

BOOK REVIEW

Dmitri M. Bondarenko. *African Americans and American Africans: Migration, History, and Identities*. Canon Pyon, UK: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2019. 184 pp. \$75.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781912385003.

Dmitri Bondarenko's new contribution to the evolving literature on the relationships between Blacks in America, *African Americans and American Africans: Migration, History, and Identities*, exposes the superficiality of the idea of Black unity. Through painstaking interviews conducted annually from 2013 to 2015 in seven states (Alabama, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, and Pennsylvania), Bondarenko and his team interviewed African immigrants and African Americans about their attitudes toward one another and between the groups. Organized in an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion, this book provides a valuable and timely addition to a nascent field of study that includes historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and non-specialist theorists.

Each chapter is thematic, covering in precise and smoothly written prose the basis and problems of the relationships between Blacks (African migrants, African Americans, and Afro-Caribbeans) in America. I insist on using the term Blacks to emphasize Bondarenko's conclusions: the unity between Blacks is based entirely on skin color and is pertinent only in situations of racial oppression.

The first chapter covers the relationship between African Americans and Africans. Sub-titled "Mutual Attraction and Repulsion," this chapter is based on respondents' views regarding the communities' differences and similarities. Bondarenko questions the utility of the notion of diaspora but settles on the traditional definition of the term, though he makes the point that the integrity of diasporas based on existing African nation-states maintains a level of cohesiveness even in America, as it is the basis of many self-help organizations. Being African only becomes important when smaller national diasporas must come together for larger goals.

Ethnicity plays a role also. Though Bondarenko does not elaborate on it, the artificial borders between African nations created by Europeans cut through traditional ethnic areas, resulting in members from one ethnic group being split between two nations. The Hausa of northern Nigeria and

Niger are a glaring example of such a situation. The result is that when we consider Hausa from Anglophone Nigeria and Francophone Niger, they do not neatly fit into the nation-state diaspora designation that Bondarenko describes.

However, Bondarenko's observation about the national diasporas and the organizations that represent them is the reality. Personally, I know of many such organizations. They are more prevalent in the metro areas where most Africans congregate. There they meet African Americans with varying degrees of exposure to Africans. The study exposes a clear distrust between the two communities, based on historical memory and stereotypes. In Chapter One, Bondarenko identifies one of the primary differences between African migrants and African Americans; the latter group focuses on race as not only identity but also as explanation for problems. Africans generally do not think in terms of race and even deny the power of racial oppression as a causative agent in African Americans' poverty, lack of access to education, and other perceived deficiencies.

Chapter Two covers the role that history and historical memory play in the formation and navigation of the complex relationships between the two groups. Bondarenko connects this issue with the way that both sides view and remember American slavery and how it is compared to the European conquest and colonization of Africa. One of the strengths of this analysis is in Bondarenko's inclusion of socio-economic class as an important factor. Citing the disdain middle-class African Americans had for their Liberian neighbors as well as the "educated" Africans' issues with the "uneducated" poorer African Americans, Bondarenko explains these fault lines between the groups.


The socio-economic separations between Africans and African Americans, coupled with African Americans' central focus on race as a defining identity, add to the already vast cultural and linguistic chasm between the two groups. These issues, however, are subsumed when racial oppression arises. Bondarenko points out how both groups came together to protest the police murder of Amadou Diallo in 1999 and the killing of Michael Brown in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. Both groups were outraged at these tragedies because they exposed their common denominator in America, Blackness.

Bondarenko looks at Black unity from a detached but logical point of view. Despite the best arguments of Afrocentrists and Pan-Africans in both groups, it is clear from the respondents' statements overall that the unity of Blacks is dependent on the prevalence of racial oppression. Can we honestly call this unity?

Based on the respondents' statements, neither side really holds any hope of a large-scale rapprochement between Africans, African Americans, and Afro-Caribbeans, because the fault lines are too vast. Though they all have a common homeland in Africa, the groups have been separated for so long that culturally and linguistically they are vastly different, not to mention the intra-group socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural differences.

Personally, as a scholar of Africa, I think it is ridiculous to observe the entire population of the world's second largest continent as one mega group in comparison to a group in the African diaspora whose cultural roots are limited to primarily the Western section of the continent. Bondarenko's work is ambitious, and it has value for the literature; however, that tactical analytical error weakens the essence of the work by playing into Western epistemological norms of knowledge about Africa which are rooted in error.

To sum it all up, the book is an easy read and a good read. From my personal perspective as an African American who studies Africa and was married to a Senegalese, I have navigated the divides of both communities and have seen nothing that would contradict Bondarenko's conclusions. From my professional perspective, despite the flaws, this work is a must read for all who consider global Blackness as an object of study. The conclusions give us reason to start with the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Pan-Africanists and critique their arguments on Black unity. Is unity based on skin color a viable unity? Whatever answer we may offer; studies of this type beg the question and expand the perspective.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Erhagbe, Edward O. 1996. "African-Americans and the Defense of African States Against European Imperial Conquest: Booker T. Washington's Diplomatic Efforts to Guarantee Liberia's Independence 1907–1911." *African Studies Review* 39 (1): 55–65. doi:10.2307/524668.

Kemp, Amanda D., and Robert Trent Vinson. 2000. "'Poking Holes in the Sky': Professor James Thaele, American Negroes, and Modernity in 1920s Segregationist South Africa." *African Studies Review* 43 (1): 141–59. doi: 10.2307/524725.