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# THE AUSTIN SCHOOL MANIFESTO

## *An Approach to the Black or African Diaspora*

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We are embattled—writing, living, and participating in various transnational struggles from our positions as intellectuals in the US: post-civil rights, post-Black Power, post women’s liberation, post queer liberation. This is a moment of reactionary attacks on the gains of previous generations and the attendant reality of fundamentalist wars over power and resources in which Blacks and other people of color are disproportionately victimized. In this moment, as activist critical intellectuals we are compelled by our politics and positionalities to work together to articulate scholarship and activism. Our aim is to form clearer conceptualizations of our collective condition and, more pointedly, to contribute to the liberation of African-descended peoples, and all others, from socially constructed limitations and diminished life chances. We believe that teaching and the production of insurgent knowledge is itself one form of ‘resistance’; however, we struggle to push our work past discourse to praxis. We seek social transformation through both aspects of our work.<sup>1</sup>

Black and/or Africana Studies is concerned with Black collectivity, Black positioning in relation to power and social hierarchy, and Black agency regardless of national or other boundaries imposed upon us. It follows then that Africana/Black Studies is the intellectual and political work as well as the intellectual politics of the Black and/or African Diaspora. This is our approach to the Black/African Diaspora.

We acknowledge the importance of traditional notions of the Black/African Diaspora as a concept that refers to the dispersion—and attendant racialization—of Black bodies through distinct but overlapping histories of enslavement, colonization, and forced/voluntary migration, as well as resistance and contestation. These processes are mobilized by the globalization of racial capitalism, originally by the transatlantic slave trade. This produced multiple and distinct formations of anti-Black interpellation and racial structuration which have created and continue to create ‘Africa’ and ‘Blackness’ and have impelled the dispersal of peoples of African descent across the globe.

However, our notion of the Black/African Diaspora moves far beyond the mobility and unity imposed on dominated subjects through their interpellation as Black. Rather, our idea of Diaspora focuses on Black agency and the processes of self-making; the Black/African Diaspora as a transnational cultural, intellectual, and, above all, political project that seeks to name, represent, and participate in Black people's historic efforts to construct our collective identities and constitute them through cultural-political practices dedicated to expressing our full humanity and seeking for liberation.

We recognize that racialization and corresponding racial formations manifest themselves differently in various locations. Within these contexts peoples who are interpolated as Black self-make their subjectivities and fill them culturally and politically in multiply distinct ways. We do not root Blackness in imagined notions of Africa, or assume an essential unity of African-descended people across national, gender, sex, class, or any other sites of difference. Nevertheless, we understand that diasporic notions of Blackness as identity and culture are dialogically produced among African and African-descended populations worldwide. We recognize Diaspora as characterized by both Black roots and Black routes: Black *roots* meaning the politics and experiences of many Black people of meaningful connections to 'imagined' or 'real' African ancestry and culture; Black *routes* being the historical and political-economic processes by which Black identities have been constructed within and across local places and national spaces—for example, Brixton, New Orleans, Port Au Prince and Rio de Janeiro—made up of folks with similar relationships to racialized power hierarchies who recognize each other as connected and potentially collective.

We have consciously chosen to employ the term *African Diaspora* to disrupt the traditional ways that Africa and its peoples have been reified as sites of savagery and underdevelopment. To reiterate, we are not privileging Africa as the primary site of Black identity formations, nor are we rooting Blackness in imagined notions of Africa, though we affirm the importance and power of this imaginary. Instead, we seek to critically resituate Africa within both historical and contemporary global processes of racial formation and the politics of Blackness. This move acknowledges the important ways that Africa and the Black Diaspora have been and continue to be mutually constituted.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis of and struggle against racisms is one of the fundamental organizing elements of our perspective. The diasporic framework places seemingly disparate processes of racial formation in dialogue, enabling us to recognize and articulate how race operates locally and globally. Following the principles of racial formation theory we are working to develop a diasporic race theory that probes the articulation of processes of racial structuration with practices of racial representation. We are particularly interested in unveiling hegemonic notions of cultural difference/pathology, racelessness,

and hybridity. In this way, we seek to reveal the ways in which some rely on transparent identities as the basis of their privilege while denying others the ability to use identification as a tool of struggle against such privilege.<sup>3</sup>

Our analysis of racial formation among global Black populations demonstrates that race is crucial to the construction of identities in the Black/African Diaspora. Racial identities continue to be axes by which power and resources are controlled and distributed. Even in societies where color/class continua exist and the existence of racism is denied, these are masked expressions of racial processes and racialized identities that enable structures of dominance. Given the continued salience of (racialized) identities in the Black/African Diaspora, our work attends to the political significance and effectiveness of mobilization around issues of identity. Black identity politics is a fundamental constitutive element of Black diasporic cultural processes and communities. Therefore, without understanding the cultural politics behind the strategic construction of Black identities, there is no framework for understanding Black expressive practices. Moreover, we insist that in a global racial formation in which racialization and racism continue to structure social processes with devastating material effects and in which political collectivity empowers, Black identity remains an important (though admittedly contradictory) basis from which to wage forms of collective anti-racist struggle.

As we understand it, race is neither adequately understood nor lived absent inter-articulating and mutually constituting axes of [at least] gender, class, and sexuality. Our political commitment and scholarly choice in this regard emerges from the Black radical intellectual tradition of Black feminism, which persuasively posits, among other things, that listening to knowledges, movements, and expressive projects from below and in between power axes provides the most powerful critical locus and compass. As we seek to move beyond additive analytical approaches and rather insist upon the mutually constitutive character of identities and inequalities along the lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, following Black feminist precepts, we are committed to strategies of simultaneous struggle for justice against all forms of social hierarchy.<sup>4</sup>

Methodologies are the conceptual framework of our research and methods are the tools we deploy to carry out the research. Our methodology is driven by the overarching goals of social change and theoretical development. We seek to couple established methods with those that emerge from our interactions with collectivities with whom we work. In struggles for liberatory politics, our emphasis is on dialogic and reflexive methods. Rather than stressing observation as a method, we stress participation: acknowledging our positionality, engaging in dialogue and synthetic practice. Reflexivity is a critical and aware process for transformative practice.

The core of our practice is activist research. Our research agenda is formulated through the people with whom we work, in alignment with their efforts, and with a shared sense of purpose. Our conceptual repertoire emerges from their political struggles and from our commitment to an anti-racism agenda. A central goal of the School is to work in support of liberatory social change and create the conditions through which academic practice can contribute to these ends. This kind of practice engages us in social movements and other forms of political practice that we find produce new forms of knowledge. Activist research begins with an act of political identification and dialogue with collective subjects in struggle for relief from oppression, for equality and betterment. These dialogic processes in activist approach will necessarily transform our methodologies.

Upon this activist research foundation, the Austin School engages in activism that include: pedagogy and training; university-based politics, both contesting racism and affirming actions of institution building; public education; direct activism and advocacy with struggles that we support.

## NOTES

This manifesto is a collective living document. For this reason there is no definitive version. This version was presented by E.T. Gordon at Williams College in spring 2006 and revised in August 2006. It was based on the results of a collective writing effort initiated during the two-day Diaspora Symposium held at UT Austin in 2003, with a version produced by Jafari Allen from notes that he and Jemima Pierre took of discussions that took place over the course of two days during the Diaspora Symposium held in 2005. This was leavened with some of ETG's insights and those presented on the subject in commentary by Charles Hale as a discussant of papers presented by affiliates of UT's Diaspora Program on an AAA panel in 2004.

1. Black Studies emerged out of the Black Power movement in this country. To continue to have salience both for the Black community and within academia it must retain its activist and contestatory core and in particular its anti-racist project. Neither Blackness nor anti-Black racism are contained by national boundaries. Given the particular place of Blacks in the global racial formation and the centrality of racial oppression to interlocking modes of social and material hierarchy worldwide, the struggle for Black liberation has global implications for human liberation. Therefore, global formations of capital, race, patriarchy, etc. and the place of Blacks within them can only be understood and combated in diasporic perspective. In the tradition of Dubois, Lorde, Drake, and many others, the intellectual and political work as well as the intellectual politics of the Black/African Diaspora is what Black Studies should be.
2. African Studies is thus seen as an integral part of Black Studies. Sub-Saharan Africa is part of the Black/African Diaspora in the routes sense of its peoples' connections with diasporic Black identities and cultural processes. It is an

integral part of Black Studies in that its peoples occupy positions similar to and connected with those of other diasporic Blacks in global racial formation and that racialization processes similar to those that take place elsewhere in the Diaspora take place on the continent. Analysis of how racial processes operate in relation to Africa or in Diaspora without understanding the other is incomplete. Sub-Saharan Africa is part of the Black Diaspora and so should be a part of Black Studies.

3. It should be obvious that Critical Race Studies and in particular racial formation theory are central theoretical tools for our notion of Black Studies. Historically and contemporarily, we understand local, regional, and global racial formations to be the contexts within which Blackness and Black politics are created. Racial formation theory provides critical theoretical tools to understand these processes.
4. As laid out here, Black feminist theory and particularly its emphasis on intersectionality provide key theoretical tools for our version of Black Studies. We are also particularly interested in the ways in which patriarchy as ideology and practice are key to understanding important issues of gender and sexuality in our communities. In general, the heterosexist and masculinist focus of Black Studies can only be reversed by making Africana Women's Studies a central feature of Black Studies.

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The compiler–interpreter of this version of the Austin School Manifesto is Edmund T. Gordon, Sterling Brown Visiting Professor at Williams College (Fall 2006), Director of the Center for African and African American Studies, Assoc. Prof. of Anthropology, and founding member of the African Diaspora Graduate Program in Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. He is a light skinned and eyed, 55-year-old, married with two children, heterosexual, bi-racial Black man who was born in New York to a middle-class professional family. This version of the Manifesto reflects this and other more complex aspects of his positionality. [email: [etgordon@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:etgordon@mail.utexas.edu)]