

Introduction

Diaspora and the Localities of Race

Minkah Makalani

Work theorizing the African diaspora has sought to identify its defining characteristics, map out lines of continuity between its geographic segments, and outline methodological approaches to studying the dispersion of African descended populations. This work has resulted in studies of cultural exchange, migration, the social structure of various Afro-diasporic communities, as well as political activism within those communities.¹ Recent scholarship, however, has devoted greater analytical attention to the question of difference—how diasporas emerge through “relations of difference,” thus opening up the necessary space for thinking about difference as a central feature of diaspora rather than a problem one must solve.² Difference draws attention to how diaspora, as a social formation, is simultaneously framed by relationships of domination and is itself a structured hierarchy. Thus, the claim by Kachig Tölölyan that the African diaspora is exceptional precisely because of the history of racialization in this particular formation suggests the need for more work on racial difference in diaspora.³ What stands out most about the African diaspora is not merely that the process of racialization was central to and concomitant with dispersion, but that dispersion involved multiple racial formations that rendered large segments of African-descended populations in places like the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Lusophone Africa, and Europe something other than black. The unique racial formations within which these populations exist complicate thinking about diaspora as a community and call into question the assumption of a correspondence between African diaspora and blackness. Indeed, work on the dissimilarities between the blackness of Africans, African Caribbeans, and

African Americans has alluded to the need for a serious examination of this question.⁴ Given the connections between blackness, racial identity, racial ideology, and racial hierarchies in what philosopher Charles W. Mills calls “global white supremacy,” attention to intradiasporic racial difference offers to open new realms of inquiry into diaspora as a transnational social formation by focusing on the inability of race to translate easily across historical and national contexts.⁵

The inquiry into race and diaspora suggested here has hovered at the margins of diaspora studies since George Shepperson’s suggestive 1965 query, “The African Abroad or the African Diaspora,” which in part urged greater attention to the complex histories of Africa in order to appreciate the implications of Africa and its diasporas “for the human condition as a whole, for universal history.”⁶ Scholars continue to pull at this theoretical thread, as when Paul Tiyambe Zeleza registers the oddity that, while the populations of most diasporas are defined “in *national* or *ethnic* or even *ideological* terms,” when the gaze turns toward Africa, “they are simply called African,” without a clear sense of whether the referent is racial or spatial. A racial rather than spatial frame, he continues, risks reducing diaspora to the racialized experiences of a specific group (African Americans) or diasporic route (black Atlantic), an approach that would leave out, for example, Algerians, or that might fail to ask whether South Asians exiled from Uganda are part of an African diaspora (a question that also suggests the possibilities of overlapping African and South Asian diasporas).⁷ Colin Palmer has similarly warned scholars not to “homogenize the experiences of the diverse people of the modern [African] diaspora,” lest we risk overextending how race and blackness are understood in one context (the United States, for example) in explaining the divergent racial structures, ideologies, and modes of being and belonging that prevail in other contexts.⁸ Yet holding the racial and spatial frames in tension brings into focus how the diverse societies that came to constitute the geopolitical entity Africa did so through the racial logics of colonialism — a process that racialized Africans themselves. Africa can therefore be seen as a series of racialized moments where African-descended populations on the continent and across the globe occupy multiple sites in the global matrix of race and reflect ongoing racial processes. Such an approach also highlights how the diasporic imaginary of those in dispersion constructed and reconstructed a homeland to which they might return.⁹

Such diasporic imaginaries have spanned a range of intellectual and political currents from Ethiopianism to pan-Africanism, projects with nodes in Africa and its diasporas. As Brent Hayes Edwards reminds us, it was out of the pan-Africanist crucible of the 1950s and 1960s that a range of intellectuals and activists turned to the term *diaspora* in order to attend to the “relations of difference and disjuncture in the varied interactions

of black internationalist discourses.”¹⁰ Indeed, many of these intellectuals participated in the processes of constructing diaspora through their efforts to facilitate interaction and exchange between the divergent segments of the African diaspora. For example, in 1946, well before *diaspora* became a useful heuristic, the anthropologist St. Clair Drake, after publishing *Black Metropolis*, his coauthored study of Chicago’s South Side, turned his attention to blacks in Europe. It was in England that he met black radicals from throughout the diaspora, interactions that later led to him working in Kwame Nkrumah’s independent government in Ghana and informed his important study *Black Folk Here and There*.¹¹ Drake would go on to participate in the First African Diaspora Studies Institute organized in 1979 by Joseph Harris at Howard University, where he turned to diaspora explicitly as a way to think about pan-Africanism. Harris also organized a second institute at the University of Nairobi two years later, which fostered an international network of scholars working in the field that led to the adoption of African diaspora courses in black studies programs in the United States and at the universities of Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Zambia¹²—an impulse reflected more recently in the rise of African diaspora programs, conferences, colloquiums, publications, and intellectual organizations such as the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora. A critical part of that diasporic imaginary, then, involved creating the institutions and venues through which linkages could occur between different segments of the African diaspora living in divergent racialized societies.

In a similar fashion, the essays in this issue of *Social Text* participate in diasporic knowledge production and construction through their exploration of intradiasporic racial difference. These essays focus on the spaces where, and ways in which, diverse African diasporic racial groups meet and contest competing claims to, or exceptionalist definitions of, blackness and Africa, and how diasporic projects emerge within such spaces. The specific focus on race and racial difference also allows for critical attention to history and to the nation in transnational formations, interrogating the balance between the descriptively transnational and the analytical possibilities and limitations of transnationalism in considerations of the African diaspora. While it is useful to attend to how racial ideologies are formed across national borders, acknowledging the “continued vigor of the nation” brings into focus how the international reality of racial oppression does not mean all racial formations are alike, highlights how transnational methods of domination vary across time and space, and explores the social relations that create difference within a diaspora and render them structured hierarchies.¹³

“Diaspora and the Localities of Race” is thus meant to stimulate discussion of how to think about the local in understanding race in the

African diaspora. Starting from the by now theoretically pedestrian assertion of race's social construction, these essays turn to the places inhabited by race, where the local occurs, to draw attention to the divergent racializations that constitute the African diaspora. In this way, the essays gathered here investigate how place stretches, twists, and ultimately severs any presumption of a necessary correspondence between African diaspora and blackness. The various locals forming the constituent elements of diaspora, those places where diaspora emerges and gets created, are processes, social structures, relationships of domination, modes of imagination and affect that are simultaneously ordered by the local and the global. From this vantage point, the nation becomes not a frame that is merely artifice, but a historical reality, a social unit of organization that, imagined as it may be in detailing what determines its modes of belonging, is also the site, as Tiffany Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley point out, where people and communities manifest a diasporic identity through intellectual, cultural, and political activities and social movements, however transnational their identity may be. The difference that race makes in diaspora is precisely through its instantiation of difference; place and local structures become the nodes of diaspora, an ongoing construction and elaboration carried out at the same time within and against the nation.¹⁴

Jacqueline Nassy Brown's "The Racial State of the Everyday and the Making of Ethnic Statistics in Britain" shows how those in diaspora at times engage in statecraft to establish their diasporic identity and contest notions of blackness. She considers how Liverpool-born blacks used the 1991 National Census of the United Kingdom to construct their identities and legitimate their belonging and citizenship in Britain while resisting the census's "other-ing" effect of marking blacks as non-British. Particularly interesting is how Liverpool-born blacks articulated divergent notions of blackness that reflected their being African, Afro-Caribbean, or born in Liverpool to a black father and white mother. It is revealing that the ethnicity question on the 1991 census drew on the available literature on race in the U.S. census. What Brown charts, then, is a node in a diasporic circuit of blackness that travels through the instruments of governmentality, moving from the United States to Britain, and possibly to France, where blacks see the collection of racial data on the census as potentially helping to monitor and empower challenges to racial oppression and build community across the diverse black populations there. But, as Brown notes of the complex nature of such an engagement with statecraft, how Liverpool-born blacks engaged in and resisted the objectifying practices of the state highlights the "fraught relationship between black people and British society, and the contradictory racial identities of the British state," which, she suggests, will have a profound impact on how blacks in France pursue similar projects.

Brown's discussion of the competing notions of blackness in Britain highlights the importance of racial difference in the African diaspora and insists that we keep our attention on blackness, not to preclude challenging arguments that phenotype or genetics explains or defines who is part of the African diaspora, but to interrogate how we understand those of African descent for whom blackness is less salient or even irrelevant to their group identity. For example, Ben Vinson sees a great research opportunity in exploring a multivalent blackness in Latin America, where it is "simultaneously segmented, denied, and reluctantly embraced—all the while morphing into something that seemingly stretches beyond blackness." For Vinson, "the experiences of not just living dual lives, but inhabiting the space in between, among, and through various racial existences offer rich theoretical potential" to both open up the nationalist historiographies of Latin America to blackness and further explore how those histories line up unevenly or somewhat ambiguously with diaspora. His project is invested in how blackness reveals race as a modality whereby diaspora can cut across national and regional boundaries.¹⁵

Yet, blackness is never a uniform, singular entity. As Adrian Burgos Jr. shows in "Left Out: Afro-Latinos, Black Baseball, and the Revision of Baseball's Racial History," the encounters between differing valences of blackness in baseball can open up new avenues of inquiry in African American (and by extension American) historiography. His works reinserts Afro-Latinos and Latin America into Negro League baseball to expand that institution's history and revisit the role of Afro-Latinos in baseball's integration. This is suggestive for how including Afro-Latinos and Latin America might interrupt what has become the standard narrative in African American historiography more generally. The experiences of both Afro-Latinos and Afro-Americans on and around the baseball diamond call into question common assumptions about trailblazers in the sport and the early Civil Rights movement, as Afro-Latinos also integrated Major League clubs. Yet, as Burgos notes, for African American and Afro-Latino ballplayers, "a sense of shared struggle was not automatic." At times, African American players accused their dark-complexioned Afro-Latino counterparts of denying their color. Teammates thus had to reconcile "the meaning of blackness as individuals of the African diaspora from different locations within the Americas," with such misreading leading many to move beyond the field in order to construct visions of an integrated future.

As this hints, any treatment of the complexity of blackness in Latin America, indeed, globally, requires that we avoid negating alternative racial identities that might have as a central feature the muting of blackness or superimposing other markers of belonging lost in the all-too-easy slippage between the adjectives "African" and "black" in discussions of African diaspora.¹⁶ Those racial identities occupying the spaces between white-

ness and blackness often signify the degree to which one is nonblack and thus enjoys the privileges, protections, and liberties denied blacks. Yet, to assume that such racial or group identities are antithetical to an African diasporic consciousness, are rigidly antiblack, and are fixed for all time risks oversimplifying the matter. More important, it glosses how blackness is itself negotiated within the diaspora.

Jemima Pierre's "Beyond Heritage Tourism: Race and the Politics of African-Diasporic Interactions" approaches this question through a provocative ethnography of diasporic return to Africa. Her consideration of such return and exchange between elite African Americans and Ghanaians around heritage tourism, and their interactions in sites of Ghanaian cosmopolitanism in Accra, offers a corrective to the tendency to miss that "continental Africa continues to be racialized as black within a global socioeconomic hierarchy" and that both diasporic returnees to Ghana and Ghanaians themselves engage in exchanges and processes of race-making, discourses over blackness, and the production of markers of difference precisely around competing conceptions of blackness. The fraught experiences of diasporic blacks pursuing a historical memory/imagination through heritage tourism ironically attest to the divergent racializations that give way between those returning and those to whom they return. Especially revealing is the Ghanaian state's participation in the business of making and marketing diaspora, extending a much longer history of diasporic blacks encountering Africans who have their own histories of race, memories of slavery, and diasporic imaginaries.¹⁷ James Clifford has described diaspora's ability to connect the various communities of a "dispersed population";¹⁸ Pierre's work shows how these connections can also be conducted through and mediated by local or state processes of memory, national imagination, and assertions of authenticity.

The complicated histories of racialization and the state take on a different valence in Tina M. Campt's "Family Matters: Diaspora, Difference, and the Visual Archive," as the place in question shifts to Germany. Campt offers a rich textual analysis of the family photographs of Afro-Germans Hans Hauck and Fasia Jansen to explore the complex ways the visual field functions in diaspora. Taking this archive as an opportunity to ponder how visual technologies—representation and reading—are fraught with historical assumptions and ideas about who populates the diaspora, she considers "how we 'see' race in diaspora—and diasporic blackness, in particular" as an opportunity "to untangle our implicit understandings of what constitutes membership and belonging therein." Who is part of the African diaspora, who we envision when thinking about blackness, is as much a visual imaginary as a social formation, but the visual insists on an interrogation of those terms of order. Such work, Campt demonstrates, calls into question the assumptions about diaspora beyond merely the visual.

Afro-Germans occupy particular locations as diasporic subjects that are lost in a black Atlantic frame. However much diaspora may be about return, connections across borders, and modes of exchange, the stories contained in these photographs reveal the limits of diaspora, its gaps and incongruity, at the same time that it shows diaspora to be about “dwelling” and “staying put.” The question thus becomes how photographs serve as a site of contact and mediation around how certain diasporic populations see race and, at times, fail to see those in diaspora, because of assumptions about race based on a given set of historical experiences.

Frank Guridy’s “Feeling Diaspora in Harlem and Havana” offers another perspective on the visual, taking it, along with music, dance, literature, and audience reception, as facilitating diasporic linkages. If diaspora is constituted through difference—race, divergent conceptions of blackness, belonging, and relationships of power—Guridy considers how participants in the Harlem Renaissance and the Afro-Cubanist movement of the 1920s and 1930s experienced commonalities. Looking at the exchanges between Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes, the reception of Hughes’s work in Havana, the travels of Afro-Cuban musicians in Harlem, and the Mexican caricaturist Miguel Cobarrubias’s Harlem and Cuba paintings, *Negro Drawings*, Guridy demonstrates how an “Afro-diasporic affect” allowed exchanges and encouraged modes of belonging that reached across cultural and linguistic divides. As much as we need to understand difference, he reminds us that we also must attend to why, and how, diasporic groups actively establish ties across those differences, the affective desire that drives such longing in someone like Langston Hughes, who, upon hearing a Cuban *son*, exclaimed: “I want to be black. Very Black. Truly Black!” Such yearning and desire reflects Hughes’s own racial position, but, as Guridy reminds us, it also insists that we attend to how the “emotional dimensions of Afro-diasporic commonality can enrich our readings of textual sources by enabling us to account for the influence of sensory power on the ways that historical subjects experienced their place in the world.”

Notes

I wish to thank Corey Capers, Edlie Wong, and Delida Sanchez for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. Paul Lovejoy, “The African Diaspora: Revisionist Interpretations of Ethnicity, Culture, and Religion under Slavery,” *Studies in the World History of Slavery, Abolition, and Emancipation* 11 (1997): 1–23; Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World,” *African Studies Review* 43 (2000): 11–45; Kim Butler, “Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse,” *Diaspora* 10 (2001): 189–219; Darlene Clark Hine and Jacqueline McLeod, eds., *Crossing Boundaries: Compara-*

tive History of Black People in Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Kristin Mann and Edna G. Bay, eds., *Rethinking the African Diaspora: The Making of a Black Atlantic World in the Bight of Benin and Brazil* (New York: Cass, 2001); Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davies, and Ali A. Mazrui, eds., *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Lisa Brock and Digna Casteñeda Fuertes, eds., *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Michael A. Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); James H. Sweet, "Teaching the Modern African Diaspora: A Case Study of the Atlantic Slave Trade," *Radical History Review* 77 (2000): 106–22; Anthony Bogues, "Teaching Radical Africana Political Thought and Intellectual History," *Radical History Review* 87 (2003): 146–55; Michael George Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945–1988* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Kim Butler, *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition São Paulo and Salvador* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Harvey Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees: Trinidad and the United States Occupation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

2. Kachig Tölölyan, "The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 27 (2007): 650. John Thornton's *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) represented one of the earliest efforts to address difference in the African diaspora. For more recent efforts along these lines, see Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Jacqueline Nassy Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Herman Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Tina Campt, "The Crowded Space of Diaspora: Intercultural Address and the Tensions of Diasporic Relation," *Radical History Review* 83 (2003): 94–113; Asale Angel-Ajani, "Diasporic Conditions: Mapping the Discourses of Race and Criminality in Italy," *Transforming Anthropology* 11 (2002): 36–46.

3. Kachig Tölölyan, "Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment," *Diaspora* 5 (1996): 23.

4. Irma Watkins Owens, *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900–1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Michael Hanchard, ed., *Racial Politics in Contemporary Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Nemata Blyden, *West Indians in West Africa, 1808–1880: The African Diaspora in Reverse* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2000); Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila, eds., *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Agustín Laó-Montes, "Decolonial Moves: Trans-locating African Diaspora Spaces," *Cultural Studies* 21 (2007): 309–38; Ginetta E. B. Candelario, *Black behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

5. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

6. George Shepperson, "The African Abroad or the African Diaspora," in *Emerging Themes of African History*, ed. T. O. Ranger (Nairobi: East Africa Publishing House, 1968), 174; article originally presented as a paper at the First International Congress of African Historians, Tanzania, 1965.

7. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic," *African Affairs* 104 (2005): 40–41; Earl Lewis, "'To Turn as on a Pivot': History, Race, and African Americans in a World of Overlapping Diasporas," *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 765–87. The imbrication of South Asian and African diasporas is explored, in part, in Aisha Khan, *Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity among South Asians in Trinidad* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

8. Colin A. Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," *Journal of Negro History* 85 (2000): 27–32.

9. I am drawing loosely on Brian Keith Axel's notion of the diasporic imaginary in which homelands are created, though I maintain that, for the African diaspora, Africa has been, and continues to be in many ways, an important place of origin, if not always an unproblematic site of return. Brian Keith Axel, "The Diasporic Imaginary," *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 411–28.

10. Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," *Social Text*, no. 66 (2001): 53.

11. St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History and Anthropology*, 2 vols. (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Culture, University of California, 1991); Marc Matera, "Black Internationalism and African and Caribbean Intellectuals in London, 1919–50" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2008).

12. Joseph E. Harris, "African Diaspora Studies: Some International Dimensions," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 24 (1996): 6. Harris published many of the papers from that Howard University conference in *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, ed. Joseph E. Harris (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1982).

13. Antoinette Burton, "Introduction: On the Inadequacy and the Indispensability of the Nation," in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 1. See also David Kazanjian and María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, "Introduction: The Traffic in History," *Social Text*, no. 92 (2007): 1–7; Arif Dirlik, *Postmodernity's Histories: The Past as Legacy and Project* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

14. Patterson and Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations"; Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Binghamton: Department of Art and Art History, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1991), 27.

15. Ben Vinson, "Introduction: African (Black) Diaspora History, Latin American History," *The Americas* 63 (2006): 8–9.

16. For a suggestive argument along these lines, see Silvio Torres-Saillant, "Inventing the Race: Latinos and the Ethnoracial Pentagon," *Latino Studies* 1 (2003): 123–51; Tanya Katerí Hernández, "'Too Black to Be Latino/a': Blackness and Blacks as Foreigners in Latino Studies," *Latino Studies* 1 (2003): 152–59.

17. Kevin K. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

18. James Clifford, "Diaspora," *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (1994): 304.

