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Symposium

"St. Clair Drake: The Making of a Scholar-Activist"



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# LEARNING FROM ST. CLAIR DRAKE: (RE)MAPPING DIASPORIC CONNECTIONS

Faye V. Harrison

St. Clair Drake was an erudite scholar whose breadth of knowledge and publicly engaged scholarship blurred disciplinary boundaries and spanned the terrain of the African world. Although he is most readily known for the classic study in sociology—and anthropology—*Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945), co-authored with sociologist Horace Cayton, and for his advocacy of scholarship in African Studies, Drake devoted the final two decades of his career and life to developing a conceptual paradigm and programmatic framework for studying the African Diaspora in both its Old World and New World configurations.<sup>1</sup> The published result of this project is the two-volume *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History and Anthropology* (1987 and 1990).<sup>2</sup> Another important outcome, albeit now a part of the historical archives, is an equally wide-ranging unpublished manuscript, “Africa and the Black Diaspora,” which he was unable to complete before his death in 1990. This prodigious tour de force informed much of his teaching and mentoring at Stanford University, both before and after his official retirement.

Drake became an emeritus professor at Stanford University in 1976, after his seven-year tenure as professor of anthropology and sociology and director of the African and Afro-American Studies Program for five of those years (1969–74). Drake had been recruited to lead the newly established program that was made possible, initially, through funding from the Ford Foundation (in the amount of \$100,000).<sup>3</sup> He also chaired Stanford’s Committee for the Comparative Study of Africa and the Americas, which institutionalized Africana Studies beyond the initial pedagogical mission of the Program in African and Afro-American Studies by promoting and facilitating graduate student and faculty research.

## (RE)MAPPING THE CARIBBEAN

This symposium gives me the welcome opportunity to reflect on St. Clair Drake’s “Black Diaspora” perspective, particularly on the Caribbean and

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Caribbean Diaspora as integral sites for interrogating the legacies of race, power, and history in the wider African world, which Drake understood to be a global phenomenon. Caribbean and circum-Caribbean connections, crosscurrents, and migrations were an important concern for him—personally, politically, and professionally as a scholar-activist. Understanding the significance of contacts, solidarities, and in some instances conflicts among diverse diasporic experiences and between diasporic situations and the African motherland or homeland was a pursuit he embodied. His critical reflexivity about his family origins in both Virginia and Barbados, the watershed year he lived in Barbados as a young child, and two field trips to the Caribbean in 1967 and 1973 made their way into a great deal of what he taught his students. His Pan-Africanist thinking and teaching about the culture, political economy, and history of the Caribbean world inspired some of his students to become Caribbeanists—in the broadest conceptual and cartographical sense of the term.

With his encouragement and blessings, my qualifying exam focused, in part, on a mapping of the circum-Caribbean that included Florida and other parts of the Gulf Coast region, the Caribbean archipelago, and the Caribbean littoral or coastal zones of Central and South America. As a consequence, northeast Brazil was just as integral to my studies as was the Anglophone, Hispanic, and Dutch Caribbean. Three decades later, the Caribbean Studies Association (CSA) claimed Brazil as part of its purview. In 2006 the CSA held its 32nd annual meeting in Salvador da Bahia. Eight years earlier, the conference was held in the Yucatán Peninsula, a major entry point for the inflow of Africans who became Afro-Mexicans. Percy C. Hintzon, CSA president, declared that this trend to stretch the boundaries of the Caribbean sociocultural area was meant to “challenge . . . the traditional insular definitions of the Caribbean by stressing connections across culture, society, history, political-economy, aesthetics, and poetics as bases for defining the region.”<sup>4</sup> Drake had already articulated a similarly expansive sense of cultural cartography in the 1970s.

### MENTORING GRADUATE STUDENTS

Although Drake had a major impact as an educator throughout his long career at Dillard, Roosevelt, and Stanford universities, it was only at the latter institution that he taught doctoral students. But in working with doctoral students especially, a professor gets a chance to influence the direction of new trends in the production of academically oriented knowledge. The scholar gets the chance to reproduce and professionalize a scholarly project or paradigm. Ironically, Drake did not teach graduate-level courses at Stanford, at least not by the time I arrived there. According to many of his colleagues' perceptions, his “griot storytelling”



pedagogical style was more appropriate for undergraduate teaching. They believed that his characteristic storytelling was less amenable to teaching the theory and analytical substance of anthropology at the graduate level. The graduate program in anthropology touted the importance of conceptual and theoretical sophistication. As Drake himself explained, he was considered an "'area [studies] man' not a theory man" in the department.<sup>5</sup>

Another reason for Drake's not being assigned to the graduate program is that, as he himself admitted, his scholarship was well outside of the established disciplinary canon. A prolific author, in his long career he published only one article in an anthropology journal.<sup>6</sup> His priority was to appropriate the most useful tools from anthropology to make a contribution to Pan-African Studies, whose mission was to contribute to the liberation of African-descended people from all forms of oppression that thwarted self-determination. Also related to Drake's place within the department's curricular division of labor is that his better known scholarly works such as *Black Metropolis* were more closely aligned to sociology than to anthropology as it was then constituted.

Despite Drake's institutional role administering and developing the program in African and Afro-American Studies, as well as teaching undergraduate courses on Africa, the Caribbean, and race and power, there were several doctoral students who were determined to study under St. Clair Drake's guidance. In the late 1970s Ronald W. Bailey completed his Ph.D. in a customized program of study in "Black Studies" with Drake's mentorship and institutional lobbying. In the Department of Anthropology, I and four other students—Adebiso Otudeko, Glenn Jordan, Willie Baber, and Edmund "Ted" Gordon—worked closely with Drake, if not as our major professor, then as a key member of our dissertation committees. Drake himself would advise us to select other faculty members to chair the committees because of academic politics, but Glenn Jordan and Ted Gordon, who worked in Belize and later in Bluefields, Nicaragua, and environs, insisted that Drake play that role and receive official recognition for doing so.

Glenn Jordan, who had studied with Drake since his undergraduate years at Stanford, was Drake's protégé, and we all acknowledged that special relationship, which came to be reflected in Jordan's research and scholarly agenda. To a great extent, that agenda focused on the social ontology, epistemology, methodology, and theory of Drake's *oeuvre*.<sup>7</sup> Jordan's dissertation project, which he later pursued at the University of Illinois, was originally designed to replicate Drake's late 1940s dissertation research in Butetown, a port community in Cardiff, Wales—also popularly known by the tropicalized name of "Tiger Bay," a historic multiethnic and multinational community that included African, Caribbean, and Arab seamen and their Welsh families.<sup>8</sup> Willie Baber carried out his dissertation fieldwork in Martinique on matters of economic growth and development. I conducted



research in an impoverished community in "downtown" Kingston, Jamaica.<sup>9</sup> My focus was on the socioeconomic organization as well as the political consciousness and practices among men and women whose livelihoods were situated, to a great extent, in the extra-legal spheres of the urban informal economy. My ethnographic gaze on the "social bottom" was inspired, in large part, by Drake's experience as an ethnographer among ordinary folk at the bottom of urban social structures in Natchez, Mississippi; Chicago, Illinois; Cardiff, Wales; and Tema, Ghana. His unpublished research on Tema, which was a newly constructed port city, focused on the involuntarily relocated villagers who, by state mandate, populated the new urban center. This project resulted in a critique of his friend Kwame Nkrumah's hardline policies for postcolonial modernization and development.<sup>10</sup>

Although Drake did not chair my dissertation committee, he was an inspiring mentor among several professors who were supportive in helping me develop in ways that I can deeply appreciate now more than three decades later. Being able to work with Drake, however, was a real privilege, given my interests and experiences in the Caribbean and the Caribbean Diaspora in Britain and the United States. I will admit that in the fall of 1975 when I entered the graduate program at Stanford, I had no idea who St. Clair Drake was. Nonetheless, he was the most appropriate advisor for someone like me, who had just spent a research fellowship year in London, England, where I undertook an exploratory project on West Indian immigrants.<sup>11</sup> My focus had been on youth in Brixton and the problems they encountered with their families, schools, potential employers, and the police. From that experience, I realized that I really needed to know much more about the Caribbean itself. Drake was perfect as a professor and sponsor. But there was a hitch—he was scheduled to retire at the end of my first year in the program.

Fortunately for his students and many others, as professor emeritus he continued to play an active role in the university, although he lost his office in the department. Drake rode his bicycle onto campus nearly every day and worked in the library or, space permitting, in the African and Afro-American Studies office. He often met with colleagues and students, and continued to be an integral part of Stanford's intellectual community, especially the one organized around the study of Africa and the African Diaspora, issues of race and power, and black intellectual histories.

It took me many years to understand the depth of his influence on my thinking and my scholarly approach. I have reflected on this in *Outsider Within: Reworking Anthropology in the Global Age*, a broad-ranging synthesis of the politics and praxis of anthropology, as I have experienced them.<sup>12</sup> I may never have attempted to write a book like that—speaking truth to disciplinary power—without having had St. Clair Drake as a role model.



## THE DIASPORA ACCORDING TO DRAKE

In 1967 Drake spent six months in Jamaica. It was there that he began working on "Africa and the Black Diaspora," which eventually became a more than 2,000-page manuscript. The year before, Drake attended the First Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. His experience there was a major watershed. It inspired him to begin working on a book on the "Black Diaspora," initially intended to be a textbook for the teaching of African and African Diaspora Studies courses. The broad-ranging manuscript that he worked on for many years eventually gave birth to *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History and Anthropology*, the two-volume work published in 1987 and 1990, just before Drake passed away.



St. Clair Drake, lecturing at Roosevelt University in late 1960s.  
Courtesy of Roosevelt University Archives.

In *Black Folk Here and There* the focus is largely on the meanings and social-structural positioning of "Blackness" in the pre-colonial Old World—Egypt and the larger Nile River Valley, the Islamic and Judaic Middle East, Mediterranean Europe, and, then, Northern European Christendom. With this comparative baseline laid out, Drake offers an explanation for the rise of "racial slavery" and processes of racialization for Sub-Saharan Africans and their descendants in the context of the transatlantic slave trade and the development of various slave and slave-owning societies in the New World. This became the two-volume work. The second book manuscript, "Black Diaspora," was originally envisioned as a three-volume work with a focus on the Americas. These two books (or sets of books) were more in the tradition of seminal works in the field of Black Studies than the discipline of anthropology. They are very much in the tradition of Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois. Indeed, *Black Folk Here and There* is modeled after Du Bois's *Black Folk Now and Then: An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race*.<sup>13</sup>



The bulk of the work on these books was done at and in association with Stanford University, extending past Drake's retirement in 1976. His research was largely based on the library's secondary literature and archival materials, but field trips to the Caribbean in 1967, when he began to draft the initial chapters, and later in 1973, were also significant experiences that informed the frame and contents of his analysis.<sup>14</sup> His teaching during his Stanford years drew on this evolving project. I recall the mimeographed and xeroxed copies of chapters and portions of chapters that he distributed in and out of class. I enrolled in an undergraduate course for graduate credit in order to see what I could learn from him. No other faculty member in the social sciences taught courses on the Caribbean and on race and power in the way that Drake approached these subjects. Consequently, students hungry for what he offered followed him around campus, walking our bikes, listening to him relate intriguing episodes from his encounters and experiences with a long list of "who's who" in the black liberation struggles during much of the 20th century. His relationship with Kwame Nkrumah and the Trinidadian Pan-Africanists George Padmore and C. L. R. James while in Britain (and later in Ghana during its postcolonial transition) figured prominently in his mesmerizing tales of antiracist and anticolonial politics and the accompanying quest for a form of knowledge that convincingly explains and effectively empowers.

Drake drafted "Africa and the Black Diaspora" to address African peoples globally, the prevailing patterns of economic domination, and the multiple forms of coping, cooptation, and resistance that emerged in response, especially in the Americas. He examined the wide continuum of responses, from the "everyday weapons of the weak" to large-scale *marronage* among the militarily sophisticated maroons in Jamaica and Dutch Guiana (Surinam today). Drake wrote about the many conspiracies and revolts of enslaved men and women who yearned to be free. The historical prism he crafted also focused on the historic revolution in Saint Domingue, transformed into Haiti in 1804, the first black republic. In today's parlance, Drake's ambitious and encyclopedic scholarly agenda was concerned with understanding: 1) the dynamics of structure and agency; 2) the conditions under which consent and dissent to hegemonies developed within the Black World of the past several centuries; and 3) the cultural logics of discursive practices and modalities of habitus that crystallized in the volatile settings in which racially and class-stratified slave colonies, mostly plantation societies, formed and were reconfigured from the spirit and concrete action of black resistance and rebellion.

In many respects, Drake's manuscript (and the lively discussions it generated among his colleagues and students) anticipated later disciplinary and interdisciplinary developments in social analysis and theory in much the same way that Du Bois's scholarship anticipated the later writings of critical theorists and radical historians. According to Donald Nonini, with whom I have collaborated in bringing



more attention to Du Bois's legacy in anthropology, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) "anticipates and resonates with contemporary studies of [race and] 'class consciousness' by a variety of twentieth century Marxist and critical theorists, including Antonio Gramsci, E. P. Thompson, and even Michel Foucault."<sup>15</sup> I would argue that, along similar lines, in his historical sociology and anthropology of the African Diaspora, Drake attempted to grapple with the dialectical relationship between "resistance" and "accommodation" well before this issue became *de rigueur* in academic debate, particularly in response to James C. Scott's important intervention in political ethnography.<sup>16</sup>

The heart of "Black Diaspora" comprises several case studies on the history of white domination and black response in a variety of diasporic locations and colonial situations in the Americas, most of them in the Caribbean. Using selected chapters from his manuscript as teaching resources, Drake taught his students the elements of comparative history and comparative sociology/anthropology in which research questions are framed in "the context of a larger geographical and temporal setting." As Glenn Jordan has written, "[t]ime and space grew qualitatively" over the course of Drake's career, which began with a focus on single-community studies.<sup>17</sup> He also taught us an expansive way to think about "Black Power" beyond the historical particularities of the U.S. freedom movement during the 1960s and 1970s. He addressed the paradoxes and dilemmas of the "ideologies and utopias" (invoking political theorist Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge) propelling black struggles for human dignity and full citizenship rights.<sup>18</sup> He wrote about reform and revolution, racisms and antiracisms, and struggles for self-determination across multiple contexts in the Americas and Africa. These issues remain germane to the engaged scholarship being undertaken currently, reflecting the intellectual and political continuities that tie us to our ancestors and elders in the genealogy of African American and African Diaspora Studies.

### REHISTORICIZING DRAKE, RECOGNIZING HIS ACHIEVEMENTS

During the 1980s and 1990s Glenn Jordan, Willie Baber, and I, beginning as junior faculty, worked concertedly to redraw the traditional boundary between anthropology and sociology in order to reclaim Drake from anthropology's peripheral zone and to demonstrate the substantive and methodological significance of his scholarship to the concerns of contemporary anthropology. Anthropology is no longer expected to be confined to the study of far-away exotics, so ethnographers doing fieldwork today in the South Side of Chicago, or in Harlem, or the Wall Street District in the heart of New York City are not necessarily presumed to be doing sociology rather than anthropology. Toward the objective of re-mapping Drake and underscoring the anthropological underpinnings of



his interdisciplinary scholarship, we have exposed the racialized and often gendered biases in determining what is authorized to belong to the discipline's core knowledge or canon.<sup>19</sup> During the course of this work, I was joined by Ira E. Harrison, a former president of the Association of Black Anthropologists. We embarked on a larger project of "rehistoricizing" anthropology, excavating buried intellectual histories, particularly those of African and African-descended scholars who were pioneers in U.S. anthropology.<sup>20</sup> Inspired by Drake's example, we cleared the ground for exciting new trends in the history of anthropology.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond organizing conference symposia and producing publications on Drake's work, we sought to celebrate his scholarship by nominating him for prestigious honors and awards. George Clement Bond and James Gibbs, Jr. played an important role in this endeavor, resulting in Drake's receiving fellow status in the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (1985), a Professional Achievement Citation from the University of Chicago Alumni Association (1987), the Society for Applied Anthropology's Bronislaw Malinowski Award (1990), honorary doctorates, and many other awards. Drake's recognition as an anthropologist came well after sociology had acknowledged his classic contributions to social science. In 1973 the American Sociological Association conferred upon him the Du Bois-Johnson-Frazier Award, established only two years earlier. Sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox was the inaugural recipient.

St. Clair Drake's black internationalist pedagogy and scholarship were awe-inspiring. They continue to set the standard for what I understand to be the role of black intellectuals, especially those of us who claim citizenship in the world. More of us interested in transnational blackness, Pan-Africanism, and the global African Diaspora should revisit his work.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York, 1945).

<sup>2</sup>St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History and Anthropology*, 2 vols. (Los Angeles, CA, 1987 and 1990).

<sup>3</sup>"A Pioneer in Black Studies," *Stanford Observer*, June 1990, 22.

<sup>4</sup>Percy C. Hintzen, "President's Message," in *Caribbean Studies Newsletter* 33, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 1.

<sup>5</sup>St. Clair Drake, personal correspondence to author, "Drake's Reaction to Proposal for an ABA [Association of Black Anthropologists] Session on His Forthcoming Book," 12 January 1983, author's personal papers. Faye V. Harrison, "Remapping Anthropology's Peripheral Zones," in *Keynotes in Anthropology*, ed. Peter J. M. Nas, Hao Shiyuan, and Zhang Xiaomin (Beijing, 2011), 100, 110–111.

<sup>6</sup>St. Clair Drake, "Traditional Authority and Social Action in Former British West Africa," *Human Organization* 19, no. 3 (1960): 150–158.

<sup>7</sup>Glenn H. Jordan, "Reading St. Clair Drake: A Methodological Essay with Focus on *Black Metropolis*," in *Afro-Scholar Working Papers*, 11 (Urbana, IL, 1982); "Time, Space, and Basic Research Questions in the Major Writings of St. Clair Drake," in *Notes from the ABA*, Vol. 9, April 1983, 13–27. For insights into his research in Cardiff, Wales, in the same district where Drake conducted his doctoral research, see Glenn Jordan, "On



Ethnography in an Intertextual Situation: Reading Narratives on Deconstructing Discourse," in *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further toward an Anthropology for Liberation*, ed. Faye V. Harrison (Arlington, VA, 2010, 1991), 42–67.

<sup>8</sup>St. Clair Drake, "Value Systems, Social Structure, and Race Relations in the British Isles," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1954. Jordan, "On Ethnography," 42–67.

<sup>9</sup>For a glimpse of my Kingston research, which began in the late 1970s and continued over many years since then, see Harrison, "Gangs, Politics, and Dilemmas of Global Restructuring in Jamaica," in *Outsider Within: Reworking Anthropology in the Global Age* (Urbana, IL, 2008), 153–178.

<sup>10</sup>George Clement Bond, "A Social Portrait of St. Clair Drake: An American Anthropologist," in *American Ethnologist* 15, no. 4 (1988): 762–781.

<sup>11</sup>For a reflection on this formative research experience and Drake's earlier research in Cardiff, see Harrison, "Probing the Legacy of Empire," in *Outsider Within*, 137–139.

<sup>12</sup>Drake's influence is discussed in Harrison, "Reworking Anthropology from the 'Outside Within'" and "A Labor of Love: An Emancipated Woman's Legacy" in *Outsider Within*, 7–59, 282–299.

<sup>13</sup>Harrison, "The Du Boisian Legacy in Anthropology," in "W. E. B. Du Bois and Anthropology," special issue, ed. Faye V. Harrison and Donald Nonini, *Critique of Anthropology* 12, no. 3 (1992): 239–260. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Folk Then and Now: An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race* (1938; reprinted New York, 1970).

<sup>14</sup>The reference to these two field trips is found in a 12 January 1983 letter to Faye Harrison and Glenn Jordan, in the context of Drake's refusal to consent to his former students' plan to organize an American Anthropological Association session on his forthcoming *Black Folks Here and There*.

<sup>15</sup>Donald Nonini, "Du Bois and Radical Theory and Practice," in *Critique of Anthropology* 12(3): 293–318; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1939; reprinted New York, 1962).

<sup>16</sup>James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT, 1987).

<sup>17</sup>Jordan, "Time, Space, and Basic Research Questions," 22.

<sup>18</sup>Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York, 1936).

<sup>19</sup>Faye V. Harrison, "Introduction: An African Diaspora Perspective for Urban Anthropology," in *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 17, nos. 2–3 (1988): 111–141; Glenn Jordan, "On Being a Committed Intellectual: St. Clair Drake and the Politics of Anthropology," and Willie L. Baber, "A Tribute to St. Clair Drake: Activist and Scholar," *Transforming Anthropology* 1, no. 2 (1990): 15–18, 18–24; Willie L. Baber, "St. Clair Drake: Scholar and Activist," in *African American Pioneers in Anthropology*, ed. Ira E. Harrison and Faye V. Harrison (Urbana, IL, 1999), 191–212. For a review of anthropological literature on race and racism, in whose intellectual history Drake's work is situated, see Harrison, "The Persistent Power of Race in the Cultural and Political Economy of Racism," in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 47–74.

<sup>20</sup>Ira E. Harrison and Faye V. Harrison, eds., *African American Pioneers in Anthropology* (Urbana, IL, 1999).

<sup>21</sup>An important example of this recent trend is Lee D. Baker's work, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896–1954* (Berkeley, CA, 1998).