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AFRICANS MAKING THE MODERN WORLD:
ACCORDING TO DR. CHARLES H. LONG

In 1996 I organized an international conference with UNESCO support on “The African Diaspora and the Modern World” at the University of Texas at Austin, where I was a Professor of Anthropology, held an endowed chair in the College of Liberal Arts, and was Director of the Center for African and African American Studies. Who I would invite to give the keynote address was obvious.

Dr. Charles H. Long, Historian of Religions, had been my favorite and most enlightening professor at the University of Chicago. He was also the sine qua non of my surviving doctoral studies in Cultural Anthropology and the most important supporter of my research, publishing, and academic career. Although he taught in the Divinity School, not in the Anthropology Department, Dr. Long did for me, as a graduate student and young professional, everything the professors in my department did not do. Their support of aspects of the colonial discipline that denied the validity of my experiences conflicted with his principles as they did with mine as African Americans.

In my opening remarks at the conference, I said that the participants I had invited had “formed the way I think about the African presence in the Americas and around the world.” Charles Long was a major influence in forming “the way I think.”

After Dr. Long made his transition from elder to ancestor in 2020, I wanted to pay tribute to him. Not finding adequate words to express what I felt he merited, I decided to honor him by allowing him to speak for himself and share his wisdom in his inimitable way. I wrote an article using clips of him from my documentary, *Scattered Africa: Faces and Voices of the African Diaspora*, which was based on the conference that he keynoted. That article became a blog post, “A Tribute to Dr. Charles H.

Long,¹ on my website,² for which these reflections are a complement.

In the article I said that Dr. Long provided the “conceptual foundation for the theme of the conference” and an “explanatory framework for understanding the larger implications of the presentations.” His introductory, foundational statement was:

This was the largest dispersal of people throughout the world up to that time in the whole of human history. This dispersal took place in the Atlantic world, in the world of modernity. That means that it had tremendous effects upon everything that took place in the world that we call modern. It cannot be overlooked. After all, Europeans did not bring people from Africa into the Americas just because it was nice. They brought them for very practical, definite, specific reasons – economic, political, etc. So without understanding the Africans in the Atlantic World, you cannot have a clear understanding of what the Modern World is.³

In another clip from the documentary, Howard Dodson, then Chief of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, buttressed Long’s assertion with demographic data that came as more of a surprise than it should have:

What is remarkable when we talk about the demographics of the slave trade and the slave trade experience and its impact on the western hemisphere and its development, is the fact that Africans constituted the majority of the people who came from the Old World to the New World.

[During] the first three hundred years of the colonial period of American history . . . 6.5 million people crossed

¹Sheila Walker, “Tribute to Dr. Charles H. Long,” *Afrodiaspora: Visualizing the Global African Diaspora* (Afrodiaspora Global LLC), <https://afrodiasporaglobal.com/>.

² <https://afrodiasporaglobal.com>

³*Tribute to Dr. Charles H. Long (2): Foundational Roles of Africans in the Modern World*, Youtube (Afrodiaspora Global, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqBUI8K69o&list=PLZ3OnqsOmKkxTDM Dy1LN6ilvcFDSdZi7R&index=3>.

the Atlantic from Africa and Europe and settled in the Americas . . . Of those 6.5 million people, only one million were European. The other five and a half million were African.

Most of the histories that we have have been written from the colonial perspective, from the perspective of the minority of the population, from the perspective of their institutional histories, without taking into account any of the economic, political, and social consequences of this simple demographic fact.

Those of us who are involved in the study of the African Diaspora and the African experience, are really faced with two sets of challenges, intellectual challenges:

- to set the record straight about the African experience in the Western Hemisphere
- to rewrite in a fundamental way the history of the Americas.⁴

Long's conclusion that, "without understanding Africans in the Atlantic World, you cannot have a clear understanding of what the Modern World is," concurs with Dodson's statement that, "if two-thirds or more of the peoples of the Western Hemisphere have not been included in the history, then we don't know very much about the history."

Long said of European and African roles in the making of the Americas:

Europeans came over to the Americas voluntarily. And they know the importance of that. But then you have the millions of Africans who came over involuntarily. And they made the Modern World. And they made that world together – even though Africans had to make it together involuntarily.⁵

⁴ *Tribute to Dr. Charles H. Long (3): Howard Dodson Also Urges Rewriting the Story of the Americas, Youtube* (Afro diaspora Global, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcZL1W5gyrM&list=UUBrG5r8IgQPtMUFElIKvCQ&index=10>.

⁵ *Tribute to Dr. Charles H. Long (5): Africans and Europeans Made the Modern World Together, Youtube* (Afro diaspora Global, 2021),

The conference was about how Africans and Afrodescendants contributed proactively, albeit involuntarily, to creating the Modern World. It focused on the last five centuries of the peri-Atlantic World, defined by the results and implications of the transatlantic commerce in African lives as a violent forced labor migration after the European invasion and conquest that led to the near genocide of most of the indigenous inhabitants of the hemisphere.

As Charles Long's student, I have taken seriously his words, and my responsibility to research, teach, and share broadly knowledge and perspectives about Africa's human, intellectual, technological, and cultural contributions to the Modern World. And to help rewrite the story.

Much progress has been made since the 1996 conference in generating and transmitting knowledge about the importance of people of African origin in the creation and development of the Americas and the Atlantic World. More people are demanding the truth, and more Afrodescendent researchers and our allies are involved in correcting lies with accurate and representative portrayals, often thanks to mentors like Charles Long. I am pleased to have been, and to continue to be, part of this process, beginning with the edited volume of articles by conference participants, *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas*, and the complementary documentary, *Scattered Africa: Faces and Voices of the African Diaspora*.

Whereas many of the ways in which Africans contributed to the Atlantic World were discussed at the conference and elaborated in *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* and in *Scattered Africa: Faces and Voices of the African Diaspora*, many more remain to be researched, acknowledged, and properly attributed. In the volume, Nigerian economic historian Joseph Inikori discussed the extent to which the Industrial Revolution was fueled by the centuries of unpaid labor of enslaved Africans and their descendants; African American dance scholar Brenda Dixon-Gottschild wrote of African and Afrodescendent movement vocabularies found in contemporary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4DSzmAO5xY&list=UUBrG5r8IgQPtMUFElIKvCQ&index=8>.

Euro-American concert dance; and Afro-Argentineans Mario Luis López and Lucía Dominga Molina wrote of contributions to Argentina of the Africans and Afro-Argentines whose existence the nation and its leaders have denied, a presence betrayed by their national dance with the Central African Bantu name – Tango. And in *Scattered Africa*, Afro-Peruvian Susana Baca highlighted commonalities among Afrodescendent communities and continued links with African origins, and Afro-Colombian Juan de Dios Mosquera echoed Howard Dodson by insisting that the history of the Americas should be rewritten from the perspectives of Afrodescendants to counteract inaccurate denigrating and misrepresentative images projected by others.

To characterize the perspective reflected in the book, I had to invent a word, Afrogenic.

Afrogenic simply means growing out of the histories, ways of being and knowing, and interpretations and interpretive styles of African and African Diasporan peoples. It refers to these communities' experiences, priorities, and styles, and their articulations of them, while acknowledging that most human behavior is not intellectually articulated by the actors who perform it and that plural interpretations of similar behaviors are obviously possible.⁶

In what became the modern Americas of the last five hundred years, a new people was born in and into this Indigenous territory that was colonized by Europe. Africans enslaved by Europeans and transformed into Afrodescendants after surviving the horrible trans-Atlantic voyage, participated in creating a "New World" that became new in large part because of their presence and contributions.

Whereas African contributions have been minimized and misrepresented as being limited to unskilled labor, the reality is that as the majority of the population during the majority of the history of the modern Americas, their contributions to

⁶ Sheila S. Walker, "Are You Hip to the Jive? (Re)Writing/Righting the Pan-American Discourse," in *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Construction of the Americas*, ed. Sheila Walker (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 8.

developing the European colonial societies through generations of unremunerated labor were largely based on the technological expertise and cultural knowledge they brought with them from Africa. In myriad ways, as the documented research of conference participants demonstrated, they indelibly marked the hemisphere as their new homeland.

The enslavement of Africans in the Atlantic World must be re-examined for its role as a transfer of knowledge systems and of technology from Africa to the Americas. That history must be reconsidered as the basis of the development of the hemisphere. Such reconsideration is being done in books such as Judith Carney's *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*, and her *In the Shadow of the Plantation: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* about African agricultural and culinary contributions to feeding the Americas, and Kevin Dawson's *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora (The Early Modern Americas)* that tells of Africans as underwater divers who generated wealth for their enslavers based on their their skilled diving for pearls.

African American educator and author Dr. Jean Marie Robbins, who got to know Charles Long in *Scattered Africa*, characterized the impact on her of his statements in the documentary as "pivotal." She said of his comments about Africans' roles in the creation of the Modern World:

Long's statements about Africans represented a paradigm shift for me. He completely upset the lazy, shiftless narrative about us to expose our profound and enduring contributions to the evolution of the modern era. I had understood that our labor and bodies produced the wealth of "western" nations, but I was unaware of the extent of the cultural and technology transfer from Africa to the Americas.

It took me quite a few listens to process it. I've (we've) been so thoroughly conditioned to see ourselves as a problem – impoverished, ignorant, dependent – that it takes PRACTICE or discipline to correct my/our false concept of Blackness/Africanity. I believe Long's work is provoking an ongoing identity shift, at least for me.

A paradigm shift has changed my view of everything. Long's and Dodson's contributions have recalibrated my sense of what's real. Historical truths begin to clear up the gaping inconsistencies. How can Black people be worthless if our minds, bodies, and labor created the wealth of the modern world?

These truths have opened up previously unimaginable possibilities. Truly acknowledging the resourceful, inventive genius that Africans introduced, involuntarily, solidifies my own sense of self-worth and possibility, and that of all Black people.

Formal education has been a tool of manipulation, control – a way to compel compliance from the population, and not just from Black people. We need to explore new ways of knowing and measurement. I've begun to wonder if the lack of formal schooling could have had the unintended consequence of preserving our enslaved ancestors' ability to survive in a hostile environment.

Dr. Robbins' comment about what she learned so recently from *Scattered Africa* reminded me of the extent to which I had experienced such a paradigm shift more than two decades earlier. Mine led me to structure both the book and the documentary from the conference around Long's statement about the foundational roles of Africans in the creation of the Americas. Dodson's demographic data made that assertion even more persuasive.

That experience fortified attitudes I had already started developing, beginning with an adolescent stay with a family in Cameroon in Central Africa where I learned, experientially, about the African roots of my African American culture that had been insistently denied by authoritative sociologists who studied us as "problems." These attitudes, that had already been represented in my writings, were enhanced by this new information and perspective that I gained at the conference I organized. I have subsequently been, in various ways, part of the rewriting of the story of the Americas to include the majority of the people who created them. My research and understanding of

African contributions have now evolved and expanded beyond the Atlantic World to global civilization.

In my talk, "Thinking and Rethinking the African Diaspora,"⁷ that I filmed for presentation at the August 2021 hybrid conference that inaugurated Ghana's Pan African Heritage World Museum, I included clips of Charles Long talking of the necessity of understanding Africans' roles in order to understand the Modern World and of Howard Dodson talking about the African majority of the population during most of the history of the Americas. I also said that I was irate that it was only at a conference that I organized, two decades after getting a PhD from a major U.S. university, that I learned such fundamental truths about the essential role of Africans in creation and development of the Modern World.

Beginning in 2020, the desire to understand issues that Charles Long raised more than two decades before becoming an ancestor has taken on increased urgency throughout the Atlantic World and beyond in this period of global awakening to pervasive systemic racism evidenced by the brazen violence of filmed beatings of Black men in places like the 17th Arrondissement in Paris, and murders of Black men in Atlanta in the United States, Puerto Tejada in Colombia, and Porto Alegre in Brazil, to say nothing of the gruesome recorded torture of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Current concerns align with Long's 1996 assertions about the seminal role of Africans and their descendants in the creation of the Modern World and discussions at the conference and in the book about the systemic racism that has obscured and distorted knowledge of this reality.

Provoked to awareness by such overt state-sanctioned violence against Afrodescendants in such a concentrated period of time in so many places, people around the world are understanding that structural inequalities created by the enslavement of Africans and the colonization of Africa are maintained by various forms of overt and covert violence built into the systems of modern nations. They have been manifest and perpetuated in the

⁷*Thinking and Rethinking the Global African Diaspora, Pan African Heritage World Museum, Accra, Ghana, Youtube (Afro diaspora Global, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05K1O-I6epg&list=UUBrG5r8lgQPtMUFefliKvCQ&index=12>.*

adulation of enslavers and colonizers represented in statuary and honorific naming practices that are now being challenged by removing statues and denaming and renaming spaces and institutions for emancipators rather than enslavers.

Many people are now asking, “Why didn’t I know this before? Why wasn’t I taught this?” That is a reaction I still get to the content of *Scattered Africa*, which was originally produced in 2001 and re-edited in 2017, and that I have shown in many diverse contexts over those years. The reality is that we don’t know these truths because we are not supposed to. We don’t know them because compulsory educational systems that purport to teach us the truth do not teach us the truth. On the contrary, many teach worldviews that deny the truth. It is especially distressing that most African descendants whose ancestors were the Africans who contributed so much to the development of the Modern World are unaware of this basic fact, as are most other people.

In his 1933 classic book *The Miseducation of the Negro*, African American historian Dr. Carter G. Woodson, who created in 1915 what is now Black History Month as well as the oldest African American intellectual organization, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), argued that Euro-American society, especially via the system of compulsory education, presented distorted perspectives on African and African American history and culture. The goal was to induce African Americans to deny and negate their ancestral heritage.⁸ Robbins’ comment that formal schooling limited by racism may have “had the unintended consequence of preserving our enslaved ancestors’ ability to survive in a hostile environment” rings especially true here.

African American educational psychologist Asa Hilliard, examining why inaccurate, denigrating images of Africans were created in the first place and are perpetuated in spite of the availability of correct information, associated images of Africans with the treatment of African Americans, and asserted that Euro-Americans created such images to justify their oppression of African Americans. He stated that, “the history and culture of colonized or dominated people is usually destroyed or distorted.

⁸ Carter G. Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro* (Washington D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1969 (1933)).

This enables an oppressor to hold a view of the oppressed which will justify self-serving interventions. It also serves the function of confusing the oppressed group regarding its own identity and resources, thus limiting its ability to respond to oppression (Hilliard 1978: 110).⁹ Discussing the “colonization of scholarship, general information, and belief,” Hilliard, like Woodson a half century earlier, concluded that, “By the control and production of information, the control of a people's belief and behavior will follow.”¹⁰

Educational systems that inculcate and perpetuate misinformation cannot possibly “miseducate the Negro” while accurately educating everyone else. They rather miseducate everyone by misrepresenting the truth about everyone. Charles Long’s assertion about the definition and meaning of the Modern World is about everyone – the original Afrodescendent majority and the Eurodescendent minority that used their superior force of arms to impose distorted definitions of reality with a violence that was not only physical and psychological, but also epistemic. In asserting the foundational roles of Africans in the creation of the modern world, Long was calling for a decolonization of knowledge and a countering of epistemic violence based on a perspective I would characterize as Afrogenic.

He concluded with pointed questions and posed a bold challenge:

The issue is about how did the modern world come into existence? How did the Americas gain their wealth? Why is the United States such a wealthy nation? Somebody paid a price. And Africans paid a great price for the meaning of this country. And it has not ever been acknowledged. Therefore, the political implications have to do with when do we share in the world that we made – legitimately, authentically, and openly?¹¹

⁹ Asa G. Hilliard, III, "On Equal Educational Opportunity and Quality Education," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, Special Issue: "New Perspectives on Black Education,"* ed. Sheila Walker, 9, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 110.

¹⁰ Hilliard,, "On Equal Educational Opportunity and Quality Education," 112.

¹¹ *Tribute to Dr. Charles H. Long (7): When Will Africans in Americas Be Recognized for Contributions?*, Youtube (Afrodiaspora Global, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pf4ibj_UY8I&list=UUBrG5r8IgQPtMUFefliKvCQ&index=5.

More people in the 21st century are beginning to respond to the challenge Charles Long raised in the 20th. They are seeking and offering answers to his questions about how the Modern World came into existence, how the Americas gained their wealth, and why the United States is such a wealthy nation. They are increasingly aware of the realities and details of racialized slavery and colonization. They are demanding to know the truth as they topple symbols of brutality, statues of enslavers and colonizers, and are refuting versions of reality that accompanied them. They are acknowledging and examining the high price paid by Africans and Afrodescendants by acknowledging their roles in the creation of the Modern World. And increasingly enlightened African descendants are seeking to share in the benefits of the world to which our ancestors contributed so much – legitimately, authentically, and openly.