Deborah A. Thomas and Tina M. Campt
Dialogue Participants: Jacqueline Nassy Brown and Bayo Holsey

DIASPORIC HEGEMONIES: SLAVERY, MEMORY, AND
GENEALOGIES OF DIASPORA

“Slavery, Memory, and Genealogies of Diaspora” is the first in a series of two dialogues organized by Deborah A. Thomas and Tina M. Campt as part of a project titled “Diasporic Hegemonies.” In this dialogue, Jacqueline Nassy Brown and Bayo Holsey draw from their ethnographic research within Liverpool, England and coastal Ghana respectively to discuss the processes by which and places within which notions of the African diaspora are produced. They also address questions of how particular notions of diaspora are politicized, how they move between and among communities, and how they are used at specific moments in time.

KEYWORDS: diaspora, Liverpool, Ghana, place, memory

Deborah A. Thomas is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on the changing relationships among the political and cultural dimensions of nationalism, globalization, and popular culture. Her book, Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica (Duke University Press, 2004) explores the ways a changing global political economy has structured and restructured the ways Jamaicans have conceptualized the relationships among culture, progress, development, race, and territory. As a Caribbeanist, Thomas is interested in how people of African descent think about, experience, represent, and mobilize around racial, class, national, gender, and generational identities, and in how these representations and mobilizations also shape global trends—politically, economically, and culturally.

Tina M. Campt is Associate Professor of Women’s Studies at Duke University. Trained as an historian of modern Germany and a feminist oral historian, her work theorizes processes of racialization, gendering, and subjecthood in the history of Black Germans during the Third Reich. She is author of Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender and Memory in the Third Reich (University of Michigan Press, 2004). She also coedited a special issue of the journal Callaloo (2003) with Michelle Wright entitled “Contested Black Voices: Critical Readings of the Black German Experience.” Campt is currently working on a project on memory and the African diaspora in Europe. She is one of a handful of scholars working on the African diaspora in Germany, and her past and present work is concerned with the circulation of different forms of Black culture to Germany and within Europe more generally.

Jacqueline Nassy Brown received her Ph.D. in Anthropology from Stanford and is now an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Hunter College in New York City. Her research focuses on the mutual construction of race and place in Britain. Jackie’s work examines the role of localization processes in the formation of racial categories, communities, and identities, inclusive of those that cross national boundaries and might be called diasporic. Her goal of developing an anthropology of diaspora, especially of the relations among blacks here and there and in reference to space and place, is evident in her book Dropping Anchor and Setting Sail Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool, which was published in March 2005.

Bayo Holsey is Assistant Professor of African and African American Studies and Anthropology at Duke University. Prior to her arrival at Duke in 2004, Holsey held a Post Doctoral Fellowship in the Department of African American Studies at Northwestern. She received her Ph.D. in Anthropology at Columbia. Holsey is currently completing a manuscript called Routes of Remembrance: The Atlantic Slave Trade in the Ghanaian Imagination, which examines the place of the Atlantic slave trade within Ghanaian collective memories. For this project, she lived for a year in Ghana near two former slave castles that have become popular tourist destinations. Her project examines the ways in which the tourist industry, African American tourists, and local residents engage in a somewhat contentious process of memory making. Her research and teaching interests also include West Africa, the Atlantic slave trade, the African diaspora, memory, gender, and labor.
What does it mean to want to bring together the transnational and the diaspora? For us, this question arose from participation in a university seminar called “Feminism, Transnationalism and the International” at Duke University. During this three-year seminar, a group of scholars representing different disciplinary backgrounds met regularly to theorize the genealogy of feminist transnationalism in relation to earlier feminist internationalist discourses and movements. As a group and in collaboration with invited speakers, we spent a lot of time in productive dialogue about what each of the terms in our seminar title meant and about important research directions for the future.

As people who worked on diaspora, we began thinking about how, despite the close relationship between diaspora studies and transnational studies, scholars seemed to be having separate conversations about similar issues. Through our work in the seminar and our own research on diaspora, we began to get a sense of what the tensions have been between these two conversations. Some of the tensions were historical—that is, what does it mean that feminist theorizing of the transnational has come right on the heels of women of color critiques of institutional reconfigurations of Women’s Studies programs away from explicit engagement with processes of racial formation and toward globalization/transnational studies? Some of the tensions were disciplinary—that is, if we can’t agree on terms, how do we continue to have productive conversations? And some of these tensions had to do with the role of theory and theoretical interventions in understanding and responding to the contemporary politics of diaspora and globalization—that is, how do we measure the politics of knowledge production in relation to actually existing activism?

In order to name these tensions, and in order to make diaspora a central analytic through which to examine them, we developed a project called “Diasporic Hegemonies.” We wanted to stage a multi-year scholarly and pedagogical encounter through which we would bring feminist transnationalism and scholarship on gender in the African diaspora into a productive dialogue geared toward investigating the formation and transformation of racial, classed, gendered, sexual, national, and generational subjectivities. We started out by team-teaching a graduate seminar at Duke during the spring 2005 semester, during which we began to think with students about how to create this dialogue. As part of the seminar, three times during the semester we invited a pair of scholars to campus to respond together to a series of questions that had emerged from our reflections about their work in the classroom. Although we circulated questions in advance to the invited speakers, we encouraged the speakers not to write papers, but to “think out loud,” both in relation to each other and with the audience, about the issues that motivate their research, and to work through connections and differences in a public setting. What follows is an edited transcription of the first dialogue between Jacqueline Nassy Brown and Bayo Holsey that transpired at Duke University on January 24, 2005.

Both Brown and Holsey are struggling to think critically about the place of “Africa” and the centrality of slavery and notions of African origins to authenticating, authorizing, and legitimizing discourses within diaspora. In other words, they are trying to situate diaspora discourse in relation to the historical and contemporary global political economies of the areas where they work. The questions that we circulated in advance to them were:

How (and where) are diasporas, and particularly the African diaspora, produced? How have diasporas been politicized? How have they been taken up and for what reasons? How do they move, and in what ways? In other words, what have been the uses of diaspora? What are its limitations?

What follows is our discussion of these questions, moderated by Tina M. Campt.

THE DIALOGUE

Jacqueline Nassy Brown: Thank you very much for inviting me here again. It’s always nice to visit you at Duke. This is my third time speaking to you. So I hope that this will be as enjoyable as previous encounters with members of this community. This time I really am stimulated by the format. It’s very interesting. Bayo and I were talking about it earlier remarking that we had never done anything quite like this. So, it will be an adventure and an experiment, but I thought that I would make opening remarks about my work just to give you a context for how I started to think about diaspora and where I see the concept as useful or not useful. Bayo and I read each others’ work, and we’re actually old friends and colleagues. Well, Bayo is not very old, but in any event, we just exchanged pieces and had a wonderful conversation about the points of convergence in our approaches to diaspora. Most of you have not read the essays that were circulated to the members of the graduate seminar, so I wanted to give you a sense of what you’re missing so that you’ll know where these comments are coming from. In short, my work has to do with the mutual construction of race and place in Liverpool, England.

I basically started my work right after Paul Gilroy published his first, and in my mind, best book, There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack. I went to Britain to look at questions of race and nation as they concerned
the community in Liverpool. Liverpool is a very small, fairly marginalized city in Britain which has the status of having been a very important slave port. Many slave ships left out of Liverpool's port, et cetera. Liverpool was one of the three really major slave ports from which slave ships sailed to West Africa. So that's one thing actually that Bayo and I have in common is that both of our sites of research were in former slave ports. But I didn't go to Liverpool to study the history of slavery or the meanings of slavery, although that very much came up in the process. I went there to study race and what race means, and to study how Black identity intersects with or contradicts British and English identity, and in that context, questions of diaspora came up. Not because people themselves use that term or mobilize that term, but because it was the only framework or concept that I had to think through some of the debates people had with each other. Black Liverpool is a concentrated place. People are concentrated in a very small part of Liverpool, basically, a little neighborhood. And Black people trace their origins to, for the most part, African seamen who were their fathers and grandfathers and great grandfathers, and these seamen were hired by Liverpool shipping companies to work as seamen during the height of the colonial era, and that's the origin story of the Black community of Liverpool.

Liverpool also received post World War II Caribbean migrants, but for the most part, Black people in Liverpool trace their history to these African men. The African men married White British women and the rest is contested history. So it's actually this contested history that the book is about, and these issues help me think about diaspora. How it is that different Black people might see their differences in what might be called diasporic terms? What kinds of different histories of colonialism and enslavement come to bear on the ways that people negotiate who they are in relationship to each other? So I use diaspora to think about relationships between the group who call themselves "Liverpool-born Blacks" and those who are people of Caribbean background and those who are African. There was also a significant presence of Black American GI s at one point. So for me, I use diaspora to think through the contested sorts of history that are brought to bear when Liverpool-born Blacks look at themselves in relation to Africans and Black Americans. The chapters of my book that you read for this intellectual encounter has to do, then, with the negotiation of these relationships.

Bayo Holsey: As Jackie mentioned, I also do work in two slave ports actually which are located in two neighboring cities on the coast of Ghana and I went there, in fact, to look at questions about the history of slavery. I was interested in thinking about what that history means in Ghana particularly because in the past 15 years or so, the tourist industry in Ghana has really capitalized on the two slave ports located in Cape Coast and Elmina and have made them into tourist sites in which the history of the slave trade is elaborated for tourists, for international tourists primarily, and a large percentage of those tourists are African American tourists. So these African American tourists are visiting Ghana in order to consume the history of the slave trade, and are engaged in a kind of identity project around slavery and incorporated slavery into how they construct their identities. So I went interested in that process and very quickly became more interested in how Ghanaians themselves view this process and more generally view the history of the slave trade, particularly people in these two towns who are living in places in which their ancestors might have seen slave ships dock.

So those were the kind of questions I wanted to ask. How were people thinking about their history? In fact, I found that there's a great deal of silence surrounding the history of slavery in Ghana, and so it's a very contested history there. I can talk about the reasons why the history of slavery is so problematic within Ghana, in ways that mean it's sequestered from discourse to a large extent.

What I also want to talk about is what does that then mean for the construction of diaspora and homeland? This is because, of course, diaspora tourists who are coming to Ghana are constructing Ghana as the homeland of the African diaspora and in thinking about diaspora studies, I think there is very little emphasis on what it looks like from "the homeland." What's the view from "the homeland"? How are people in "the homeland" constructing the formation of diaspora and does it operate in different ways? I found that Ghanaians mobilize the notion of diaspora particularly in regards to the tourist industry and it shapes how they relate to tourists. It can be mobilized in quite conscious ways in order to form a transnational relationship that might have certain kinds of benefits.

But there are other ways in which the notion of diaspora also can become quite problematic, and it is a concept that in many ways does not really fit within the most common ways in which they may construct their identities, which are tied very much to the place. For African Americans, diasporic identities are very much about being separated from that place, from that homeland and so place-based identities are, in a sense, unimaginable in our view. So that becomes one of the tensions, among many, that then develops between local Ghanaians and diasporic visitors.

Tina Campt: As a way of moving us to the larger questions that we were framing, it does seem like both of you are very, very interested in "place" as the site through which you explore how and why and where diaspora is
produced. If I were to ask you that question straight up, you would both probably be in a similar “place.” And yet, in a way, I’m wondering if it’s also a really interesting way of thinking about this in terms of how diaspora discourse proliferates the notion of roots and routes. Roots and routes are very often figured through migration, or travel, but both of you are actually very concerned with the ways in which roots and routes come to dwell in particular places. So I was wondering if both of you could speak to the specificity of how place configures diaspora in each of your particular sites of engagement.

Jacqueline: Well, I think I would like to pull the lens back a little further to say that the one thing that I learned in Liverpool is that place is everything. If there was one thing I learned, that was it. You can’t understand anything unless you understand Liverpool, and that is something that mediates every other aspect of how Black people there see themselves in the world—diaspora or no diaspora. So the thing that I’m interested in and that I write about in the book has to do with how it is that this notion of Liverpool itself takes on this larger-than-life significance. This is what shapes how people negotiate who they are in relation to each other. For me, diaspora is most productive if it is understood as a relation, rather than in terms of a displacement from a homeland or anything like that—because it’s a constructed relationship. And in this case, I’m interested in the way that Liverpool itself becomes constituted as the homeland. Liverpool itself is the main basis of identity for every single community in Liverpool—Black or not. So that has to be the beginning. That’s sort of the origin of all the other tensions.

One of the things that I bring out in the piece has to do with the contradictions that this brings up. That attachment to place is sometimes articulated in a way that’s extremely nationalist and anti-immigrant, but their own parents or grandparents were immigrants. So how is it that a group of people constitute themselves as Liverpool-born Blacks in a way that essentially maintains a notion of themselves as immigrants without causing some kind of major contradiction. The flip side of that or the other aspect of it that is crucial is that Black folk from the Caribbean and from Africa bring with them ideas about race and ideas about identity that are offensive to their children. People from West Africa would refer to children who are of mixed racial background as half caste, which is just like the way that Whites would refer to people of mixed backgrounds. So part of the struggle of Liverpool-born Black people is to overcome what they see as a pathological or pathologized inscription—“half caste.” Diaspora and place, then, come together insofar as Liverpool is constructed as the site of the authentic Black person. “You other Black folk are very nice, but you come from elsewhere and you have these funny ideas about race which contradicts what we’re trying to bring into existence here.” In a way, theirs is a liberating identity—one they call “Black”— instead of an identity that has been pathologized within Britain.

Tina: One final question before you give Bayo a moment to respond. Both of you have a very nuanced notion of what place means right?

Jacqueline: Um hum.

Tina: That is, place for you is something beyond site and something beyond location and something beyond identity. I was hoping that you could also say a little bit more about how that nuanced conception has developed and how that nuance is necessary to your thinking about diasporic formation.

Jacqueline: I think about place in a variety of different ways and those ways are the ways that are encouraged by the people that I’ve studied. I’ve tried to give place all the variety of significance that people in Liverpool did. In the context of what I’ve just said, place is actualized through a notion of being born here as opposed to someplace else. That’s what place means. In other ethnographic contexts, place means a built environment and the history of that environment, and how this place or that place came into being and what that means.

One thing that Bayo and I both want to talk about is the different ways that slavery comes up as part of perhaps not part of what diaspora means in our two different contexts. Usually in African diasporic studies, slavery has this huge place. It certainly has a huge place in The Black Atlantic, for example. That whole configuration begins with the history of slavery. And that’s fine. I do think, though, that it’s important not to forget other histories that were formative to the creation of Black people all over the world. Right? For Black Americans, for example, we don’t have a profound notion of colonialism as a key aspect of what mediates our experience now in the twenty-first century. But lots of Black folks do in Europe, and slavery is not necessarily the origin point of a concept of diaspora in some of those contexts. Liverpool would be one of them. Slavery is very important. It’s a very important aspect of their racial discourse and their racial politics. But this is not because “this is how we got here,” which is what you would get with many Black Caribbean and Latin-American studies of diaspora.

Bayo: Place is really central to the kinds of questions I am trying to answer, and in Ghana place is most significant in terms of hometown. One of the first questions people ask is “what is your hometown?” This refers to a kind of ancestral hometown where the lineage for a people originates. People maintain a connection to their hometowns,
an imagined connection, even if they live someplace else. In Cape Coast and Elmina when I asked people about their families' histories, many would make statements like, "My great, great grandmother or great, great grandfather is from this place." And they would say that they were from Elmina, from Cape Coast, and they would somehow index their indigeneity to that particular town.

What I discovered that is really significant about this fact is that by indexing their indigeneity to these particular places, what they were also doing was defining themselves as people who were not the descendants of slaves. That's what that meant—that they were indigenously to this town, whereas others were brought into the town as slaves. Indexing indigeneity in that sense was also indexing free ancestries, and that's why place is so central. It is so crucial to the ways in which people think about slavery and think about history in general. This is what I was alluding to before in terms of a notion of diaspora—it becomes tricky because in Ghana, it is a heavily stigmatized state to be living in diaspora. Moreover, in terms of domestic slavery within Ghana, people who were brought to Cape Coast or Elmina as slaves were incorporated into these communities and into particular families in which they were enslaved. Because of this incorporative kind of slavery, which applies in many different African contexts and which one reads about so much, these people were absorbed into those societies in ways that over time, they would have been considered to be members of those societies. Or, if they weren't, their children would be considered to be full-fledged members of those societies. This happens through a silencing of the history of their enslavement, or their parents' or grandparents' enslavement. In this way, that ancestry becomes unspeakable. You cannot invoke someone's place of ancestry because you might then undermine their entire identity as a member of that society. You might uncover the fact that they are indeed not from that place.

For that reason, slavery is really not openly discussed. Yet at the same time it really defines these kinds of internal divisions that erupt at particular moments. And, of course, people are aware of these divisions. Within families, people know who is the descendant of a slave and who isn't. But that notion of slavery is so central to their understanding of the division between slave and free status, and this is what forms the background to how people understand diaspora. It also influences how they read African Americans who come back as tourists and who completely define their identity through this notion of diaspora. It's almost incomprehensible to many Ghanaians that people would purposefully construct their identity in that fashion.

Tina: I want you to expand on the second question because it relates to what you are saying. The question was "how has diaspora been politicized?" I would like you to think about that by moving slightly away from the notion of politicization and thinking instead about mobilization. The ways in which I've understood both of your conceptions of this phenomenon is in terms of memory, and how diaspora is mobilized and politicized by way of memory. Memory is the vehicle that invokes diaspora in different ways and in different places, and so memory is what motivates diaspora in relation to tourism, or is what situates family members in relation to slavery. I was hoping that you could actually say a little bit more about the status of memory in your two cases. And in your case, Jackie, what I'm interested in is your understanding of diaspora in Liverpool as "counter/part." You have this really sort of ingenious concept of "counter/part" that does not necessarily mean counter-part in the supplementary way that we normally think of it. I was hoping you could say a little bit more about that.

Bayo: It's true I do think about memory as a political act. And certainly for diaspora tourists, I think that the idea of remembering slavery is a way of exploring this history and constructing their identities through an exploration of this history. This seems to be clearly related to an attempt to grapple with their contemporary conditions as African Americans in American society and contemporary racism. For them, it's a way of creating an identity that is somewhat oppositional, and rooting that identity through a different place. It's a way of finding an alternative, especially to popular notions of African American culture as pathological, notions that see African American culture solely in relation to slavery and subsequent periods of oppression. For these African Americans who are traveling to Ghana, I think the project of remembering the slave trade is one of finding a way to root their identities in something that preceeds slavery. Their Africanity precedes slavery and oppression and is thus outside of it. Their return to Ghana functions in that way—it's both a way of finding roots outside of the U.S. on the African continent, and of exploring their own origins and the origins of their oppression through the slave trade by trying to bring the history of how they ended up in the U.S. to life.

I guess I would use the phrase “political act” here at a more personal level. Many of the tourists refer to their experiences in the slave dungeons and so forth as experience of catharsis. Their discourse has to do with a sort of spiritual renewal that takes place through these experiences. For Ghanaians, I think the silencing of the slave trade that I found to be so widespread, on the other hand, functions in many ways to protect their notion of community. It is productive in that regard; it protects their notion of community by not bringing to light the kinds of internal divisions that their own history of slavery would highlight. But then at the same time that
they are defining their community, they're also defining what's outside of it. For people in Cape Coast and Elmina, what is “outside” is generally people in the northern regions of Ghana who were enslaved. For them, “the north” is constructed as the region that is the source of slaves, and then that region becomes stigmatized through the memory of slavery.

Jacqueline: I’m trying to think of how I want to make a pathway into this. And I’m thinking, when in doubt always cling to your disciplinary chauvinism. When people invoke a notion of origins, I think anthropologists are committed to trying to figure out how this notion operates for a particular group of historical actors. I was just reflecting on the question about slavery and your lovely introduction in terms of what prompted your questions and why you brought us together, and I was thinking that we do both deal with slavery. I really do think that our work has a lot of commonality. One thing I would like to say about the question of origin is that in Liverpool, when people invoke “origins,” they are not thinking of slavery. Instead, they are thinking of how they got “here in this place, Liverpool.” That memory is very selective and really faulty and political. That memory writes out a whole lot of other narratives. And the thing about memory, slavery, origins, and diaspora— in Liverpool, those buzz words would articulate with each other in ways that we might not expect.

What I would like to say about memory in relation to the question that you pose is that I’m fascinated by the kinds of events that people would recall in talking about “how we came to be what we are today” in relation to those Africans and those Caribbean people who came. The discourse is that everything was fine before they got here. The memories that people would rehearse or the events that people would recall would be moments of tension, moments of conflict that were really ugly. Those moments of conflict were cited as triumphant moments when “we came into our own as Liverpool-born Blacks,” and “we finally showed them that our Blackness is not to be denigrated by the likes of folks who have these other ideas about what Blackness means,” and “you came from the Caribbean and we know those ideas are all messed up.” The kinds of memories that people would invoke would be those moments of tension and conflict in which they were ultimately the victors.

At first in their stories they are the ones who are being denigrated or being slighted in some very profound way and in the end they triumph. And for them, that explains why their notion of blackness is the authentic one. In trying to reckon with these very difficult kinds of conflicts that people engaged in, I experienced perhaps a kind of diasporic crisis insofar as I wanted to see myself as identifying with all these oppressed people. In my view, the oppressed people were all black, but for Liverpool-born blacks, the “oppressed people” were uniquely themselves—not the Caribbeans and certainly not the Africans who came. To make a long story short, a lot of West Africans came to England, and to Liverpool in particular, following their independence from Britain. They all came, so the legend goes, with education up the wazoo, and they came from middle-class families that had been privileged under colonialism and all of this stuff. Liverpool-born blacks look at post-colonial Africans as elites, and the post-colonial Africans themselves denigrate Liverpool-born Blacks for not being as educated as they are.

So what does a well-meaning Black anthropologist from the States do with all these tensions among Liverpool-born Blacks, Africans, and Caribbeans, all of whom seem perfectly nice to me? I came up with this way of thinking about diaspora as a counter/part relation (with a slash between “counter” and “part”) that would help me think about how we might explain the construction of affinities at certain moments and the production of antagonisms at other moments. This helped me to see diaspora not only in terms of people, that is, all Black people are the African diaspora, you know, outside of Africa. That’s a notion that has had a lot of purchase in particular locations in what one might call the Black World, and it certainly has purchase in Ghana where diaspora tourism is developed and encouraged. I wouldn’t want to say that that’s not an important construction of diaspora, but I do want to argue that we have to treat diaspora in anthropological terms as just that—a construction.

I wanted to think about diaspora in terms of the counter/part relation because it could stress either the “counter” aspect of the term or the “part” aspect. This helps us to see how and why Liverpool born blacks construct certain events as the key moments in which they came into being as different from other groups of blacks. It helps us to answer questions like: How do we see Black people not as being all the same, and not being a homogenous “African diaspora,” just as we no longer see a homogenous “Black community”? How might we see instead the negotiation of diaspora, the production of affinity or antagonism?

Tina: I want to pose a final question, which is sort of the flip side of this coin, and then we can open this up to a larger conversation. This question has to do with the uses of diaspora. Both of you are talking about certain limitations in relation to diaspora. What I’m interested in is what you share, or what your work shares. Both of you frame the limitations of how people construct and understand diasporic community in relation to a notion of class. Is this right? Both in Ghana and in Liverpool, what might be seen as “culture” or “heritage” or “ethnicity” speaks to the emphasis on the “counter” part of
the diasporic relationship, and this is articulated through national and class differences within the diaspora. I was wondering if both of you could actually speak a little more about how you see these distinctions being made in terms of class.

Jacqueline: I think I’d like to answer a different question that’s related. I’ll answer your question, and then I’ll answer my version of the question. To answer your question, I think that in Liverpool there’s this notion of legitimacy that defines who has the legitimate rights to social mobility. If social mobility is not available to everyone as it should be, Liverpool-born Blacks ask, “Why is it more available to them over there when we were born here?” And there is an irony that Black people who were born “there” bring up; their argument is “We’ve been here for a gazillion years now. We’re still oppressed. The British government and every social policy concern in the country has come to study us twice and we’re still broke. And then look, these folk come right off the boat, they get the jobs that we should be getting. These are race relations jobs. We were the ones that got our butts kicked in the riots. We were ones on the front line all the time and now . . .” This argument is mobilized by the gravity of their poverty. Liverpool is really poor and Black people in Liverpool, along with most of the White people in Liverpool, are the underclass. So they are actually using these nationalist arguments to decry what they perceive as a profound economic injustice. I don’t know what to do with that except to point out there is some nationalist instinct. All I could do really in the book was to point out to British and Liverpool readers that they were drawing from anti-immigrant discourse and leave it at that.

Now, the version of your question that I want to answer is this: Why is it that African diaspora studies really doesn’t incorporate a notion of class very much? It’s always “identity,” God bless, and “hybridity,” and all of those other concepts. But if you look at Asian diasporic scholarship, class is all over the place. There is a lot of good political economy and a lot of class-based analysis. There is also a lot of work done on how folks are differently situated in different national contexts. If you read Aihwa Ong, for example, you can’t get away from class. This is not to say that Aihwa Ong is the messiah, but I would like to see more concrete, bread-and-butter kinds of issues brought into diasporic theorizing. It doesn’t have to be all about identity.

Bayo: I agree. I think class is really crucial to this conversation, certainly for Ghanians and the diaspora tourists that they encounter. Ghanaians definitely view these individuals through the lens of class and they see them very much as privileged subjects. The degree to which they really are varies, but Ghanians are viewing them first and foremost in terms of their ability to obtain a visa, buy a plane ticket, get on a plane, and go to Ghana. This is really almost all they need to know about these individuals because to them, it indicates great privilege. Most of the African American tourists are also staying in hotels and traveling around on tour buses and so forth, and all of this reinforces this notion of their privileged status. This plays a large role in the interactions between Ghanaians and diaspora tourists, and in some of the misunderstandings that take place, because Ghanaians tend to be paying more attention to their understanding of African Americans as privileged at the very same time that the tourists want to think and talk about their oppression. This becomes very complex, and leaves many Ghanaians scratching their heads over this issue since they’re thinking about their own positions in the global economy, and the fact that not only did they not see great economic opportunities for themselves, but also that they really felt “entrenched” in place due to really heavy visa restrictions and so forth. They have had very few opportunities to leave the country. In fact, travel was one of their most commonly stated desires, particularly among young people, so that became a big issue for them.

And one other thing, Jackie had mentioned the issue of who has a legitimate right to social mobility, and I think that’s really interesting. I’m thinking of how people in Ghana mobilize a claim to that right. Cape Coast and Elmina were towns where Europeans had settlements during the Atlantic trade and there was a class of elite Africans that emerged in these towns, Africans who were also involved in this trade. Of course, there’s a whole history about these elites and all the different kinds of privilege they enjoyed, which then collapsed with formal colonization through indirect rule. They were pretty much stripped of this privileged status. A lot of people in Cape Coast and Elmina invoke the history of these elites, and I see this as an attempt to mobilize a rightful claim to social mobility. This operates in a somewhat bizarre fashion, as people would talk about the history of the European presence in their towns and the types of relationships that local elites had with Europeans in what sounded like very nostalgic terms. This was very puzzling to me at first. In Elmina, the Dutch were there for the slave trade and they left when the slave trade ended essentially—the trade was the only reason they were there. And Ghanaians spoke about this time in what sounded like very nostalgic terms. What I think explains this is precisely the fact that they were constructing an identity for their town around a memory of this privileged status that certain members of their society enjoyed in the past as a way to try to stake this claim to what they wished they had in the present—not only in terms of economic opportunity but
also regarding a standing in the global economy. This is because these past elites were very much incorporated in a global economy through the Atlantic slave trade. So now, individuals are remembering that past in order to say something about the lack of that standing in the present. James Ferguson talks about this in terms of the idea of “abjection,” and I find this very useful in thinking about how Ghanaians might think of themselves as “abject” in that way.

Jacqueline: That’s just like Liverpool-born Blacks. It’s exactly the same thing. They are making a claim to an economic status and to a social status that was somehow taken away from them. I mean, the whole national discourse in Britain was that immigrants are bad, and they argued, “Well, we’re not immigrants. We’ve been here for a thousand years. We’ve been here since before the Romans. We’re not immigrants. So don’t we get a piece of the pie now?”

Tina: Well, I think it’s actually a proper time to open up the conversation to other questions.

Bianca Robinson (graduate student, Cultural Anthropology, Duke): Is there something unique about this notion of diaspora? Did people in Liverpool actually speak in those terms?

Jacqueline: I only heard the term “diaspora” twice. I think that what you’re saying is that there’s no notion of diaspora that we hear coming our of the streets of Liverpool from what I represented to you. That’s a fair statement, but I think we don’t have to tether our analyses on the fact that there must be an invocation of the term. Instead, I found that there was a sense of, “We’re somehow related to each other, but kinda sort of not really”; or, “we’re sort of related to each other but that doesn’t mean everything is hunky dory”; or, “we have to negotiate how exactly we’re related to each other.” And sometimes people forge less of a relationship per se than a non-relationship or distance. Like, “Here’s what makes you different from me. I was born here.” That kind of statement gains traction from a prior notion that somehow we’re supposed to be alike or somehow we’re supposed have some kind of kinship.

One of the things that race does is get us to think of ourselves as a people in terms of phenotype, or whatever the signifier of the day is. Race, to me, is better understood as a kind of politic, as a system of domination that, among other things, gets us to think in these very terms of typing, et cetera. Diaspora and race are compatible because what people in Liverpool are doing, and what I hear people in Ghana are doing, is suggesting that we have been affected by this thing called “race” in different ways, in our different contexts. As a result of our different histories, different trajectories emerged.

So people are using a notion of race to construct a sense of relatedness across difference. Whether that means we can form affinities or antagonisms remains to be seen.

Bayo: There are many different constructions of identity in our community that are sometimes competing, sometimes overlapping, and in relation to diaspora; one is a construction of homeland, one is race, and then there’s ethnicity also. And all of these operate in Ghana in different ways. Certainly, the diaspora/homeland construction in terms of an African diaspora was, until the popularization of tourism, not really something that people were thinking about to any great extent. But there were certainly other notions of Black community and we could think about—the history of Pan-Africanism, for example, and other historical moments during which notions of racial community, or a Black or African community may have been evoked. I see it as a series of moments, of historical moments in which these different types of relationships become salient, and then others that are less so. It’s complicated in that regard. I believe that in a certain sense, the notion of race become less politicized in Ghana than it was at several earlier moments, one just prior to independence and another among earlier nationalists during the 1880s. These were moments when people were actively constructing notions of communal Blackness or Africanness that seem to be less important now. Part of this shift has to do with the language of modernization and how it really seems to echo the language of the civilizing mission—the premise here is that people can become modern and can become like Europeans essentially, like Americans. This has really served to depoliticize a notion of Blackness as being important to define against Whiteness.

The other thing I want to mention is that there are other competing constructions of community now, and one that’s very important in Ghana is Charismatic Christianity. That generates a notion of a transnational community that many people find much more useful than any notion of race or diaspora or anything like that. They feel Christianity promises more concrete benefits for them having to do with economic opportunities, and perhaps opportunities to travel and so forth. So I think that’s becoming a really important competing construction of community.

Lee Baker (Department of Cultural Anthropology, Duke): We’ve heard a lot about the limitations of the concept of diaspora. I guess I just want to pose the flip side of that discourse and ask whether it’s still a productive concept, and if it is, why?

Jacqueline: I think that it’s very productive. In fact, I think that what I’ve been saying is not necessarily that it has its limits, but that it’s best used as a way to think
about the actual kinds of relations that people form and construct with each other. I, as a Black American, was very embraced in Liverpool as sort of “You’re one of us.” That is something I would name as a diasporic encounter, a diasporic relation that they were constructing and using as a way to say, “Yes, you can study us.” “That’s fine.” “Great.” And, “Write about us.” I mean there were limits to that niceness too. But I like the notion of diaspora as a name for a relationship that doesn’t necessarily presuppose what the quality of the relationship is. It could be a relationship of complete antagonism, for example, but it is still a diasporic relation because people are constructing a sameness within difference or difference within sameness. So, for me, it’s still a useful concept to think with for that reason.

Bayo: I think it’s an important concept. I think it does have to be situated in these particular contexts because there is so much variation. We talk about how people actually think about it and how it might be mobilized in different contexts, and in Ghana it is mobilized in particular moments, in particular situations, in ways that people themselves might find quite powerful. So I think it’s important in that regard. Having ways to think about transnational connections is really crucial particularly because many Ghanians, even those who don’t envision ever being able to leave the country, still think in these global terms. They’re thinking about different kinds of transnational relationships, and sometimes it’s really through the imagination that they’re creating these different kinds of relationships. Diaspora is one way in which that can be envisioned. In terms of the issue of memory and the history of slavery, I think diaspora is very useful to people. Yet, the link between diaspora and the Atlantic slave trade shouldn’t be the only lens through which we understand Black people or their transnational connections. But as one of many, it can be useful.

Wahneema Lubiano (Program in African and African American Studies and Program in Literature, Duke): My question has to do with class issues, and here I think a comparison between Asian diaspora studies and the way they deal with political economy is real important. I’m trying to think about the history of the specificity of African diaspora studies and the form that it has taken that means political economy is not a particularly important aspect of the interrogation. Does that have to do with the sites of the knowledge production in Europe and in the United States? Where has this field come from and why? Because when you look at the way area studies disappears and African languages for the most are no longer really studied, we have to think of the larger historical forum that frames our questions. I’m just wondering, how do we get this particular configuration?

Jacqueline: I think that the field of African diaspora studies for most anthropologists begins with the figure of Melville Herskovits who was interested in the retention of African culture and who did research in the Caribbean and Latin America. For him, the question of diaspora was, and apparently in some corners still is, analyzed with reference to the question of culture (and cultural retentions, adaptations, etc.). But he never interrogated the question of diaspora and what it meant processually. For people who follow the Herskovits model, they haven’t paid close attention to class. Yet in Latin American and the Caribbeanist research, class is highlighted but they don’t analyze it as a phenomenon that articulates with this question of diaspora. Instead, they analyze it in reference to race, and skin color, and whitening, and the negotiation of status hierarchies.

With the intervention of Paul Gilroy came something very interesting. His first book does more political economy analysis than anything else he’s done. In The Black Atlantic, he makes this amazing statement. Now no one loves Paul Gilroy more than I do. However, he makes this amazing statement in The Black Atlantic that he’s not going to deal with capitalism, or class, or the category of labor in that book because for Black people, labor has always been an aspect of our racial subordination. There’s one sentence where he says, “Anyone who’s looking for me to engage political economy, class, labor, Marxism or anything like that, forget it.” And this is the book now that has revolutionized diasporic studies. A book that writes class out in one sentence.

Wahneema: Another way of posing this question has to do with where and when class is taken up in African diaspora studies, who does that, and for what particular purposes. I feel there are a number of people who do take it up, but not necessarily in contemporary African diaspora studies that have been influenced so heavily by Gilroy’s work. I think it’s really important for us to also take into account the forms of scholarly inquiry that are acceptable at any given moment, and how certain formulations become “hot.” This is not an accident. I think for somebody like Gilroy to make that kind of claim and still be adopted as a canonical text is really phenomenal. I raise this because so often people seem to dismiss African American studies and its focus on class. And people intervene and produce these other systems of knowledge every five years, and I don’t know why we have to keep doing this. Every five years, we have to remind people that African Americanists have been working through class for a very long time, even as they attempt to theorize diaspora. The point is that there are other literatures that grapple with these questions, and if we don’t do our homework, then the ways these particular thinkers talk it seems like the way it has always been.

DEBORAH A. THOMAS AND TINA M. CAMPT 171
Jacqueline: This sort of leads back to a question that has
to do with the relationships that exist between the kinds
of scholarship people do and the kinds of political ques-
tions that are important at a particular moment because
if you look at the focus during Herskovits’s time, the big
question was: Can African Americans be citizens? Are
they too culturally different to assimilate into American
society? Do African Americans have a pathological
culture? Do they have a culture at all? Do they have an
African culture? So, the political context of post-
Reconstruction America shaped the focus on culture.
So, where is class? We might ask what are the conditions
of research that make class an important category to
analyze in particular moments, and I think this is where
some questions regarding the production of locality
come in.

REFERENCES CITED
Brown, Jacqueline Nassy
2005 Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies
of Race in Black Liverpool. Princeton: Prince-
ton University Press.

Holsey, Bayo
2005 Transatlantic Dreaming: Slavery, Tourism, and
Diasporic Encounters. In Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return. Fran Markowitz
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.