

Accepted manuscript version of:

Rastas, Anna (2020) Involving diaspora communities through action research. A collaborative museum exhibition on the African presence in Finland.

Published in Espinoza Garrido, Felipe, Caroline Koegler, Deborah Nyangulu and Mark U. Stein (eds) *Locating African European Studies. Interventions, Intersections, Conversations*. Routledge, pages 79 – 91. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429491092>

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Involving diaspora communities through action research. A collaborative museum exhibition on the African presence in Finland.

In many European societies, the people of the African diaspora have few opportunities to participate in knowledge production concerning their communities and their particularity as racialised subjects in predominantly white societies. The participants in my earlier studies among African diaspora communities in Finland often criticised their portrayal as non-Finns in public discussions, the media and research. They also talked about the effects of exclusionary, stereotypical and derogatory depictions of people of African descent on their well-being and ability to feel at home in this Nordic society with a relatively short history of immigration from Africa and the global African diaspora (Rastas 2011, 2014). African diaspora communities' discussions about the necessity to include their experiences in narratives of Finnishness encouraged me to start an extensive action-research project in which knowledge of local African diaspora(s) and the social and cultural transformations in Finnish society could be studied together with people who identify with African/black diasporas. This chapter reviews the action phase of

this research: the planning and organisation of *The African presence in Finland* exhibition at the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas (28 April–8 November 2015).

The common aim of action research, in addition to production of academic knowledge on the studied phenomena, is to promote change through the involvement of the studied community. I selected participatory action-research methods (e.g. Whyte 1991; Reason and Bradbury 2008) for this project for reasons that go beyond political and ethical considerations. In research on minoritized communities and especially people who might position the researcher as an outsider due to her/his position in racialised hierarchies, theorising situated, embodied knowledges and the privilege of partial perspectives (Haraway 1988, 589) is an epistemological choice that requires dialogue that sometimes can be enabled only by collaborative methods.¹ Furthermore, I was interested in how prevailing theorisations in the tradition(s) of African and black diaspora studies can be applied in research on the diversity of and transformations within African and black diasporas, locally and globally. The guiding principle of action research is carefully documented collaboration with the studied people in all phases of the research project. When the validity and reliability of the generated knowledge are assessed through dialogue with the research subjects, the research materials are of a different quality than materials produced, for example, by interviews using only the researcher's questions framed by specific conceptualisations and theories. Collaborative methods force researchers to test and develop their theoretical frameworks (e.g. Zeelen, Slagter, Book and Preece 2008).²

¹ My role as an outsider categorised as a white Finn was evident, although questions related to racism and Africa(ness) are important to my personal life, family ties, social networks and work history. A good network among diaspora communities was a precondition for the project.

² I continue to analyse the research materials produced during the exhibition project in my on-going project 'Rethinking diasporas, redefining nations. Representations of African diaspora formations in museums and exhibitions' (2015–2020, funded by the Academy of Finland) by comparing African diasporas and their representations in various European countries and the United States.

I cannot here discuss all the theoretical questions that arose during the project or offer detailed descriptions of what was done during the project or the exhibition, its reception and the new projects generated from it (e.g. collections, archives, books and new exhibitions). Instead, along with describing how the portrayals of local African diaspora communities and cultures in the exhibition were informed by dialogue and collaboration between the researchers and the studied people, I intend to show how methods that allow research subjects to participate in knowledge production can provide researchers with alternative ways to approach the studied communities and cultures. Such an approach can help us to avoid the pitfalls of making ontological claims about research subjects and it allows a researcher to reflect on the power relations at play.

Objectives of the exhibition project

The main objectives of the exhibition project were to document the histories of Africans and people of African descent in Finland—histories researchers have rarely addressed—and to invite those who identify with Africanness or blackness to participate in knowledge production about their communities and cultures. By emphasising diaspora communities' contributions to Finnish society and culture, the exhibition was also aimed at questioning outdated, exclusive perceptions of Finnishness. I was inspired by discussions on the roles of museums in the (re)construction of national identities (e.g. Crooke 2007; Boswell and Evans 1999; Anheier and Raj Isar 2011; Krankenhagen 2011; Dixon 2012, 2016; Witcomb and Buckley 2013; Whitehead, Lloyd, Eckersley and Mason 2015; Thomas 2010). The main ideas of these discussions are summarised in the Association of Critical Heritage Studies' (2011) *Manifesto*: 'Nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, cultural elitism, Western triumphalism, social exclusion based on class and ethnicity, and the

fetishising of expert knowledge have all exerted strong influences on how heritage is used, defined and managed’.

With the chosen museum, the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas, I wanted to question discourses that present African immigrants in Finland as outsiders and burdens on taxpayers (see Rastas 2014). Werstas is in Tampere, Finland’s second-largest urban area and third-most populous city. Although not in Helsinki, the Finnish capital with the largest African diaspora community, Werstas is the national museum of social history and working life. Recently, Werstas started to specialise in minority communities and cultures and has produced relevant changing exhibitions and learning materials. In 2011, the museum board accepted my proposal to organise this exhibition as the action phase of my research involving close collaboration with African diaspora communities.³ The museum agreed to the project only after I presented a preliminary manuscript and ideas for what the exhibition could be like.

Calls for collaboration and lessons from nonparticipation

The final exhibition manuscript was planned and produced in dialogue with a museum-appointed team⁴ and ultimately more than 200 individuals and communities⁵, including more than 30 associations of African immigrants. An open invitation to participate was issued to communities

³ Museum management also agreed to apply funding for the project. Various workshops and the salaries for a museum lecturer and a doctoral student working on the project at the museum were funded by grants from the European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland and the Kone Foundation. Some participants received grants for producing exhibitions materials and new archives and collections projects.

⁴ The members of the exhibition team appointed by Werstas were collections head Ulla Jaskari, museum educator Hanna Yli-Hinkkala, visual designer Kati Lehtinen and Uyi Osazee, a PhD student hired to work for the exhibition project, along with myself. Just before the opening of the exhibition Wisam Elfadl joined the team as a museum educator.

⁵ Their names were displayed at the exhibition but cannot be listed here.

and individuals who identify with the diaspora. The invitations were issued face to face at seminars, festivals and other events as well as through various email lists and online forums. Those from African immigrant communities and others who expressed interest were provided with a written introduction explaining the objectives of the exhibition and research project:

The purpose of the exhibition is to represent Africans and other people of the African diaspora as part of Finnish society, culture and history. The exhibition portrays various African communities in Finland and asks how the African presence has changed Finland and Finnishness. The exhibition is part of an action research project conducted at the University of Tampere.

The research project aims, among other things, to give Africans and other people of African descent a chance to participate both in producing information on themselves and in writing our common history. The researchers will attempt to find answers to, for instance, the following questions: What kind of communities are and can be included in the African diaspora in Finland? What differences are there between these communities' immigration histories and cultures? How do these communities cherish their own cultures, and how have their cultures changed in Finland? What unites the Finns with African backgrounds and makes them stand out as a particular group in Finnish society? What should be told about the differences between and within these communities, and how should it be told? How has the African presence changed Finnish society (e.g. working life, school system, art and culture)? How have non-white Finns changed the way Finnishness is understood? How can children and young people and their experiences be reached? How are generational differences presented in African communities in

Finland? How do non-white Finnish youth talk about their particularity? What does Africanness or belonging to a diaspora community mean to them?⁶

Calling for collaboration afforded insight into issues that might be taken for granted in planning research projects. For example, we could not avoid the question of “Who will be paid for participation?” Many workshops started with a presentation on the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas because people seemed to know very little about the activities of museums in Finland. Those to whom the project was introduced never questioned its importance, and most of the communities, immigrants’ associations and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) approached sent representatives to our workshops. However, many people who showed interest did not participate. Some thought that they were expected to act as ambassadors for their African cultures and withdrew when we explained that the exhibition would focus on their lives and agency in Finland (including how they cherish their cultural roots). People representing established diaspora communities and people of African descent born in Finland stated that the starting point of the project—their contributions to Finland as racialised subjects and their right to belong to Finnish society while maintaining bonds to other countries, cultures and transnational communities—motivated their participation.

Following the principles of the participatory action-research tradition (e.g. Whyte 1991; Gustavsen 2003; Reason and Bradbury 2008), all the encounters and discussions with people, including their reactions to the calls for collaboration, were documented as research materials. These materials included other researchers’ and my field notes on discussions that took place face to face, on the

⁶ This excerpt is from the introductory letter.

phone, through email correspondence and during workshops. Dozens of tape recordings, photos, online materials and videos were also archived.

The nonparticipation by many whom we approached could be interpreted as a failure. However, their explanations for nonparticipation revealed important information about the boundaries of the African diaspora in Finland and the many activities motivated by identification with (particular places and cultures in) Africa and/or the African diaspora. For instance, personal history and political engagements, rather than complexion or country of origin, seemed to define many North Africans' identification with Africanness/blackness. Lack of time—the most commonly given reason for nonparticipation—indicated African immigrants' level of integration in Finnish society and activities in various transnational diaspora organisations. People's stories about their busy working life and their involvement in local and national immigrant and ethnic associations and other Finnish NGOs, as well as international organisations, contradict prevailing discourses (see Rastas 2011, 2014) of African immigrants as people who do not want or cannot integrate into Finnish society and culture. The people we encountered worked hard, paid taxes and learned the Finnish language. Many also participated in politics as members of Finnish political parties. These findings made it clear that the exhibition had to represent all these activities, as well as some transnational diaspora organisations.

Organisation of collaboration

Our calls for collaboration offered the following roles to potential participants:

Our wish is that as many African communities as possible, and especially researchers, artists, journalists and activists of African background, will participate in the project, for instance, by discussing the objectives of the exhibition with the

researchers. These discussions will be used as research data. The participants may also provide or loan different documents for the exhibition. Communities, artists, researchers, etc., may make suggestions to the exhibition team concerning their own works to be included in the exhibition.⁷

Although we held various workshops, most conversations took place with individual participants and required more time than anticipated. I had long face-to-face, email and phone discussions with people who wanted to talk, for instance, about the materials or their artworks to be included in the exhibition. Most also wanted to discuss how their communities or their agency as diaspora subjects should or should not be presented. Discussions with contact persons in communities and other researchers involved in the project⁸ made visible how people not only cherished their ethnic identifications but also crossed ethnic, racial and other boundaries through their agency as Africans and/or racialised subjects.

From 2011 to 2015, general workshops were organised in various cities to introduce the project, recruit new participants and test the objectives and ideas of museum staff and myself. Some workshops focused on certain themes: music, sports, religious activities, family life, diaspora and development co-operation and children and young people of African backgrounds. Other researchers responsible for particular sections or artworks also organised workshops. I coordinated a mailing list to inform all the participants about the project's progress. Two Werstas staff members of African background helped arrange the workshops and manage the exhibition project's Facebook page. We talked about certain issues with only some participants but in larger

⁷ This excerpt is from the introductory letter.

⁸ Nearly 20 researchers, including doctoral and master students, contributed to planning and organising the project.

forums discussed various questions, such as the exhibition's logo⁹ and visual identity and the need to emphasise the perspectives of children and young people. These discussions inspired the production of the on-line educational package for schools, with exhibition materials (e.g. texts, photos, films, music videos, radio documentaries and other media texts), assignments for children and instructions for teachers (see Werstas). As well, these discussions spurred ideas for many events during the exhibition. A constant question was how to talk about racism in the exhibition. This question stemmed from our intention to build an exhibition in which all children and young people, who comprise the majority of people of African descent in Finland, could feel comfortable regardless of their position within racialised social relations.

Final exhibition manuscripts always depend on numerous factors, including the objectives, funding, museums' curatorial and other practices, the time available for planning and organisation and the expertise and other resources of those involved (e.g. Whitehead, Eckersley and Mason 2015, 47–56). Within the limits of this essay, I cannot explain how these resources or their lack defined the boundary conditions for the African presence in Finland exhibition.¹⁰ Suffice it to say that those involved, including the museum staff and myself, learned much from making mistakes.¹¹

Discussions of which themes to address and how to present them in the exhibition took place in the workshops and, as mentioned, conversations with individual participants and community

⁹ The logo, which is aimed at challenging common, stereotypical depictions of Africans and black Europeans, can be found at the bottom of the first page of the education package for schools, see Werstas.

¹⁰ For example, European Union funding enabled much of this project but also forced opening the exhibition six months earlier than planned, which caused many changes and omissions in the manuscript.

¹¹ An evaluation of the research as a museological project is underway. My involvement necessitated an outsider's gaze, which was provided by Lorena Sancho Querol (2015), who studied this exhibition project in her own research project.

representatives. Changes to the manuscript were documented as research materials, showing how the participants' ideas determined the final manuscript. The main rule I attempted to follow while writing the manuscript was that individuals and communities had to accept the plans for presentations of themselves and, preferably, either produce or select the works on their own. This rule was also made clear to the researchers, contact persons and museum staff members working with the collaborators who could not participate in the meetings.¹²

The overlapping themes of the exhibition: at home in Finland as racialised subjects with transnational bonds

The many project objectives and the exhibition scale preclude detailed description of all the works in the exhibition: hundreds of photos and texts, more than twenty films and music videos, radio documentaries, artworks and dozens of other objects.¹³ The exhibition was built in Werstas's largest hall for changing exhibitions and consisted of the following, partly overlapping sections:

- *History, At home*, focusing on family life, childhood and youth, and *Religious life*
- *Cultural activities and leisure time*, with subsections on music, theatre, dance, film and immigrants' associations and anti-racism activities
- *Sports*, introducing, for example, successful athletes and the role of sports in anti-racism initiatives in Finland
- *Political activities* in both Finland and immigrants' home countries and *Development cooperation*

¹² To my knowledge, this rule was followed, with only couple of exceptions I cannot explain here.

¹³ For more information on the exhibition and the development of the manuscript during the project, see Querol (2015) and Rastas (2016).

- *Working life and the labour market*, including entrepreneurship, new consumer groups and examples of both so-called low-paid jobs commonly held by immigrants and of academics, namely, Africans doing African diaspora studies at Finnish universities
- *The case of Lieksa* about the Somali community in a small town in eastern Finland

The small History section based on earlier research and journalistic projects presented the stories of the first Africans in Finland through text, photos and three radio documentaries, including interviews with Africans living in Finland since the 1970s. Some of these stories were also put in the on-line educational package (see Werstas). The History section shared stories about individuals' routes to Finland and their coping with overt racism and others' stares and impudent interest in 'the exotic strangers' that they faced. Racism was discussed throughout the exhibit, but the main focus in every section remained on the agency of individuals and communities in anti-racism. This focus emphasised African diaspora subjects' active citizenship in Finland instead of their potential victim position, which young people especially wanted to challenge. Furthermore, mapping the activities and the activists in different fields of anti-racism also served to examine the places of black cultures in Finland (see Rastas 2018). For example, the artistic projects presented in the exhibition were chosen based on their artistic and (identity) political contents.

Like anti-racism, the theme of transnationalism permeated the exhibition as a central element of the African diaspora cultures and the everyday lives of diaspora subjects. Prominent concerns in studies on transnational activities within the African diaspora include remittances and immigrants' development cooperation projects and political activities in their countries of origin (for the case of Finland, see Abdile and Pirkkalainen 2016; Tiilikainen and Hassan Mohamed 2013). The exhibition dealt with these topics but also showed how individuals' and communities'

transnational ties have transformed and enriched Finnish society in various areas, such as family and religious life, youth culture, education, arts, sports, political activism, labour, the economy and new consumer groups with special needs. The works that portrayed these transformations by making visible the many meanings of transnational ties and individuals' and communities' transnational activities also asked: what is Finland like, and what is Finnishness about today?

The At home section, which visitors entered after the History section, portrayed changes in Finnish family life through photos of dozens of transnational families, including immigrant families and families divided by the colour line. Young people, in particular, demanded that the At home section look like a normal Finnish home, not an exotic, ethnographic museum reproducing outdated images of Africa and Africans. Next to modern sofas, television screens showed films made by young Somalis, and IKEA bookshelves were filled with volumes written by Africans living in Finland. Photo albums were placed on the table, and the many families who contributed photographs shared that they enjoyed seeing pictures of so many families like us themselves. During the exhibition, a group of families of mixed Finnish and African parentage decided to arrange their regular meetings at the museum 'because of the good vibes', as they told to the museum lecturer Wisam Elfadl. The children's corner featured toys, like black dolls, relevant to some children who identify as Finns but had roots in Africa and books in which also non-white children could find characters who look like them. The many meanings of transnational roots were also discussed in works made for the exhibition by children and young people from Africa adopted by Finnish families.

The At home section also featured a large trophy with a photograph of Lola Odusoga (later Wallinkoski), who has Finnish and Nigerian parentage and was chosen as Miss Finland in 1996. The

selection of a non-white woman of African descent to represent Finland in international beauty contests caused much debate. According to many project participants, that discussion and the first black role model for thousands of young Finnish girls were important memories that needed to be documented as part of national history.

Previously made works shown in the exhibition included, for example, the aforementioned radio documentaries and films by young Somalis¹⁴ who grew up in Finland, along with paintings and other artworks. The Wall of Fame showcasing trophies lent by successful athletes was planned in a workshop on sports. The video jukebox in the Music and theatre section played more than 20 music videos by famous young Finnish rappers of African descent and older African musicians whose social roles as diaspora subjects in Finland have extended the music and art scenes (see Rastas and Seye 2016). Posters of African music and film festivals and theatre productions by choreographer Sonya Lindfors and other artists of African descent, portrayed places in African and black diaspora cultures where artists have created forums to articulate new, collective identities through their works on their own experiences. Posters of Finnish musicals and plays about the lives and achievements of individuals such as Fela Kuti, Miriam Makeba and Stokely Carmichael symbolised the importance of Pan-Africanism and global diaspora cultures for African diasporas, including in a northern country such as Finland. The names and photographs of the people behind these productions showed how ethnic and racial(ised/ising) boundaries were both reinforced and crossed in arenas celebrating the political and intellectual legacy of Pan-African and African diaspora cultures.

¹⁴ These included short films by Somali-based film director Naima Mohamud and the documentary *Minun Helsingini/My Helsinki/Waa/Magaaladeydii Helsinki*, produced by Helena Oikarinen-Jabai and Sami Sallinen and made by young men Akram Farah, Hassan Omar, Jabril aka Dice, Mohamed Isse and Ahmed Muhamed about their lives in Helsinki. The radio documentaries were made by Leena Peltokangas for the Finnish Broadcasting Company in 2010.

Many works (texts, photos, videos and artworks) were made for the exhibition by individual artists and groups who worked with the researchers to build representations of, for example, their religious communities and their everyday life in particular places in Finland. New knowledge was produced by many students, including those not of African backgrounds who collaborated with members of African diaspora communities. These works' topics included African immigrants' participation in Finnish political parties and contributions to Finnish working life. Subsections and works about particular religious communities pointed to the transnational dimensions of religious life. The subsection on local African Pentecostal churches (see Haapajärvi 2012) reminded viewers that the growth of Islam in Europe is not the only effect on religious life from migration. Works on Mourides¹⁵ as well as pieces by Maryan Abdulkarim and Warda Ahmed, both Finnish Muslim feminist activists of Somali background, also questioned common stereotypes concerning Muslims in Europe.

To produce new knowledge of African diasporas in Finland, for both the exhibition and scholarly publications based on materials generated during the project, the guiding principle was to focus on the heterogeneity of and changes within diaspora communities, including generational differences, and to avoid essentialising ideas of Africanness, blackness and Finnishness. The richness of the African diaspora communities—based on agency rather than ethnicity—displayed in the exhibition emerged from examination of how local diaspora communities articulated (embraced, consumed or rejected) the political, ideological and iconographic flows (Zezeza 2009, 46) constructing the global African diaspora. Examples of international missionary work performed

¹⁵ Mourides are Muslims who belong to one of the largest Sufi brotherhoods in Senegal. Mouride organisations and prayer circles operate in nearly all of the world's major cities. The section on Mourides was planned by Marjatta Peltonen and the group of Senegalese Mourides whom she studied in Helsinki.

by Finland-based African Christian churches in other European countries and Nordic initiatives by African musicians and Finnish–Somali associations (e.g. new Nordic associations and cultural festivals) recalled the influences of local diasporas—lively, rapidly transforming cultures of people whose everyday lives are transnational—on African diaspora cultures in other locations.

Conclusions

Tens of thousands of people from Africa and of African descent live in Finland today. Representing all their communities, let alone all their activities, in the exhibition was impossible. Nevertheless, reactions to our open call for collaboration with ‘anyone who is of African background or identifies with the diaspora’ made visible those in Finland who identify with Africanness and/or blackness and when and how they articulate these overlapping identifications. The participants included both those born in Finland and immigrants hailing from approximately 20 African countries, including North African nations. Some participants never even mentioned their (parents’) country of origin.

Diaspora engagement discourses in many European countries treat immigrants as agents in the development of their countries of origin (Sinatti and Horst 2015; Bréant 2013). In Finland, African immigrants and others of African descent rarely used the word *diaspora*, despite discussions on development cooperation and peace-building projects in their (parents’) former countries. Among Somalis, who constitute the largest group of Africans in Finland, the older generation especially preferred to call themselves Somalis, not Africans or black. However, their communities and the dozens of Finnish Somali associations were linked to the African and black diasporas through anti-racism activities. The younger generations, who were born or grew up in Finland in immigrant families, nurtured their ethnic identifications but also made space for blackness as a collective

racialised identity, joining with other non-white Finns of African descent and other racialised minorities.

Reliance on ethnic or other predetermined categorisations characterises the design of many studies on immigrants and racialised minorities. Through examples from the African presence in Finland exhibition project, I instead have attempted to show how using collaborative methods can avoid what Brubaker (2002, 164) calls 'groupism', or 'the tendency to take groups for granted in the study of ethnicity, race and nationhood'. I suggest that the diversity and the rapid transformations within African diaspora communities in Europe can be better understood when people are invited to participate in knowledge production about their lives and communities and are allowed to perform and discuss their multiple identifications and activities as transnational diaspora subjects.

Collaborative action-research methodologies emphasising the political dimension of the research and the agency of people as Finnish citizens or residents and as racialised diaspora subjects enabled moving from asking people about their identities to exploring the places of diaspora cultures and the complex processes of local diaspora formations. By these places, I mean the social spaces in which questions related to racism and the cultural, political and other flows of the global African diaspora (Zezeza 2009) are articulated and (re)negotiated. I argue that research on these processes is needed to identify and understand the on-going cultural transformations (e.g., Rastas 2018) in European societies caused by immigration and the rapidly growing numbers of African/Afro-/Black Europeans who can no longer be categorised as immigrants.

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