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## Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow

Frank Andre Guridy

# FORGING DIASPORA

Afro-Cubans and African Americans  
IN A WORLD OF EMPIRE AND JIM CROW

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### Reviewed Work(s)

*Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow.* By Frank Andre Guridy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Pp. 270. Cloth, \$59.95. Paper, \$22.95.

Studies of the African Diaspora have tended to focus on transnational linkages without necessarily transcending the geo-cultural boundaries of the European empires that colonized the Americas. Consequently, insufficient attention has been paid to the multitude of *transcultural* diasporic linkages in the Caribbean, a region characterized by human diversity and imperial transition.<sup>[1]</sup> Frank Guridy addresses this shortcoming by examining the networks developed by black peoples in the United States and Cuba within the “cross-border, transnational zone” he calls the “U.S.-Caribbean world” in *Forging Diaspora* (7).

Guridy’s focus on American empire in the twentieth century provides a rare opportunity to study transcultural alliances people of African descent made through the channels of empire.<sup>[2]</sup> One of the book’s main arguments is that diaspora was a strategy through which African Americans and Afro-Cubans sought to combat the racial discrimination that surrounded them at home and abroad. Empire provided a means to create and sustain these transcultural diasporic linkages.

The book is structured chronologically, each substantive chapter addressing a different aspect and epoch of cultural connections between African Americans and Afro-Cubans. In chapter 1, “Forging Diaspora in the Midst of Empire,” Guridy provides a brilliant, amply-documented discussion of the educational exchanges between Afro-Cubans and African Americans through Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, starting after the American intervention in Cuba in 1898. The evidence in chapter 2, “Un Dios, Un Fin, Un Destino,” suggests that Afro-Cubans voiced a stronger affinity to (supposedly) race-less *cubanidad* than to a transnational racial identity proposed by Marcus Garvey, though the author argues that Garveyism was still influential.

Chapter 3, “Blues and *Son* from Harlem to Havana,” delves into the world of music and dance, elaborating the cultural connections between the Harlem Renaissance in New York and *afrocubanismo* in Havana. In chapter 4, “Destination without Humiliation,” the author examines mobility and travel, specifically focusing on the instances in which this privilege was denied to African Americans desiring to enter Cuba, thus underscoring the paradoxical world of imperial racism and Diaspora: if African Americans were at the apex of the diasporic community, they were certainly not immune to international racial barriers, even in places considered politically and racially inferior *in a World of Empire and Jim Crow*.

One of the greatest strengths of this book is the author’s ability to cast light on two diverging tendencies within the Afro-diasporic community of the U.S.-Caribbean World. On the one hand, elite people of African descent in both the United States and Cuba sought to distance themselves from the idea and perceived cultural practices of Africa. Instead, they presented themselves in occidental terms as respectable, cultured, and responsible for helping uplift the downtrodden members of their “race.” At the same time, another sector of men and women of African descent practiced cultural forms deemed to be “African,” a judgment that made them both repulsive and appealing to the diasporic black elite. They were repulsive because the cultural forms that they practiced were neither respectable nor civilized by prevailing Euro-American standards. Yet, this very perception made them the portrait of authenticity, a sight worth seeing for African American tourists, and the source of cultural forms that would continue to be appropriated by black elites in Cuba as well as throughout the U.S.-Caribbean world, albeit at later times (e.g. *danzón*, chapter 3).

*Guridy’s insightful juxtaposition of these two currents casts new light on an old debate on black cultural forms in the Americas. It would seem that respectability, understood as distance from Africa, was at stake in presenting cultural forms as black as opposed to African, especially in the politicized and racist climate of the mid-twentieth century U.S.-Caribbean world.*[3] The perceived “authenticity” of “African” cultural forms practiced by lower class black Cubans enabled African American elites to cast Afro-Cubans as an inferior people, in need of uplift. From the imperial metropole, Afro-Cuba was monolithic, despite Cuban

colored elite who condemned these “low” cultural forms in favor of occidental elitism.

Like a good work of scholarship should, this book prompts a number of questions. One relates to the role of class within a racialized concept of Diaspora. Guridy prefaces his argument with the acknowledgement that the “book’s emphasis on black cultural and educational institutions biases the study toward relatively privileged persons of African descent in both countries” (13). Yet, the popular classes of African descent do appear in the book, though less as agents of Diaspora than as objects of it. Is Diaspora an inherently elitist phenomenon? The reader is left pondering an alternate definition of Diaspora that might encompass or allow for further exploration of the contributions and roles of the popular classes.

*Forging Diaspora* is an impressive effort to unmask the long history of relations between the peoples of the United States and Cuba, a task begun by Louis A. Pérez, Jr. in the late 1990s.<sup>[4]</sup> Guridy approaches this problematic with a fresh perspective, one that takes people of African descent as its main agents. From the perspective of Cuban history, this work advances scholarly understandings of the role of empire in shaping relations between the United States and Cuba, while also bringing into the discussion a fruitful analytical tool – Diaspora – which has thus far been relatively absent in studies of Latin Americans of African descent. This volume challenges readers to think about the process of constructing Diaspora, as opposed to the simple existence of it and encourages scholars to search for new vantage points from which to study community and identity formation.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Studies of Diaspora have focused most heavily on the Anglophone Atlantic and have addressed the transnational aspects of Spanish and French empires to a much lesser extent. See, for example, Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). The closest approximation to a diasporic study for Latin America is: George

Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[2] Guridy is also one of the first to explicitly relate these two concepts (empire and Diaspora) in a monograph. See also Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes, *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Ruth Reitan, *The Rise and Decline of An Alliance: Cuba and African-American Leaders in the 1960s* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999).

[3] Melville J. Herskovits, “The Negro in Bahia, Brazil: A Problem in Method,” *American Sociological Review* 8:4 (1943): 394-404; E. Franklin Frazier, “The Negro Family in Bahia, Brazil,” *American Sociological Review* 7:4 (1942): 465-78; E. Franklin Frazier, “Rejoinder,” *American Sociological Review* 8:4 (1943): 402-4.

[4] Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).



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