

## What Has African Cultural Studies Done for You Lately? Autobiographical and Global Considerations of a Floating Signifier

Handel K. Wright, *University of British Columbia*

### Abstract

This essay poses and attempts to answer the central question, “what does African cultural studies do?” It takes an autobiographical approach to address the genealogy, status quo and the potential future of the floating signifier that is African Cultural Studies. It unpacks and multiplies African cultural studies and contextualizes it as a form of African studies and as both interventionist in and contributory to transnational cultural studies. African cultural studies marginality in the global discourse is rearticulated as both a positioning of disempowerment on the one hand and one of generative and insurgent politics on the other. Stressing the need for continental and diasporic Africans to self-identify issues to be addressed (in place Eurocentric, imposed preoccupations), the essay identifies as examples the always already complex nature of identity and belonging (and the irony of emergent xenophobia); continental and diasporic relations that trouble the taken for grantedness of what constitutes Africa(ns), and queer Africa in the face of institutionalized homophobia. Whether local nativist or globally engaged approaches are taken, the essay concludes, African cultural studies ought to be self-reflexively, dedicated not only to doing cultural studies but to what the doing of African cultural studies does for Africa(ns) and for transnational cultural studies.

### Keywords

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representation.

**Username:** handelw

**Address:** University of British Columbia, Faculty of Education, Ponderosa Commons, 6445 University Boulevard

**City:** Vancouver

**State/County/Province:** British Columbia

**Postal code:** V6T 1Z2

**Country:** Canada

**Telephone:** + 604-822-2705

**2nd telephone:** + 778-997-1759

**Fax:** + 604-822-4244

**Email:** [handel.wright@ubc.ca](mailto:handel.wright@ubc.ca)

Addressing the status quo and future of “African Cultural Studies” is a seriously daunting task but that is what we are gathered here to undertake.<sup>i</sup> The programme promises a truly exciting variety of topics and issues that are to be addressed in the first conference on African cultural studies in Canada. But this assumes that there is such a thing as African cultural studies and that it is readily recognized. My title describes African Cultural Studies as a floating signifier. My autobiographical approach will address some global and intellectual considerations. I resist taking up the notion and texts of African cultural studies as given and circumscribed, as examples of what Edward Said (1983) decries as an impossibility: texts that exist in a hermetically sealed cosmos. Instead I want to trouble the taken for granted meaning of the very category we will be working with at this conference, to unfix and multiply its meaning, to speak to its inherent political nature and relatedness to what Foucault (1980) calls power-knowledge and to emphasize what Said would call its worldliness.

Explaining my title is hopefully a productive way to both introduce and contribute to addressing my topic. I want to follow Stuart Hall’s (1992) lead and absolve myself of what he described as “the many burdens of representation which people carry around;” of an African version of what Hall termed “the black man’s burden” (Hall 1992: 277).<sup>ii</sup> In my case and especially as a keynote speaker, the expectation might be that I will speak not only experientially but authentically and authoritatively about continental African identity, Africa and its issues, the African diaspora, Black lives on the continent and in the diaspora and indeed all things Black and African. After all I am

Black and thus have the phenotypical credentials for it; I am a Sierra Leonean, born and bred on the continent and so have the deep historical, spatial and cultural roots for it; I am an African working in the Canadian academy and thus am what Spivak (1999) has called “the native informant at hand” who can be relied upon to translate Africa and Africans to academics in the audience who are not African. And I am even dressed for the role – in “African robes,” surely about to perform or indeed perhaps already performing authentic Africanness and Blackness or at least the Black African academic at hand.

Taking an autobiographical approach comes with the danger of positioning oneself as unassailably correct in one’s authority and authenticity, as narcissistic or as given over to navel-gazing. My intention here is quite the opposite: as Hall (1992) points out, paradoxically, “in order not to be authoritative, I’ve got to speak autobiographically” (277). And to borrow again from Hall’s modest intellectualism, more specifically his generative notion “without guarantees” (Hall 1986; Gilroy, Grossberg & McRobbie 2000; Andrews & Giardina 2008; Wright 2016a), I regard what I am attempting here as “African cultural studies without guarantees,” a designation that signals both the high importance of the overall project of articulating (in both senses) African cultural studies on the one hand and on the other the caveat that the justness of the overall project is no guarantee that my specific approach and this particular work is effective, correct, and justified. Yes, I will touch on the contours, history and potential future of African cultural studies not definitively and authoritatively but rather under the restraint of the personal- decidedly subjectively, even, hopefully, modestly, with necessary caveats and nods to other ways of seeing things and within the limits of my own takes on the issues. I take up African cultural studies as actually or potentially utilitarian, not only in the sense of contributions it might make to exploring aspects of African culture and addressing African problems but also and especially in the sense of contributions it is making and could make to our conceptualization of the origin and history (or more accurately, the origins and histories) of global cultural studies and to the work of representation within it.

### **Unpacking and Multiplying African Cultural Studies**

So, what of our object of study, African Cultural Studies? It is all too easy to take it for granted that the object is identifiable and universally recognized. I have deliberately described it as a

floating signifier to trouble this idea. I don't mean to suggest African cultural studies is a floating signifier in Claude Levi-Strauss' (1950/1987) original literal sense (i.e. a signifier without a referent or without a signified) but rather in Ernesto Laclau's (1987) overtly politicized sense of the floating signifier having a signified which is in fact the result of a hegemonic process that has appropriated (and obfuscated) various unsatisfied demands. An empty signifier in Laclau's sense is necessarily open to contestation, with claims made upon it by various differing, opposing or allied political stances and causes. In this sense, then, though it might appear to be known, what we are calling African cultural studies should more accurately be identified as multiple (reflective of various positions on Africa, African studies and cultural studies) and should be contested over in the struggle for what it can and should become.

Consider, for example, the spatiality of African cultural studies: are we speaking strictly about continental Africa or does the concept spill over beyond the continent into its globally dispersed diaspora? Jacinta Muteshi (2003) considers the distinction between continent and diaspora to be substantial and meaningful and is quite wary of the altogether too comfortable appropriations of African dress, names, culture and identity by some in the diaspora (Blacks in New York in her specific example). On the other hand, Molefi Asante (1990), drawing on Wole Soyinka' (1990) criticism of a limited and limiting "saline consciousness" vision of Africa, has asserted somewhat poetically that, "Africa does not end where salt water licks the shores of the continent" (7).

And how about Africans and African culture and identity- do they refer, in strategically essentialised terms (a la Gayatri Spivak) to a homogenous Black Africa or to a notion that acknowledges a complexity of multiple Black ethnicities and cultures? Or, even more complexly, do they refer to the juxtaposition and intermingling of (the always already contested categories) Arabs, Asians, Blacks and whites of various ethnicities and individual and hybridized material cultures and practices on the continent? In the diaspora especially and even on the continent we can stick with cultural nationalism, which Paul Gilroy (1995) describes as "conceptions of culture which present immutable, ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of 'Black' and 'white' people;" or we can conceptualize African identity as always already constituted by what Gilroy identifies as the more difficult theoretical/conceptual frames of "creolization, metissage, mestizaje and hybridity" (2).

In disciplinary (and indeed multidisciplinary) terms African cultural studies can be conceptualized in various ways. I'll speak to two of these: first, in relation to area studies as a form of African studies and second, in relation to the field of cultural studies as a distinctive discursive frame within and contributor to global cultural studies. VY Mudimbe (1988) makes the sustained and persuasive argument that African studies is always already a historical and political construction, one in which the historical and global politics of knowledge construction (what Foucault (1980) cogently calls "power-knowledge") is inextricably imbricated. More specifically Mudimbe illustrates that from philosophy to ethnology to anthropology, African studies is imbricated in the racial/racist, colonial/imperialist, ideological/Eurocentrist relations between Europe as epistemological centre and arbiter and Africa as knowledge object, with even African and Africanist scholars working within Eurocentric frames as imitators of Eurocentric disciplinarity and scholarship. Mudimbe asserts that in fact from explorations to religious conversions to disciplinary examinations- African studies is actually not about Africa and its peoples and cultures but ultimately about Europe and whiteness. Ethnographies of contemporary "traditional" African peoples for example are in reality a way of vicariously witnessing and capturing the lived reality of Europe's primitive past and the study of African art is about articulating through Eurocentric criteria based description and evaluation of the primitive expression of Africans the binary opposite, namely the aesthetic superiority of European art.

What of the "cultural studies" in African cultural studies? Are we speaking of applying to the study of Africa the received discursive formation which originated at the University of Birmingham, UK, in the 1960s, originally as a radical, neo-Marxist project and praxis focused on multi/inter/and yes even anti-disciplinary discourse and which has since been tamed and disciplined over time and through its global spread?<sup>iii</sup> Or are we speaking of the unfortunately little known alternative advocated by Ntongela Masilela (1989) in his critique of one of the earliest African Cultural Studies texts, *Rethinking Culture* (Tomaselli 1989) namely an organic discursive formation derived from local African cultures and ways of knowing and drawing on progressive African theorists who engage indigenous knowledge?<sup>iv</sup> Or even more complexly, are we speaking, as I advocate and undertake in my own work (e.g. Wright 2004), of the need to hold those two in hopefully productive tension, the result of which is a discursive formation that draws on both

African ways of knowing and theorists on the one hand and the discourse of supposedly global cultural studies on the other and which necessarily exists in dialogue with global cultural studies?

Finally, is there something beyond an awkward, superficial reference to a 1980s Janet Jackson song to my question, 'What has African Cultural Studies Done for You Lately?' I would like to think so. Beyond the meaning of African Cultural Studies, I want to touch on the function and effects, real and potential, of African Cultural Studies. In other words I am not only interested in addressing the meaning of and historicizing African Cultural Studies but also in exploring what it has done and can do for the study of Africa and Africans and for the history and future development of the field of global cultural studies. In cultural studies terms, I move from Richard Johnson's (1986) famous, generative question, "What is cultural studies anyway?" to the more recent and potentially equally generative questions by Steven Connor (2003), who asks, "What can cultural studies do?" and even more substantially, Meaghan Morris (1997) who exhorts that we "ask in a mundane and unrepentantly academic spirit, not what cultural studies "is" but what it does, and does not, claim *to do* as a working project in the Humanities." And we can extend Morris' question beyond the Humanities, indeed beyond the disciplines to ask simply, "what does cultural studies do?" a truncation I have employed elsewhere which expands Morris' question to be about cultural studies (and for our purposes here, African cultural studies) as an academic field and intellectual project (Wright 2016a).

### **The Origin(s) and Global Spread of Cultural Studies: An African Intervention**

Cultural studies emerged in England in 1964 with the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, England. It was a neo-Marxist, project oriented inter/antidisciplinary response to an international series of crises in the Social Sciences and Humanities and its founding fathers were E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart. This single and singular originary narrative is oft repeated, including in most introductory texts (Bratlinger 1990; Gray & McGuigan 1993) and is taken for granted history that has passed into common sense. From quite humble institutional beginnings - the CCCS was literally a few offices at the end of a hallway (Hall, 1980) cultural studies caught on and spread throughout Britain and on to North America (Grossberg 1993; Morrow 1995), Australia (Frow &

Morris 1993), the rest of Europe (Eskola & Vanikkala 1994), onto Asia (Chen 1998) and even trickled into parts of Africa (Tomaselli 1989).

As a graduate student I was excited about the prospects of a cultural studies approach to addressing issues in African literary studies (my eventual PhD topic became an argument for making a transition from literary to a more utilitarian cultural studies approach to texts in the African context). Some twenty years later, I continue to be excited about what cultural studies makes possible in terms of African studies; namely an interdisciplinary, representation sensitive, popular culture inclusive, overtly social justice oriented, project alternative to traditional, supposedly apolitical, single discipline or even multidisciplinary approaches to African studies. However I have also always been uncomfortable with the received, common-sense origin narrative of cultural studies. Even as a (Black, Sierra Leonean) graduate student at a Canadian university it struck me as deeply ironic that a field and approach to knowledge that was global in scope and which made identity, difference and the politics of representation central and was overtly social justice oriented had such a definitively single and singular white, male, British origin and only existed elsewhere as a received discourse.

While it is clear that it is at the CCCS that named, institutionalized, academy-based cultural studies emerged, the various characteristics of cultural studies (project driven rather than discipline circumscribed; critique of historical and especially contemporary sociocultural and political arrangements; serious engagement of the popular, overtly social justice oriented, etc.) were all characteristics that could be found in other places and times. What this suggested to me was that we could recognize, indeed ought to recognize, a number of “origins” of cultural studies. I therefore have identified the Kamiriithu Education and Cultural Centre, established in 1977 in the slum village of Limuru, Kenya as the “true” origin of cultural studies, with writer and intellectual, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and the mostly female members of the Centre as the constructors of what we now call cultural studies. Kamiriithu surpasses Birmingham in epitomizing the characteristics and ideals of cultural studies.<sup>vi</sup> Finally I pointed to several other potential originary moments for cultural studies: culturology in Russia in the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance in the US in the 1920s and 1930s, the Negritude Movement in France, francophone Africa and the French West Indies in the 1930s (Wright 2004: 65).

I put forward Kamiriithu and other origins with tongue partly in cheek. I did not mean to suggest that the received narrative of a Birmingham origin was wrong, nor was I seriously offering Kamiriithu as a correction of a historical error. Rather, my purpose was to put forward Kamiriithu (and other viable origin narratives) in order to, variously, multiply origins of a now global discourse, draw attention to the fact that Birmingham has been thoroughly “fetishized,” and contribute to alleviating the spectres of an almost colonial history and definite centre-margin trajectories of global cultural studies.

My arguments and those of others from cultural studies’ margins have had some effect. For example, both Richard Maxwell (2000) and Toby Miller (2006) have produced a multiple, global narrative of the origin and history of cultural studies. They include Stuart Hall (Black intellectual from former British colony of Jamaica) as a founding father and identify origins and trajectories from Britain, France & Italy, Africa, The United States and Latin America. Thus well beyond contributing to the globalization of cultural studies, some arguments and interventions from African cultural studies are also contributing to rethinking the very origins and trajectories of the field and thus to democratizing global cultural studies.

### **National, Regional, Transnational Cultural Studies**

The principal way cultural studies is being instituted is in distinct national and regional forms (British, American, Canadian, Australian, Nordic, Latin American, etc.). While national and regional varieties of cultural studies are a common sense development, they are also somewhat awkward, if not problematic for various reasons, including the facts that they homogenize specific local projects into a larger totality on the one hand and get in the way of the cross fertilization of ideas and projects across national and regional boundaries and hence the development of transnational cultural studies on the other. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hall (1992) once referred to British cultural studies as “a pretty awkward signifier,” (277) while Larry Grossberg has critiqued national traditions as “generally wrongheaded” (quoted in Wright 2001: 155).

African nation states are of course always already awkward in my view since the vast majority of them are the direct result of European imperialism, more specifically, the Partitioning of Africa



and the naming of colonies, sometimes simply after exploitable resources (e.g. the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast, Cameroon). Post-independence African states and nation-state based nationalism are therefore inherently ironic as a legacy European colonialism and this deepens the irony and awkwardness of the development of national traditions on the African continent. For example, it is indisputable that South Africa has the longest history of established cultural studies (see Tomaselli 2012 ) and while some of the most exciting developments are emerging from that country, the evolution of a distinct South African cultural studies adds to the awkwardness of proliferating national forms. Fortunately, the South African example is rare and moreover is rather porous (with the presence, input, interventions and outernational expansions of non-national faculty and graduate students in the South African academy). Cultural studies is relatively new and quite diffuse in the rest of the continent and even more importantly there is a tendency among African cultural studies scholars to conceptualize their work and framework on a continental, even pan-African continent-diaspora scale.<sup>vii</sup>

What does all of this mean for African cultural studies? On the one hand the category is a formation that avoids some of the pitfalls of national conceptions of cultural studies- extending as it does beyond individual national borders and actually or potentially involving politics that smooths-out differences and promotes empowering cohesion. This very conference has drawn a disparate set of scholars together because they identify with and their work fits into the broad category, African cultural studies. And since the 1980s the journal *Critical Arts*, published out of then University of Natal, with its essays on issues in media and cultural studies of South African and other African countries, has made concrete contributions to the establishment of African cultural studies. On the other hand a continental category, let alone continental plus diasporic category, is an overly broad frame that is near useless when it comes to examining culture concretely- it misses the specificity of discrete local material and other forms of culture. And there is a price to pay for transitioning from the national and continental to the transnational. To continue with the example of *Critical Arts*- the journal is now decidedly global and transnational in scope and while this has meant the inclusion of African cultural studies in a global frame, the cost has been the loss of the exclusive focus on Africa and Africans, a void other journals (e.g. the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*)<sup>viii</sup> have emerged to fill. It is an awareness of the importance of addressing the complexity and specificity of the local that led McKenzie Wark (1997) to espouse

a city specific cultural studies, namely Sydney cultural studies and it is a similar awareness of the need to address the specificity of the local that led the CCCS's successor, the now defunct Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology to make the city of Birmingham the primary locus for students' and even various faculty members' research and praxis projects. It would be interesting to see, in contrast with or in addition to African cultural studies- the cultural studies of Freetown, Cairo, Lagos, Kumasi, Nairobi and Johannesburg.

My own preference is for African cultural studies that is at once distinct (however ambivalently) and yet engaged with and imbricated in global transnational cultural studies<sup>ix</sup> (as in the current scope of *Critical Arts*). As a recent example, in a special issue of the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* I edited on "the worldliness of Stuart Hall," (Wright 2016a), among essays from Britain, Wales, Argentina, Australia and Finland, I made sure to invite an essay from and on cultural studies in the South African context (Tomaselli 2016) and in my own contribution to the collection (Wright 2016b) addressed Stuart Hall's relevance for the study of continental African Blackness. It would be naïve to think of the articulation of African and transnational cultural studies as the mere seamless insertion of African cultural studies into an existing transnational cultural studies. In fact despite the exhortation of Chen (1992) and others, there isn't a thriving transnational cultural studies per se for African cultural studies to enjoin and it is unclear that African cultural studies could be sustained as a discrete discourse if it did. Furthermore, the articulation of transnational cultural studies that includes African cultural studies necessarily means challenges and changes to both African and especially non-African national and global formations of cultural studies. I'd like to flesh out this last point somewhat with a concrete example. Since we've used him before and he serves well as a figure that could represent Ntongela's organic African knowledge, let us turn again to Ngugi wa Thiong'o and tease out a bit what it might mean to appropriate him for transnational cultural studies.

Appropriating Ngugi for transnationalism would involve considering his work as simultaneously Kenyan (national, nationalist), African (continental, African nationalist), Black Atlantic (global, pan-Africanist), postcolonial (global, anti-imperialist), universalist (since he once identified himself as an "unrepentant universalist"), and since he has resided and been writing and teaching

in the US for the past while, even American. Thus Ngugi's work would both parallel and encapsulate the struggle over spatiality of cultural studies.

Transnationalism also means having to acknowledge and work with Ngugi's Marxism, his anti-imperialism, his repudiation of the English language in favour of Kikuyu, his Kenyan nationalism and frequent revisiting of Kenya's past, his (too infrequently acknowledged) universalism and comprehensive pan-African relations and work, however alien, uncomfortable and inconvenient some of these aspects of his work might prove, especially within US cultural studies. The range of politics of transnational cultural studies and especially national cultural studies is therefore challenged by a figure like Ngugi. It means taking up Ngugi as important not simply as an individual writer and sociocultural critic but also and perhaps more importantly as part of the articulation of national and outernational, indeed transnational discourses of cultural studies. Ngugi's work on Kamiriithu and his decisions to reject English and employ Kikuyu in his writings and his proposal of Swahili as the appropriate language of African literature, would not only parallel but contribute to the perennial problematic, indeed problem of the language of cultural studies, a field dominated by English to the chagrin of figures like Daniel Mato (2016) and Chantal Cornut-Gentile D'arcy (2009), both Spanish speakers who hold that the hegemony of English as the language of cultural studies is partly responsible for the failure of cultural studies to blossom in Latin America and Spain.

### **Current Issues and/in Utilitarian African Cultural Studies**

One of the issues African cultural studies needs to continue to address is its positioning within global cultural studies and the mutual effect the two have on each other. John Hartley has made two comments in passing about global cultural studies that are of considerable import for African cultural studies particularly. In his preface to the Dismantle Fremantle special issue of *Cultural Studies* he co-edited with Ien Ang, Hartley initially pointed out that academic cultural studies is hedged about by dominant disciplines but then goes on to add that, in spite of this, "[t]here are those for whom cultural studies is not hedged but hegemonic" (Hartley 1992). I believe that observation to be particularly true of African cultural studies, not only at the time (the early 1990s) but even today. Looking outward from within African cultural studies, one cannot help but feel that despite its spread around the globe, cultural studies has never become truly globally

representative but rather remains a mostly Eurocentric, indeed Anglocentric (predominantly British-American-Australian) tradition passing itself off as a global intellectual field. In the second instance Hartley (2003), in his *Short History of Cultural Studies*, asserts that “By refusing disciplinary orthodoxy, cultural studies kept the door open to innovation from the margins, in line with its longstanding interest in difference and marginality” (9). That longstanding interest in difference and marginality does or at least should include representation of Africa, Africans and African cultural studies. In this sense the fact that African cultural studies remains marginal within global cultural studies is not completely negative since there is considerable productive potential in marginality. bell hooks (1989) has asserted that the margin is not only a place of disempowerment but also a site of generative and insurgent politics, and what this means is that African cultural studies can make significant contributions to the evolution of a truly representative and reinvigorated transnational cultural studies.

There is considerable pressure on African studies to address pressing, practical issues on the continent. African cultural studies could also benefit from a strong (though I would hasten to add not exclusive) utilitarian approach. However, we would need to avoid the western interest centred approach which is often reflected in utilitarian African studies. Altogether too much of the scholarship on Africa is about the political in a traditional sense and altogether too much of that is taken up from a Eurocentric perspective and altogether too much of it is negative- giving rise to the homogenized text of Africa as a political and economic basketcase, punctuated by stories and images of religious and ethnic conflict, wars and child soldiers, disease, drought, famine and malnourished babies, corruption and exploitative politicians (Wright 2012). There has been interest in Somalia and Zimbabwe as failed states mainly after a rise in piracy of international shipping by Somalis and attacks on white farmers in Zimbabwe. There is western interest in supposedly Islamic terrorism in Africa only after attacks on US Embassy in Kenya and when a Nigerian Islamist militant group’s name as “western education is forbidden,” pledges allegiance to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. And there is interest in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone only because of quite irrational fear of the threat that the ebola epidemic in West Africa might pose to Western countries in these overly connected times (Wright 2016b).

In my view a utilitarian cultural studies demands some attention to other issues and other perspectives, including the need for nuanced, in-depth and social justice and equity directed examinations of current issues on the continent and its relationship with the diaspora. For example, even as the discourse of Afropessimism has gained traction (Mbembe 2003; Wilderson 2010; Sexton 2011), it now competes with the idea that we are entering what has been identified as the African era (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012). What does this mean for the potential alleviation of what Samir Amin (1992) in the early 1990s presciently called the Fourthworldization of Africa? From historical “Ghana Must Go” in Nigeria and its current reverberations to the demonization of regular and irregular migrant workers from other African countries in South Africa, to the underreported brutal attacks on and mistreatment of African migrant workers in Libya during the Arab Spring, xenophobia is clearly on the rise on the continent. The silver lining is that this is evidence of movement of Africans within the continent- emigration, immigration, migration that also makes for what Zygmunt Bauman (2007) calls “mixophilia,” interethnic and even interracial unions and rich cultural mixing, especially in major African cities.

Homophobia has raised its ugly head recently as part of official policy and discourse in countries from Nigeria to Cameroon to Uganda with draconian laws passed that criminalize same sex intercourse and elements of the fifth estate that have endorsed these moves including by releasing names of real or suspected gay men and lesbians. The silver lining to this is that the very existence of these laws and suppressive measures give the lie to the idea that homosexuality and queerness are completely un-African, a western phenomenon and imposition. Additionally there are several African countries that are codifying tolerance toward the LGBT<sup>x</sup> community and emergent anti-homophobia activism. Cultural studies can act not only to document and support queer activists in African countries but to explore the complexity of queer life including emergent queer lifestyles, the operation and limits of the codification of LGBT rights; and the involvement of western evangelist churches in promoting homophobia, etc. which illustrates not only that queerness is not un-African but rather that it is rabid religion-based homophobia that is the western import.

What constitutes Africa and African identity, especially in terms of the Africa-diaspora continuum, should in my view continue to engage African cultural studies. Explorations of the relationship between continental Africa and Africans in the diasporas have focussed on whether those who are

diasporic, including those who are doubly diasporic, can and ought to claim an African identity. There has been considerable migration of continental Africans to the west for various reasons (including immediate and later vestigial postcolonial migration from the African margin to European centres, especially of Britain and France; economic migration to the North America, Europe and to a lesser extent, Asia). Yet little intellectual attention, including in the field of cultural studies, has been paid to this other side of things. Of course sociologists and anthropologists have addressed the presence of African diasporas but this literature has tended to take up a traditional notion of diaspora (members of specific African ethnic or national groups transplanted outside of the continent and maintaining their continental culture elsewhere). What cultural studies can contribute is an interdisciplinary exploration of when and to what extent continental Africans in the diaspora can and should claim diasporic identification, and even identity (Wright 2016b).

The politics of difference has been a staple in the issues cultural studies addresses and there have been cultural studies interventions in everything from multiculturalism through anti-racism, youth identity and identification to the development of African politics of difference including African womanism to South Africa's notion of the Rainbow nation on the other; from acknowledgement of the expansion of the African diaspora beyond the traditional locations such as the Americas and Europe to new African diasporas in Asian countries from China to Taiwan and the emergence of Asian-African multiracial unions and mixed-raced African-Asians.

### **Conclusion: What Has (African) Cultural Studies Done for You Lately?**

I've tried in this brief essay to trouble the taken for grantedness of African cultural studies and to a lesser extent, global cultural studies. With some specifics, including from my own work and perspectives, I have pointed to some of what cultural studies has offered to African studies on the one hand and what African cultural studies has contributed to global cultural studies on the other. In keeping with my efforts to contribute to complicating and multiplying the origins and history of global cultural studies, I have eschewed taking African cultural studies as given and singular in favour of considering it as multiple and contested. I have pointed to the ambivalent position African cultural studies occupies in global cultural studies- at once relatively diffuse and marginalized and integral and contributory. I have outlined some of the issues that are and should

be the focus of contemporary and future African cultural studies from the politics of difference (including queer identities, politics and culture on the one hand and social and official homophobia on the other) to intracontinental migration and the ensuing responses of xenophobia and mixophobia, from the relationship between the continent and its diasporas to the place of African cultural studies within global cultural studies.

While it is fine to keep doing African cultural studies I think we ought to step back once in a while to consider not just our work in cultural studies but what our doing of that work does. As Foucault once declared “We know what we do and we know, up to a point, why we do it: what we don’t know is what what we do does” (in Conno, 2003). Cultural studies has never pretended to be neutral and African cultural studies also should be self-reflexive not only about the political stances it takes and projects it chooses to undertake but also about its own worldliness, the effects it has upon the world by its very existence. The worldliness of African cultural studies includes the fact that it is a viable and to my mind preferable alternative to single-discipline and even supposedly politically neutral multidisciplinary area studies of Africa. It also includes the fact that its existence serves (or ought to serve) to have supposedly global cultural studies face what Foucault would call the history of its present- the ironies of its hegemonic whiteness, Eurocentrism and linguistic parochialism.

Whether one wants to take it as given or put it under erasure or consider it a floating signifier, insist on essentializing and romanticizing or multiplying and troubling it, there is an existing African cultural studies and many, including scholars at this conference, are busy undertaking important work under its rubric, including work based on the national frame (especially South African cultural studies). This reality makes interventions and contributions by progressive African and Africanist scholars to African cultural studies and cultural studies frames for addressing African issues all the more urgent. Despite the caveat that my arguments represent, we cannot not do African cultural studies. My plea is that we eschew a coherent, unitary, fixed and in sum, innocent and romanticized African cultural studies. Instead I advocate that we undertake African cultural studies reflexively (as Hall would say, “without guarantees”); that like the mythical Sankofa bird we make progress by heading forward but with our heads turned backwards to capture precious knowledge from the past in the form of the egg that will shape the

fragile, precious future we seek; that we revive and utilize the neglected organic, localist frame advocated by Masilela; that we refuse to be the exotic addition and insist on being a robust contribution to global, transnational cultural studies and that we utilize a cultural studies frame to address the pressing and interesting issues facing Africa and its diaspora.

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<sup>i</sup> This paper was initially presented as the opening keynote address at the John Douglas Taylor Conference: Contemporary Orientations in African Cultural Studies, May 30 – June, 1, 2014. I have made some changes (including deleting some sections, writing some new ones and updating some examples), I have kept the presentation format and flow of the original and produced much of the talk verbatim here.

<sup>ii</sup> Throughout this essay I employ the overtly politicized, capitalized spelling of "Black" (with the exception of references to others work where the word is not capitalized (e.g. quote here from Stuart Hall)).

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<sup>iii</sup> For example, Alan O'Connor (1989) pointed out in the 1980s to the myriad aspects that collectively constitute "the problem of American cultural studies," including the downplaying of the (neo)Marxist foundations and connection with concrete Leftist intellectual projects that characterized early British cultural studies.

<sup>iv</sup> More specifically Masilela addresses the need to develop South African cultural studies (as distinct from cultural studies in South Africa) but his arguments can be applied to and imbricate African cultural studies more generally. His principal call is for Africanization of cultural studies in South Africa through nativization.

<sup>v</sup> The title quip, "what have you done for me lately?" in Jackson's (1986) song expresses the artist's frustration with her lover who used to do everything to prove himself her ideal man and who now does few of those things and has now fallen sharply in her estimation. Finding cultural studies in general and especially African cultural studies in particular as a graduate student was for me the discovery of the ideal discourse, nothing short of an academic, intellectual and political home. What I want to channel here is not disappointment with, let alone dismissal of cultural studies (Jackson's song is reputedly about her ex-husband, James DeBarge whom she divorced a year earlier) but rather the implied challenge to recover (or more realistically to work on re-making) the magic of those early years.

<sup>vi</sup> For background on the Kamiriithu Community Education Cultural Centre, including its artistic and cultural work projects and activities, see Kidd (1985) and Ngugi (1997) and for the elaborated version of my arguments for recognition of Kamiriithu as an additional origin of cultural studies and comparison of Kamiriithu and Birmingham see Wright (2004; 1998)

<sup>vii</sup> The continental, pan-African scope is reflected only in the overall frame of collections such as Wright & Tomaselli (2008) but in the politics of the individual contributors and hence the essays within such collections.

<sup>viii</sup> As indicated in the Aims and Scope statement, "*The Journal of African Cultural Studies* is an international journal providing a forum for perceptions of African culture from inside and outside Africa, with a special commitment to African scholarship."

<sup>ix</sup> For an example of the argument for a transnational cultural studies, see Chen (1992).

<sup>x</sup> I employ "LGBT" (the acronym which stands in for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered) as a practical shorthand for diversity beyond heteronormativity and the straight-gay binary and also to move beyond the impossible politics of specific naming of categories which, in the Canadian context, now has us at LGBTTIQ2SA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgendered, intersex, queer, questioning and 2 Spirited Aboriginal). I realize LGBT is too often misused as an already exhaustive "list" but following Smith and Jaffer (2012), I wish to undertake a politics that moves "beyond the queer alphabet."