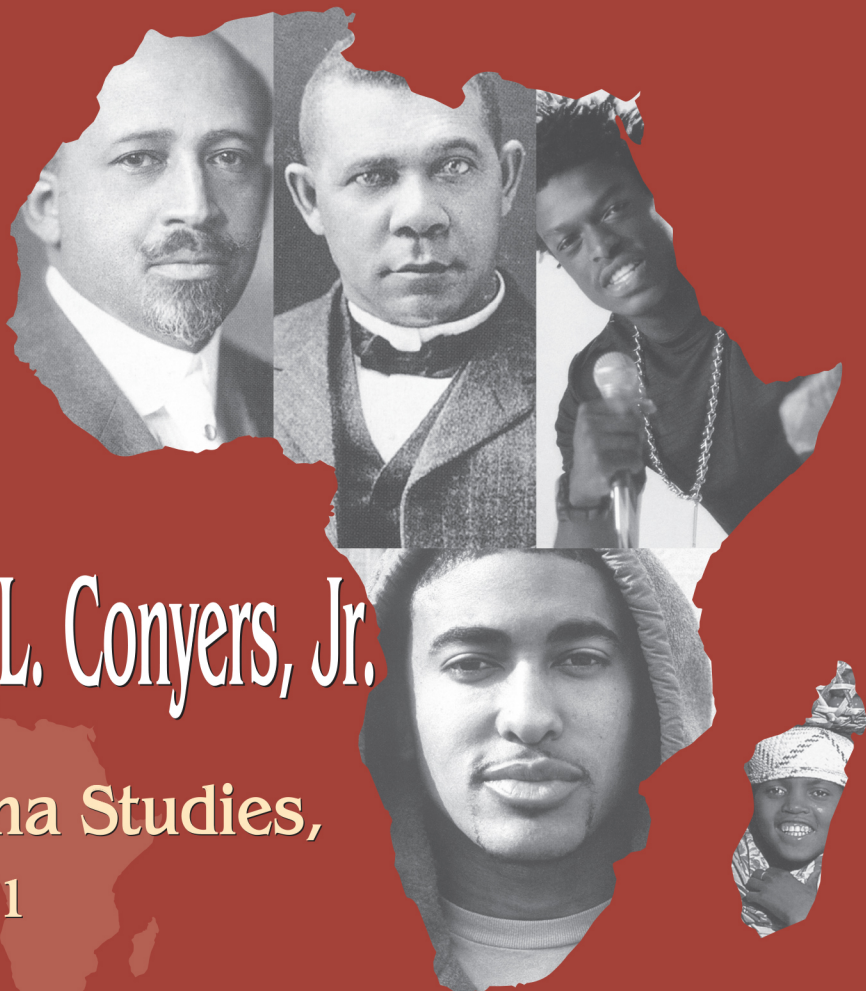


# Afrocentric Traditions

Edited by  
James L. Conyers, Jr.

Africana Studies,  
Volume 1



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A Review of Social Science Research**

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## Contents

1. Afrocentricity: Notes on a Disciplinary Position 1  
*Molefi Kete Asante*
2. The Cultural Misorientation Construct and the Cultural Misorientation Scale: An Africentric Measure of European Cultural Misidentification among Africans in America 15  
*Kobi K. K. Kambon and Reginald Rackley*
3. “The Shoah and Southern History” 35  
*Nell Irvin Painter*
4. Religio-Theological Formations and the (Re)Making of Black Kenyan Bodies: An African American’s Perspective 43  
*Anthony B. Pinn*
5. Africana Studies and the Crisis of Black Masculinity 63  
*Anthony J. Lemelle, Jr.*
6. Social Science and Systematic Inquiry in Africana Studies: Challenges for the Twenty-First Century 83  
*James B. Stewart*
7. African American Mississippi Writers, Historians, and Journalists, 1865-2004 111  
*Julius E. Thompson*

8.	A Fundamental Incompatibility? A Reassessment of the Basis of the Conflict between W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington <i>Cary DeCordova Wintz</i>	131
9.	Africana Studies and Black Popular Hip-Hop Culture: A Reflexive Summary of Social and Cultural Movements <i>James L. Conyers, Jr.</i>	149
10.	The Roots of Black Studies <i>Lea Redmond and Charles P. Henry</i>	165
	Contributors	185
	Index	187

# 1

## **Afrocentricity: Notes on a Disciplinary Position**

*Molefi Kete Asante*

Over the past twenty-five years, the field of Africology has blossomed into a full-blown intellectual arena where the mammoths of post-colonial theory, Marxism, postmodernism, feminism, and other Eurocentric ideas have been taken on with vigor and integrity. Perhaps not since the days of the universities in West Africa or the Nile Valley Kemetic institutions have scholars looking through African eyes, unveiled, been able to see so clearly the dimensions and scopes of our own intellectual work. It is my intention in this chapter to draw attention to some of the general ideas necessary to advance the Afrocentric idea.

### **Definition**

The Afrocentric idea is essentially about location. Since Africans have been moved off of terms culturally, psychologically, economically, and historically, it is important that any assessment of the African condition in whatever country be made from an Afrocentric location. We begin with the view that *Afrocentricity is a quality of thought, practice, and perspective that perceives Africans as subjects and agents of phenomena acting in their own cultural image and human interest.*

Stating a definition does not exhaust the power of a concept; it may in fact create further difficulties unless it is explained in such a way as to elucidate the idea. Afrocentricity is about location precisely because African people have been operating from the fringes of the Eurocentric experience. Much of what we have studied in

## 2 Afrocentric Traditions

African history and culture, or literature and linguistics, or politics and economics, has been orchestrated from the standpoint of Europe's interests. Whether it is a matter of economics, history, politics, geographical concepts, or art, Africans have been seen as peripheral to the "real" activity. This off-centeredness has impacted Africans as well as whites in the United States. Thus, to speak of Afrocentricity as a radical re-definition means that we seek the re-orientation of Africans to a centered position (Asante, 1998).

### Conscientization

Afrocentricity emerged as a process of political consciousness for a people who existed on the edge of education, art, science, economics, communication, and technology as defined by Eurocentrists. If the process were successful then the re-centering of the people would create a new reality and open another chapter in the liberation of the minds of Africans. This was the hope of Afrocentricity when I published the book *Afrocentricity* in 1980. The aim was to strike a blow at the lack of consciousness, not simply the lack of consciousness of our oppression but the lack of consciousness of what victories were possible. One could begin to analyze human relationships, multicultural interactions, texts, phenomena and events, and African liberation from the standpoint of orientation toward facts.

The objective has always been to create space for conscious human beings who are, by virtue of their centeredness, committed to sanity. The idea of *conscientization* is at the center of Afrocentricity because this is what makes it different from Africanity. One can practice African customs and mores and not be Afrocentric. *Afrocentricity is conscientization related to the agency of African people*. One cannot be Afrocentric without being a conscious human being. This is the key to re-orientation and re-centering.

Africans have been negated in the system of white racial domination. This is not mere marginalization, but the obliteration of the presence, meaning, activities, or images of the African. This is negated reality, a destruction of the spiritual and material personality of the African person. Therefore, the African must, to be conscious, be aware of everything and seek to escape from the anomie of fringeness. This is a linguistic problem at one level but at another level it is a problem of dealing with the reality of constructed economic and cultural situations.

Afrocentricity is not religion and that is why the constituents of African values are debatable, even though they are central to Afrocentric inquiry. There are no closed systems; that is, there are no ideas that are absolutely seen as off limits for discussion and debate. Thus, when Afrocentricity is employed in analysis or criticism it opens the way for examination of all issues related to the African world.

### **Minimum Characteristics**

I have argued that the minimum characteristics for an Afrocentric project should include: (1) an interest in psychological location, (2) a commitment to finding the African subject place, (3) the defense of African cultural elements, (4) a commitment to lexical refinement, and (5) a commitment to correct the history of Africa. Danjuma Sinue Modupe has presented the most complete list of constituents of Afrocentricity. He lists the Communal cognitive will, African development, consciousness matrix, psychic liberation, Cultural reclamation, Africanness, African personalism, Afrocentric praxis, Afrocentric framework, Framework integrity, Cause, Effect, Alleviation, Theoretical Constructs, Critical Theoretical Distinctions, Structural Gluon, Victorious Consciousness, and Afrocentric Perspective (2003: 55-72).

### **An Interest in Psychological Location**

This is fundamentally a perspectivist idea. The Afrocentrist argues that one's analysis is more often than not related to where a person's mind is located. For example, you can normally tell if a person is located in a culturally centered position vis-à-vis the African world by how that person relates to African information. If he or she speaks of Africans as the "other" then you have an idea that the person views the African as other than herself or himself. This is one way the dislocation works. Of course, if a person is not African but seeks to make an Afrocentric analysis what you look for is the ability of the person to view African phenomena from the standpoint of Africans themselves. One who seeks to construct an Afrocentric curriculum for schools, an Afrocentric social work practice, or an Afrocentric literary text must give attention to the idea of psychological or cultural location.

### **A Commitment to Finding the African Subject Place**

The Afrocentrist is concerned with discovering in every place and in all circumstances the subject position of the African person. This is particularly true in cases where the issues of significance, that is, the themes, topics, and concerns are of African ideas and activities. Too often the discussion of African phenomena has moved on the basis of what Europeans think, do, and say in relation to the phenomenon rather than what the Africans themselves are saying and doing. Thus, the aim of the Afrocentrist is to demonstrate a powerful commitment to finding the African subject place in almost every event, text, and idea. This is not easy because the complications of identity of place are often discovered in the interstices between who we are and who we want to be. While we may determine what a person is at one given moment we may not know all that he or she can become tomorrow. Yet we must have a commitment to discovering where the African person, idea, or concept enters a text, event, or phenomena, as subject.

### **The Defense of African Cultural Elements**

The Afrocentrist is concerned with all protection and defense of African cultural values and elements as part of the human project. One cannot assume an orientation to African agency without giving respect and place to the creative dimension of the African personality. This does not mean that all things African are good or useful; it means that what Africans have done and what Africans do represent human creativity. All of this speaks to the fact that many scholars and writers in the past dismissed African creations, whether music, dance, art, or science, as something different from the rest of humanity. This was decidedly racist and any interpretation or analysis of African cultural elements or contributions that employed negations of African cultural elements was suspect.

However, the Afrocentrist uses all linguistic, psychological, sociological, and philosophical elements to defend African cultural elements. Given the arguments against African values, habits, customs, religion, behaviors, or thought, the Afrocentrist discovers as much as possible the authentic African understanding of the elements without imposing Eurocentric or non-African interpretations. This allows the scholar to have a clear appreciation of the African cultural element.

### **A Commitment to Lexical Refinement**

Typically, the Afrocentrist wants to know that the language used in a text is based upon the idea of Africans as subjects. This means that the person who creates the text must have some understanding of the nature of the African reality. For example, when the American or English person calls the African house a “hut” he or she is misrepresenting reality. The Afrocentrist approaches the question of the living space of Africans from the standpoint of African reality. The idea of a house in the English language leads one to assume a modern building with kitchen, bedrooms, bathrooms, and recreational spaces, but in the African concept one sees a difference in the concept. Thus, the house must be conceived of as a compound of structures where there is one structure for sleeping, one for storage, and another for guests. The cooking and recreational areas are typically outside of the sleeping space. Therefore, it is important that any person considering African cultural ideas pay close attention to the type of language that is used. In the case of the domicile of Africans one must first of all ask, what do Africans call the place where they sleep? This is the only way to prevent the use of negative terminology such as hut when referring to African living places. One could also extend the analysis by examining the differences in understanding of the concept of house, home, and so forth, in various African cultural communities. Thus, the genuine Afrocentrist seeks to rid the language of negations of African being as agents within the sphere of Africa’s own history. This should not have been perceived a problem in scholarship and literature except the condition of Western education was such that all references to Africa or African people, with the exceptions of a limited amount of progressive thinkers, sought to see Africa as helpless, second class, inferior, non-human, not a part of human history, and indeed, in some instances, savage. This was Europe’s contributions to the lexicon of African history.

### **A Commitment to a New Narrative History of Africa**

One assumes now that the Afrocentrist is clear that one of the primary obligations of the scholar is to make an assessment of the condition of research and then to intervene in the appropriate manner. With regard to African literature, history, behavior, and economics, the Eurocentric writers have always positioned Africa in the inferior place in every subject field. This has been a deliberate falsifi-

## 6 Afrocentric Traditions

cation of the record. It is one of the greatest conspiracies in the history of the world because what was agreed upon, tacitly, by writer after writer was that Africa should be marginalized in the literature and downgraded when it seemed that the literature spoke with high regard to Africa. We see this at the very root of the problem in the study of Kemet, classical Egyptian history.

After Napoleon and Dominique Vivant Denon had made their conquest of Egypt an entirely different orientation to African knowledge was undertaken. We were at once introduced to a new field of human inquiry, Egyptology. With Champollion's deciphering of the language of the ancient Egyptians, Europe was off to a dismantling of Egypt's history as African and of African history as being related to the Nile Valley. The only river on the African continent that was made a part of the European experience was the Nile. It was as if Europe had taken the river ounce by ounce out of the continent and dumped it onto the European landscape. All African contributions from the Nile Valley became European contributions and Europe began the task of confusing the world about the nature of ancient Egypt. This was the biggest falsification and the one that appears at any discussion on the great civilizations of antiquity. Thus, rewriting this history becomes a challenge to the Afrocentric scholars who have mastered the ancient language. It is also a fact that the writing of the history of other African communities cannot be undertaken without some serious intellectual intervention of African scholars who with an Afrocentric eye will rescue the teaching of Africa from the clutches of the anthropologists whose only intent it seems to me is to develop their ethic of comparison. The idea of comparison is not necessarily the source of the Eurocentric error though there is no doubt in my mind that it is a contributing factor.

There can be no mistake about our beginnings. Classical Africa must be the starting point for all discourse on the course of African history. Kemet is directly related and linked to civilizations of Kush, Cayor, Peul, Yoruba, Akan, Congo, Zulu, and Bamun. This much we know. There is still much more that we do not know because our focus of study has only recently turned to the study of Africa for its own sake. In the past, we studied Africa as it related to Europe, not as African cultures related to each other. This was the colonial model of research. It was perfected by the French and English. If the English studied West Africa and looked at the Akan they examined the people of Ghana as if they had no relationship to the Baule people

of Côte d'Ivoire. The French did the same; they studied the Baule but not the Asante-Akan. This has produced a kind of direct beam research that does not permit the researcher to understand the interrelationships with adjacent or contiguous cultures. Afrocentricity has already begun to change this type of research and the work of numerous scholars must be seen as contributing to a Tarharkan revival in African research.

### Assumptions

Clearly, what I have discussed in the preceding are the minimum requirements for approaching any subject Afrocentrically. There are some assumptions that I have had to make in regard to intellectual methods, however, that are also important as we interrogate the facts of African life experiences.

The first point that should be emphasized is what is meant by *African*. This is not an essentialist term, that is, it is not something that is simply based upon "blood" or "genes." It is much more than that as a construct in knowledge. An African at the basic level must be a person who has participated in the five-hundred-year resistance to European domination of the African continent. Sometimes a person may have participated without knowing that he or she has participated but that is where *conscientization* enters the picture. Only those who are consciously African, given to appreciating the need to resist annihilation culturally, politically, and economically, can claim to be adequately in the arena of Afrocentricity. This is not to say that they are not Africans, just not Afrocentric. Thus, to be African is to claim a kinship with struggle and to pursue an ethic of justice against all forms of human oppression. At another level, we speak of Africans as those individuals who argue that their ancestors came to the Americas, the Antilles, and other parts of the world, from the continent of Africa during the last half of the millennium. There is an internal African connection as well as an external African connection. Those who live on the continent at the present moment are the internal connection and those who live on other continents are the external connection. Whites on the continent of Africa, who have never participated in the resistance to white oppression, domination, or hegemony, are indeed non-Africans. Domicility alone does not make one an African. In the end, we argue that consciousness, not biology, determines our approach to data. This is the place from which all analysis proceeds.

## 8 Afrocentric Traditions

Now the Afrocentrist argues that there can be no anti-place. One is either involved from one place or another; one cannot be in a place that does not exist since all places are positions. I cannot conceive of an anti-perspective because whatever I perceive of I am using a place, a position, even if it is called an anti-perspective perspective.

In a powerful ethic of subject-to-subject communication and interaction, the Afrocentrist establishes the African agency as comparable to that of any other human in the world. If you want to talk science, we will talk science. If you want to talk astronomy, we will talk astronomy. Whatever the condition and the situation with human beings in any part of the world, African people must be seen as players on the world stage, not as second-class citizens. The five hundred years of European domination may have crippled Africans' march toward human progress but those years can not erase the contributions of thousands of years of history before the European stepped foot on the African continent.

We already know that there has been a tremendous attack on African scholarship over the past few years. We know also that the recent assaults have been a part of the pattern over the centuries. This aggressiveness toward Africans who have never enslaved, colonized, or dominated another group of people simply because of their biology, is meant to prevent Africans from expressing their ethics, values, and mores in a positive way to the world. The anti-spiritual and pro-material views of the West have driven the world to the brink of destruction more than once. It is certain that Western technology will not save the world; in fact, it may be that technology will hasten the destruction of the world. The corruption of the earth, from the poisoning of the air and water, to the killing of innocent people as collateral victims of warfare, all attest to the sense of terror that sits at the door of the Western world. Humans have been on the earth less than 300,000 years, hominids have been here less than 6 million, and it is not guaranteed that we will be here another 300,000, given the way the world is now going. We cannot give up the philosophical direction of the earth to those whose pattern of greed and destruction threatens our annihilation.

All African experiences are worthy of study. When the Afrocentrist speaks of all African experiences this is not a statement that is to be taken as representing only the patriarchal point of view. Women are not relegated to some second-tier realm as they have been in West-

ern thought. The reason for this stems from the fact that women have been integral to all African cultures from the earliest of times. If one looks at the African rulers of antiquity it is difficult to find any society where women have not held high positions. For example, the queens who ruled in Kemet, Punt, and Nubia, and there were more than forty who ruled in Nubia, represent the earliest known examples of women ruling nations. Indeed, when the rulers of Kemet and Punt held diplomatic relations during the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty it was the first recorded interchange between women rulers. Women and men are equally important in any Afrocentric construction of knowledge.

One also assumes that a homologous relationship exists between the study of African phenomena and the study of humanity. Africans are a part of humanity and therefore wherever people declare themselves to be African they are involved with the creation of human knowledge. Thus, Afrocentricity recognizes and respects the transitory nature of the self, and is not anti-self, but pro-personal. In fact, one may even declare that Afrocentricity is fundamentally dedicated to the collective self and is therefore proactively engaged in the creation and the recreation of the personal on a grand scale. What African people do in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Venezuela, the United States, Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Congo, and France is a part of the general and collective rise to consciousness so long as what is done is toward the process of liberation.

In the Afrocentrist's view, all knowledge must be emancipatory. How to break open the prison that holds humans in mental bondage? How do you bring about justice in situations where there is only injustice? How do you create conditions of freedom when the ruling powers deny people the resources for life? These are the critical questions of a progress paradigm for liberation.

Afrocentricity is not data, but the orientation to data. It is how we approach phenomena. Sometimes critics argue that Afrocentrists are not presenting data on such and such a topic. Or they indicate that they do not have information on a particular subject. We respond, as Afrocentrists, that it is not so much the data that is at question many times but how people interpret the data, how they perceive what they confront, and how they analyze the African issues and values that are contained in the data. If you do not approach the data correctly, then you are prone to poor conclusions. Furthermore, it is clear from reading the various assaults on Afrocentrists that some

## 10 Afrocentric Traditions

people assume that since there is no evidence, for instance, that Africans in the Congo region interacted with Africans in the Nile region it means it did not happen. It does not mean that an absence of evidence means evidence of absence.

It is necessary to say also that history is not Afrocentricity; history is a discipline within its own sphere. It possesses certain attributes, assumptions, methods, and objectives that may or may not be consistent with those of Afrocentricity. The debates over historiography that have arisen in history over the last few years have been due to the increasing challenges of Afrocentric historiography (Keita, 2001). The implications of this transformation are tremendous and cannot be gainsaid. It is essential for us to appreciate the new orientations to data that are creating a robust intellectual discipline that has long left history behind. This is not to say that there should not be expressions of historical interest or attention to some of the key contributions of historical methods, but that Afrocentricity has imposed new criteria on research documents, interpretation of texts, and orientation to data (Conyers, 2003). One reason Ama Mazama has called for *L'Imperatif Afrocentrique* is that we have been too busy rediscovering Europe to move beyond the traditional frameworks of the West. Our objective as scholars is to provide the world with the most valid and valuable analysis of African phenomena we can. What this means is that we must abandon many of the elements of historical research, particularly its overemphasis on written texts, and introduce new ways of ferreting out meaning in the lives of African people in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro and the rich suburbs of Lagos. Indeed, in *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (1990) I proposed a series of Afrocentric responses to history that have yet to be fully examined. In the first instance, I suggested an entirely new periodization of history. Secondly, I dismissed the Hegelian assumption that Africa was no part of human history. Only the second challenge has been adequately taken up in subsequent discussions. I am sure that new scholars will re-evaluate much of the early work done in Afrocentric theory. Already Mazama's *The Afrocentric Paradigm* and James Conyers, *Afrocentricity and Its Critics*, have attempted in different directions to deepen our knowledge and appreciation of Afrocentricity.

### Subject Fields

Several subject fields of Africology were proposed when I created the doctoral program in African American Studies at Temple

University. As those fields emerged in 1990 they were social, communication, historical, cultural, political, economic, and psychological. A number of scholars have written on Africology as a way to demonstrate the power of the concept in actual analysis of texts and phenomena (Okafor, 2002). To a large extent I was influenced by the Afrocentric philosopher, Maulana Karenga, who had seen fit to discuss seven fields in his book, *Introduction to Black Studies*, and Cheikh Anta Diop, who had also made a division of our studies, suggesting that instead of social studies we should have created family studies. In Karenga's view black religion, black sociology, black politics, black economics, black creative production, and black psychology constitute principal areas of inquiry. My work must be seen as a synthesis of the central ideas of conceptualization as found in the Karenga and Diop works.

I was concerned that the intellectual seeking a place to examine our phenomena would end up on the trash heaps of many of the older disciplines unable to secure footing in the thick mud and gluey debris of failed analyses. Thus, Africology, which I called the Afrocentric study of African phenomena, is a discipline with several subject fields. When one sought to approach any of these fields the best methods, based on what I had seen in the best practices of the emerging scholars as well as the best Afrocentric work of older scholars, were grouped as *functional*, *categorical*, and *etymological* (Asante, 1990).

Each of these categories has specific methods. For example, the functional category would apply needs analysis, policy analysis, and action orientation. The categorical would require a concentration of schemes, gender, class, themes, files, and other collective ideas. Finally, the etymological category would depend heavily on language, terminology, and concept origin. These were the principal methodological approaches to research.

What was necessary in terms of the Afrocentric idea was the ability of scholars to create methods that grew out of the responses to a centered theory. Without assumptions and presuppositions methods become nothing more than rules without meaning. The Afrocentrist must not be quick to adopt Eurocentric methods that fail to appreciate African phenomena. To do so would mean that the researcher would be trapped in the constructed mental prison of failed methods. I believe that Afrocentrists could use African cultural referents in order to attain a more effective analysis of realities. I am not say-

ing that you cannot use psychological theories, sociological theories, historical analysis, or literary theory to achieve a full understanding of phenomena. What I am saying is that the Afrocentrists must seek the African agency in all methodological constructions. We live in a world where the architecton of human investigation is constructed by concepts that have grounding in the community. I see this as a principal avenue for creating patterns of analysis based on the centered idea. Discovering centeredness is itself the primary task of the Afrocentric researcher. One must create the methods that will lead to transformations in the text, phenomenon, and human lives.

### New Challenges

Afrocentricity establishes itself as a vigorous intellectual idea in line with the best Africological thinking. In fact, Karenga (2002: 346) puts the situation properly when he claims that “the initial and ongoing challenge for Africana studies is to continue to define itself in ways that reaffirm its original and fundamental mission and yet reflect its capacity and commitment to continuously extend the range of its concerns to deal with new problematics and new understandings within the discipline and with an ever-changing world.” Whatever theoretical thrust predominates in the future I am certain that Afrocentricity will shape the long-term interests of the field. In accepting the challenge of the field to “extend the range of its concerns,” the Afrocentrist also searches for new avenues for examining African cultural, economic, and political phenomena in places other than North America.

Scholars from Brazil, Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, Nova Scotia, Panama, Guatemala, Guyana, Surinam, Costa Rica, the Antilles, and other countries with large African populations will eventually add new facts that will expand and extend our concerns.

Mazama (2003: 18) contends that “it will come as no surprise that Afrocentricity does not embrace the idea of African cultural incompleteness...” Clearly, Mazama’s position is grounded in the belief that Africans must reconnect to the cultural matrix that helps them free themselves from European hegemony. There is no victory in accepting the idea that Africans, who after five hundred years of dislocation, must remain marginalized. Mazama has advanced the idea that Africology is a discipline devoted to the renaissance of the African world. Thus, this is not a geographic specific quest; it is a worldwide challenge for people of African descent.