

The Concept of African Diaspora(s): A Critical Reassessment

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I think that our migrations are an archetype of those of the dispossessed and I want somehow to tell the story of how the dispossessed become possessed of their own history without losing sight, without forgetting the meaning or the nature of their journey.

Sherley Anne Williams, "Meditations on History"¹

The concept of diaspora, though indelibly inscribed in the consciousness and imagination of the 20th century, has long been disregarded as an adequate heuristic tool to capture the experience of slavery and forced migration shared by millions of Africans. Today, after a long subterranean life, the term "diaspora" finally emerged as a promising, powerful new idea. In the humanities, the social sciences, and in cultural studies, among other fields, it is now challenging ways of thinking and presumptions not only about the unfolding of contemporary cross-cultural or multi-cultural societies and communities, but also about the past, about power relations, frontiers and boundaries, about cultural transmission, communication and translation, about revolt or revolution. It invites reconsiderations of current theoretical assumptions and, most importantly, it opens up new ways to approach familiar issues: migratory flux, identity formation, structures of society as well as structures of mentalities and emotions; it also encourages reflection upon the meaning of nationalism, colonialism or neo-colonialism, Pan-Africanism, upon established notions such as people or nation, race and gender, modernity and progress. What is more, it affects our conception of the relation between time and space, history and geography. The past and present of both Africans and Europeans are now being reconsidered, organized along new lines and new priorities; perspectives are shifting, stakes are reshuffled, continuities broken.

In its broadest sense, the linking of "African" and "diaspora" forces the recognition that people of African descent living "out of Africa" have formed a shared tradition of values and cultural behavior in the old as well as in the new worlds. While the term diaspora had been traditionally associated with the fate of Jewish people, its application to other ethnic groups, who also experienced a dramatic uprooting accompanied by geographical dispersion, was often questioned. The existence of an African diaspora, though compelling as a point of reference, was neither taken for granted nor, once claimed, easily accepted. Etymologically, the Greek term referred to forced or voluntary dispersion (primarily with regard to Hellenistic Jews or early

¹ "Meditations on History," *Midnight Birds. Stories of Contemporary Black Women Writers*, ed. Mary Helen Washington (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) 197.

Jewish Christians) that resulted in exile and separation from the homeland. In Hebrew the term "Galuth," which signified "exile," already designated a more or less permanent condition. In the 17th Century its meaning was extended to groups or peoples displaced for religious or political reasons, such as Huguenots, Armenians or Palestinians. Defined in general terms, the concept of diaspora thus provides a frame to assess the experience of exile and cultural alienation. It also spells out a number of assumptions and characteristics shared by most peoples living in diaspora: first, the existence of a homeland, real or mythic, that is rarely forgotten and with which one seeks to establish a new relation (this mythic homeland is often associated with the memory of the event that initially caused the separation and loss); second, the new life in a foreign environment and its concomitant estrangement, humiliations and ordeals not only necessitate a continuous struggle for recognition, equality, and justice but call for an identification of social and cultural forces as yet unknown; and, finally, the creation of (or connecting to) a composite diasporic community with its distinctive set of ethnic, national, and linguistic identities, unified by its collective memory, by shared sensibilities and affinities, by kinship and solidarity. This is achieved through a complex blending of dream (or utopia) and determination as well as through an attempt to negate the separation, restore the ties and retrieve the lost identity. In this sense, then, diaspora is less a condition or a state, but a search for identity that is constantly contested, re-imagined, and re-invented.

If the appropriation of the term diaspora for people of African descent is recent, the experience or reality to which it refers is not. Just consider the slave trade and its aftermath, a historical juggernaut that plundered a continent and sent millions of Africans as slaves either to Europe or to the plantations of the New World, and the diasporic implications of the Black Odyssey become immediately apparent. To the exiled population, Africa was irretrievably lost. What is more, the traumatic experience of the "Middle Passage" marked a violent and brutal uprooting. Real or imagined, Africa is the matrix of the African diaspora, the lost homeland and center. For people of African descent who had been abducted from or driven out of Africa, the "dark" continent is the place of origin, the guarantor of identity and filiation; it is a mythic place, a source of inspiration and consolation, to which one longs to return. The massive exodus of Africans and their dispersal throughout the Western World remains the most compelling image of black discourse. Even today, as the memoir of artist Tom Feelings at the end of this collection attests, images of slave ships, of capture and enslavement, of flight, revolts and resistance, still endure and keep haunting the imagination of black artists and writers.

For the African diaspora the return to Africa has proved to be a dream deferred but never abandoned. It has taken many forms, teleological (as a "natural" design and purpose), ideological and political. The myth of origin, of "homeland and return," as Safran put it in the first issue of the journal *Diaspora* in 1991, had always been an essential component of African diasporic consciousness.² It may take the form of romance and longing, of moral obligations and loyalty or of political commitments that mobilize the "black world" and inspire intellectual or artistic projects. Whatever its guises, the notion of return serves as a unifying theme that raises fundamental questions about the relation to Africa, a fragile relation that is constantly explored and rethought. To be sure, there were many actual returns: the efforts of the colonization movement to transplant African Americans back to Africa in the 19th century or, on a smaller scale, individual captives or refugees who were temporarily brought back to Africa. Yet myth and history merge while new definitions of the relations between Africa and the diaspora evolve. As historians and anthropologists have pointed out, Africa is a complex continent made up of many nations and a plethora of ethnic and linguistic groups. The assumption of unity, already questioned by historians of the slave trade, was increasingly challenged and is now poised with evidence of an amazing cultural diversity marked, more often than not, by ethnic fervor and division.³ Though still a land of origin the notion of Africa has changed: it finally became an ambiguous place, a conflict-ridden continent. This may also explain why the diaspora gradually turned into an agent of the social, political, and economic processes of modernity.

With de-colonization and the independence movements of the 1950s a decisive shift in the apprehension of Africa by its diaspora occurred. Africa was no longer a thing of the past; its future and its implication in the future of the diaspora (artistic as well as political) suddenly became an issue of utmost and widespread concern. Among the many concepts associated with these new orientations towards Africa in the twentieth century the following are of particular importance and should therefore not go unnoted here: Ethiopianism, Pan-Africanism and Negritude. A Secessionist movement that swept through South Africa when Reverend Magena Mokone founded the Ethiopian Church in 1892, Ethiopianism also garnered a considerable number of followers among African Americans. When Bishop Henry McNeal Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church visited South Africa in 1896, he created upon his return a vital network between African American and South African churches. The Ethiopianist tradition in America, Schmeisser argues in her contribution to this volume argues, "prophesied an imaginary

² William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora* 1 (Spring 1991): 83-99.

³ Cf. Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970) and *Cross Cultural Trade in World History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

... return to a former efflorescence. It originated in New World black thought as far back as the late 18th century and translated into modern back-to-Africa movements such as Garveyism. A powerful vision of cultural renewal, it bestowed upon the artistic project of the Harlem Renaissance the task of reconstructing a new 'Ethiopian Golden Age.'⁴

Pan-Africanism, mainly through the work of W.E.B. DuBois, developed as a cultural network of interaction between Africa, North America, the Caribbean and Europe. Significantly if somewhat paradoxically, however, the international orientation of this movement also created a new awareness of the differences between the various African diasporas: it changed their respective relation to the homeland and marked, for example, the emergence of a Caribbean consciousness, that was more radical and more directly involved in de-colonization than its African American counterpart. As Winston James points out in his essay on Pan-Africanist projects and the Caribbean diaspora, the latter dates back as far as the early 19th century and later included people who left the islands and lived in close contact with the former colonizers in France or England, a fact that made their cultural, linguistic and political situation even more complex and led to further differences with other diasporic groups. The idea of an African diaspora was thus gradually replaced by that of multiple diasporas, unified solely through their lost center and mythic homeland, Africa.

Whereas African Americans intellectuals such as W. E. B. DuBois took the lead in developing an idea of Africa that was connected to cultural splendour and ancient images (cf. Kirschke), the Negritude movement, that originated within the Francophone diaspora, focused more on common cultural traditions and ethical values of contemporary Africans living in exile (cf. Edwards). The idea took shape in Paris and was launched by two writers, Leopold Senghor from Senegal and Aimé Césaire from Martinique, who both played a significant political role in their respective countries. According to Senghor *négritude* "is the whole complex of civilized values—cultural, economic, social, political—which characterize the black peoples or more precisely the Negro African World."⁵ Negritude symbolized an unprecedented convergence of two French colonies, one from Africa, the other from the New World, a fact that is further reflected in the vital contribution of writers such as Léon Damas from French Guiana or of the Martinican psychiatrist Franz Fanon. If Césaire voiced his own poetical and political version of "le retour au pays natal," Fanon's work introduced a strong political overtone and striking

⁴ Iris Smeisser, "Ethiopianism, Egyptomania and the Arts of the Harlem Renaissance," 331.

⁵ Cf. Leopold Senghor, "Problématique de la Négritude," *Liberté III: Négritude et civilisation de l'universel* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).

metaphors: that of dark skins, white masks, and a false consciousness crippling the lives of the "damnés de la terre."

The idea of an "African presence" also developed in Paris; originally put forth by the *Revue du monde noir* in 1931, it was especially propagated by Niam N'goura Diop's *Presence Africaine*, created in 1947, and the journal *African Forum*, both of which lent it a more official existence. The idea soon spread to North America. An intense network of communication was established, African congresses in Paris (1956) and Rome (1959) gathered together black artists and intellectuals from both sides of the Atlantic, Art festivals, as the one in Dakar in 1966, and societies such as the "Société africaine de culture" or the "American Society of African Culture" were created to spur interest in African cultures. All of these efforts led to a reevaluation of the African diaspora and, eventually, ushered in a new brand of Pan-Africanism that, in the words of St. Clair Drake, became increasingly continental.⁶ Triggered by as well as reinforcing new ways of "seeing/imaging" Africa, these developments need also be studied as part of a shifting politics of representation.

While the various forms of political and cultural manifestations of the African diaspora—and their conceptualization in postcolonial and diaspora studies—guide most of the essays in the theoretical, introductory chapter "Thinking Diasporas," the changing artistic representations of Africa are at the center of the chapter on "Visual Art and Performance." As Amy Kirschke's and Iris Schmeisser's analyses of graphic representations of Africa between the Wars reveal, African and African American artists both in Europe and the Americas were instrumental in establishing a visual vocabulary that helped to create a new sense of identity with the lost African homeland.

In view of these developments, we see how the term African diaspora cannot be exclusively comprehended by its relation to Africa. With the rise of new, postcolonial African nations and, concomitantly, an increase of migratory flux and the appearance of multiple, temporary homelands, the cultural, historical, and geographical differences within the black diaspora itself are being increasingly recognized. Today scholars are more interested in how these various forms of diaspora are connected to each other rather than in links between the dispersed former Africans and a mythic homeland or spiritual center. As James Clifford recently argued, "transnational connections linking diasporas need not be articulated primarily through a real or symbolic homeland."⁷ What is more, with globalization in full swing attention is shifted to the

⁶ St. Clair Drake, "Diaspora Studies and Pan Africanism," *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, ed. Joseph Harris (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982) 359-66.

⁷ James Clifford, *Routes, Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997) 249.

global dimensions of diaspora, to traveling circuits, border crossings and continuous geographical dispersal and redistribution. If immigration is now seen as a major factor in the formation of diasporic communities, the contemporary understanding of diaspora seems to blur the distinction between immigrants, exile refugees or expatriates (but emphasizes their interaction). The international perspective embraced at the beginning of the twentieth century by black intellectuals such as DuBois has shifted, at the turn from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, to the *trans*-national aspects of an astonishingly hybrid, globalized market economy. Accordingly, in the first issue of the journal *Diaspora*, Khachig Tölölyan speaks of the new diasporas as "exemplary communities of the transnational moment."⁸ If "roots" have been the metaphorical focus of the twentieth century, it seems as if today scholarly attention is drawn to "routes," to the mapping of the complex, cross-cultural itineraries of African diasporas.

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The present volume is a selection from papers and keynote lectures presented at the International Conference at the University Denis Diderot in Paris "African Diasporas in the Old and the New Worlds: Consciousness and Imagination" (October 2000). The conference brought together a large number of scholars, critics, historians, writers and artists who were asked to discuss the following question: To what extent can the concept of Diaspora be considered as a useful tool or help develop new perspectives for theoretical reflection and literary or artistic creation? Though many participants focused on African diasporas in the Americas, the historical and contemporary developments in Britain, France or Italy were also addressed, often from a comparative perspective. The conference was also organized to add to the ongoing scholarly debate about Paul Gilroy's recent publication *Against Race* (2000) and a twin conference on Diaspora at New York University and the Schomburg Library in September, 2000. Hence, the Paris conference provided still another opportunity for renewed dialogue and exchange. Paris has long been a major cross-roads in the traveling routes of African diasporas and has continued to offer possibilities for new passages, circuits, and audiences. The particular setting thus allowed for a unique viewpoint from which to examine the history and theory of African Diasporas and the diasporic experience in general.

This collection of essays is organized around the following key issues: the concept of African diaspora, its possible origin, its historical development and the many, often divergent

⁸ Khachig Tölölyan, "Introduction," *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991): 4.

interpretations it has received (some inducing heated debates or controversy); the political uses of Diaspora; implications for special fields (history, art history, intellectual history, anthropology, etc.) and, more generally speaking, its validity in defining new approaches, providing new definitions and perspectives, new fields of inquiry. Since "diaspora" is not just a historical phenomenon, but also an idea or ideology and an object of representation, theorizing diaspora(s) carries important implications for scholars in Cultural Studies, African-American Studies, Ethnic Studies, or African Studies.

Some of the essays in this volume examine the concept of diaspora itself and the meanings it has received in the last decades (Edwards, Palumbo-Liu, Feith). The term "diaspora" is often associated with notions of: 1. exile, homeland and expatriation; 2. an impossible or deferred return; dispersal and "reunification," multiple displacements; 3. borders, contacts and intersections; and 4. interpretations, knowledge and translation. All of these aspects evoke, literally or metaphorically, movement, place and space. Yet they also refer to specific historical moments fraught with projects and desires, painful or exalting experiences and emotions, memories and silences.

The complex and often contradictory dimensions of the African diasporas (collective, international, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural or multi-lingual) are analyzed in relation to significant sites and figures (Frey, Dhanvantari, James), as well as through the various theoretical models such as "the Black Atlantic" (Palumbo-Liu) that have been proposed. The essays consider these movements as they occurred between societies, languages and cultures, between the New (Latin-America or Anglo-America) and the Old Worlds (Europe and Africa), or between islands (such as the Caribbean) and the American continent. Many also address the crucial issue of how to think, express or write the diaspora, with what words and what images (Peterson, Benesch, Birat, Moglen). Moreover, some authors examine the resources (collections and archives) and the iconographies that are available today and the new technologies through which they are made accessible (Kirschke, Schmeisser, Bettelheim, Bischof). The question is raised how these far-reaching changes and innovations in publishing and/or exhibition policies, have affected—or have been affected by—the attention given to the diasporic phenomenon. Most importantly, while some studies are concerned with the modes and modalities of creative expression from the perspective of both artists/writers and their audiences, others highlight the way in which literature and the arts interact, especially, photography, film, and the graphic arts (Benesch, Moglen, Feelings).

This anthology does not claim to be exhaustive, neither does it claim to reflect the wealth of papers presented at the conference in Paris, the discussions that took place, or the tremendous impact created by visual and musical performances, or the public readings by African and African American writers. Yet we hope that this interdisciplinary volume will provide invigorating and original insights into the consciousness and imagination of African diasporas, past and present.