist terms which reject enlightenment notions and emancipatory projects is somewhat misleading. Not only are enlightenment notions such as scientific understanding important for overcoming some of the superstitions that surround the political culture of significant parts of the African diaspora – as in the recent controversy over the cure for HIV/AIDS in Africa - but the emancipatory prospect of liberating black and indigenous peoples from the yoke of imperialist globalization and resource mal-appropriation, is still incomplete, and therefore most relevant. It is within this context of incomplete modernity that the need for political solidarity becomes urgent.

However, the problem with the practice of solidarity is that it keeps breaking down at a critical juncture following the realization of initial successes. Such breakdown is evidenced in a wide variety of solidarity struggles ranging from strikes over bread and butter or survival issues (the 1977 Guyana Agricultural Workers Union (GAWU) strike in Guyana), to the realization of political or ideological objectives as in the cases of the decolonization struggles in the Caribbean in the 1950s, and the aftermath of the civil rights struggle in US in the 1960s. This breakdown is equally reflected in voting strategies in national elections, as in the case of the fracas in the Guyana Patriotic Coalition for Democracy (PCD) in the 1980s. The significant sources of the breakdown in these cases are either foreign intervention as in the PPP split in 1955, government crackdown or leadership/personality differences as in the 1952 PNP split or purge and the PCD disintegration in the 1980s, or resource constraints as in all of these cases and beyond. These constraints affect particularly the myriad variety of smaller Left parties and movements barely struggling to survive in a usually inhospitable political environment.

Yet within this context the demand for transformative development, justifiable and necessary though it might be, is constantly frustrated due primarily to foreign ownership of the major economic resources and consequent destabilizing interventions employed usually to protect foreign ownership and control. Destabilization not only fosters fragmentation of forces at the mass level, but at the same time works towards the consolidation and concentration of forces at the level of the elite or capital. Primarily because significant sections of the black middle classes and white or lighter complexioned upper classes fear working class solidarity across racial and ethnic boundaries, because, that is, such mass solidarity threatens their position of dominance and stability, hegemonic and counter hegemonic struggles between the dominant section and militant groups constantly pervade the landscape of the black diaspora.

Conclusion
Regarding black diasporic identity, several conclusions could be suggested. First, black diasporic identity is not a singular unified identity, but rather a complex amalgam of multiple identities going beyond cultural factors such as race, rhythm, or spirituality, to embrace political and economic factors as well. In fact at critical moments, particularly in the struggle for significant social changes – such as towards freedom, equality, and empowerment - political and economic considerations tend to be dominant or focal. Thus, in practical terms, the notion of cultural identity tends to be secondary to the quest for a political agenda of which economic development and resource control are the most significant items.

Yet black diasporic identity is not necessarily totally fragmented and chaotic, or permanently in a state of what Glissant refers to as “infinite metamorphosis”. Nor yet is black diasporic identity demonstrative of some kind of totalitarian order, as in Beckford’s (1972) portrayal of the typical plantation society framework. In fact the conceptualization of Caribbean and black diasporic identity should fall somewhere between these two extremes. Based on our analysis so far, Caribbean and black diasporic identity would seem to be best described as a condition reflecting order amidst chaos, or akin to what Sydney Mintz discerns as simultaneous “sameness and difference”. Far from being either an anarchistic or an absolutist universe, the Caribbean and black diaspora represents recurrent and successive transformations and syntheses, as much as continual cultural celebration in the face of serious vulnerability to external penetration and control. The situation represents a series of contingent and contradictory instances which demand constant negotiation of black diasporic identity - what Stuart Hall (1995) in addressing the Caribbean situation calls “negotiated identities”. The political significance of negotiating such identities is to be gleaned from Hall’s further contention that not only is Caribbean identity characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity, but that it was born in a situation of what he termed “violent rupture” originating with European contact with natives Indians and Africans in these parts.

Although ethnic differentiation demonstrates fissiparous and centrifugal (disintegrating) tendencies throughout the black diaspora, the relationship between groups becomes overtly conflictual and/or violent mainly to the extent of elite or foreign involvement in the manipulation of ethnicity in the pursuit or control of political power and economic resources. The challenge therefore is in developing strategies towards equality and empowerment that are basically non-violent. Accomplishments by way of this non-violent approach can be significantly facilitated if solidarity does not presuppose absolute fusion or elimination of differences (authoritarian practices), but represents a recognition and incorporation of differences in a relatively flexible kind of alliance formation process (i.e., more democratic strategies).
References


