

Abstract

**Overcoming the Valence of Victimhood:
Constructing an Authentic African American Diaspora Identity in the 21st Century**

By

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For those of us who came of age in the 1960's, that decade represented exhilarating, heady times indeed. Steeped in anti-authoritarian rebellion, it manifested a period of time when there was severe social unrest and dislocation throughout the United States. The civil rights movement had hit its stride in the US South; the Vietnam antiwar movement was a force to be reckoned with; the sexual revolution was shocking traditional sensibilities everywhere; and urban race riots visited more than a hundred US cities. Although the twenty-four cable news format was yet to be invented (by CNN in 1980), modern technology in the late sixties made it possible for same day broadcast from disparate parts of the world. Consequently, as Marx Kurlansky opines in his book *1968: The Year That Rocked the World*'(2005)

1968 was a time of shocking modernism, and modernism always fascinated the young and perplexed the old, yet in retrospect it was a time of an almost quaint innocence. Imagine Columbia students in New York and University of Paris students discovering from a distance that their experiences were similar and then meeting, gingerly approaching one another to find out what, if anything, they had in common. With amazement and excitement, people learned that they were using the same tactics in Prague, in

Paris,, in Rome, in Mexico, in New York. With new tools such as communication satellite and inexpensive erasable videotape, television was making everyone aware of what everyone else was doing, and it was thrilling because for the first time in human experience the important, distant events of the day were immediate. (Kurlansky, xix)

It is out of this heady global mix that the US Black Power movement was born in the second half of the 1960's. Bold, audacious and anti-establishment, it was counterpoint to the non-violent direct action civil rights movement epitomized by Nobel laureate, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Much like King's effort, the Black Power movement was born out of frustration with the "White power structure's" slow ambivalent response to historical segregation-busting breakthroughs like in the US supreme court's 1954 decision in *Brown vs. The Board of Education* and the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act passed by the US Congress a decade later.

Like most modern ideological streams, Black power did not spring out of nowhere. Its intellectual predecessors included the likes of W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, and even the much-maligned Booker T. Washington. Indeed, you were considered "out of the loop" when it came to Black Power ideology unless you read classics like Dubois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *Garvey and Garveyism* by Amy Jacques Garvey (1963, 1968) or Booker T Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901). Consequently, this "new" brand of black nationalism dubbed Black Power in the 60's had Pan-African roots. Indeed, it is no more coincidence that while African-Americans were agitating for their rights through the civil rights and Black power movements in the US liberation movements were winning results on the continent of Africa. Clearly, in the view of Martin Luther King Jr., these two efforts were intimately connected. In

discussing the phenomenon of African American college student activism in his *Autobiography* (1998) he states:

The campuses of Negro colleges were infused with dynamism of both action and philosophical discussion. Even in the thirties, when the college campus was alive with social thought, only a minority were involved in action. During the sit-in phase, when a few students were suspended or expelled, more than one college saw the total student body involved in a walkout protest. This was a change in the student activity of profound significance. Seldom, if ever, in American history had a student movement engulfed the whole student body of college.

Many of the students, when pressed to express their inner feelings, identified themselves with students in Africa, Asia, and South America. The liberation struggle in Africa was the great single international influence on American Negro students. Frequently, I heard them say that if their African brothers could break the bonds of colonialism, surely the American Negro could break Jim Crow. (King 138)

Additionally, my colleague, Daniel Don Nanjira makes the connections clear in his new book *African Foreign Policy and Diplomacy from Antiquity to the 21st Century* (2010):

Along with Pan-Africanism was the doctrine of Negritude. It was propounded by Aime Cesaire of Martinique. Negritude as a philosophy was later advanced by Leopold Senghor, poet and president of Senegal. In essence, Negritude was French for blackness and was very similar to Pan-Africanism. They both carried the same message and basically supported the significance and pride of Africanness and the Back to America movement for freed slaves from the New World. The two doctrines also stressed the need to save Africa from European Imperialism.

Thus, Pan-Africanism and Negritude promotes the African arts, especially against imitations of European styles, traditions, and values often imposed on Africa during colonial times.

Colonialism had ignored, dispersed, and underrated African cultural values and expressions as “uncivilized” and primitive.

Both Pan-Africanism and Negritude as cultural tool comprise three constituent elements or requirements: Blackness/Africanness; liberation of the African from all bonds of subjugation and exploitation; and self-rule, self-ownership and self governance. (Nanjira 243)

What is clear from all of this is that for at least since the early nineteenth century to the 21st century, African Americans in the Diaspora have displayed a clear consciousness of and connection to their dark skinned brothers and sisters on the African continent. What is not clear, however, is what the sense of connectedness means to the present and future possibilities for black Africans and black people in the United States of America. In this paper, I will attempt to lay out some challenges that this self-understanding presents. I intend to do so by discussing “Overcoming the Valence of Victimhood: Constructing an authentic African American Diaspora Identity.”

In considering this important issue, I would like to advance the following three related propositions

1. The black political and intellectual leadership who organize their public discourse around “black empowerment; are using a discredited social construct born out of the victimhood of both dark-skinned Africans on the continent through colonialism and African Americans in the diaspora through slavery and segregation.
2. Victimhood has valence, or a chemical-like reaction that tends to militate against an empowering authentic identity development by the victimized as evidenced

by what I call the Post Victimization Ethical Exemption (PVEE) Syndrome that allows victims to excuse inertia and/or unethical destructive acts by themselves or others in their group because of their victimization.

3. Things really have changed over the past half century in Africa and in the African American Diaspora in a way that demands a new identity paradigm that would facilitate a more authentic self-empowering identity for dark-skinned Africans and Diaspora African Americans than one based primarily on skin color.

As pointed out by Manuel Castells in *The Power of Identity* Vol. 2 (2004):

The contemporary condition of African Americans has been transformed in the past three decades by a fundamental phenomenon: their profound division along class lines, as shown in the pioneering work by William Julius Wilson, the implications of which shattered forever the way America sees African Americans, and even more importantly, the way African Americans see themselves. (Castells 57)