REWRITING THE AFRICAN DIASPORA:
BEYOND THE BLACK ATLANTIC

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ABSTRACT
This essay argues that despite the growing popularity of diaspora studies, our understanding of the African diaspora remains limited by both the conceptual difficulties of defining what we mean by the diaspora in general, and the African diaspora in particular, and the analytical tendency to privilege the Atlantic, or rather the Anglophone, indeed the American branch of the African diaspora. It begins by trying to explore the various conceptions of the African diaspora, foregrounded by a critique of Paul Gilroy's influential text, The Black Atlantic. This is followed by discussions of what the author considers to be the four dominant dimensions of the global African diasporas, namely, the intra-Africa, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and Atlantic diasporas. Finally, the essay examines the emergence of the new global African diasporas.

IN RECENT YEARS, DIASPORA has become a popular term of critical and public discourse, a popularity it shares with narratives of globalization and transnationalism, which seek to contest the old settled identities of nation and race and even of class and gender and celebrate the energies of multiple subjectivities. Once seen as a space of social death, to use Orlando Patterson's evocative imagery of slavery, a kind of ontological void, diaspora is now increasingly invested with new possibilities as a harbinger of globalized futures. While images of the violent ruptures of displacement from Vietnamese boat people to Somali refugees occasionally fill television screens, it is the studies of diasporic agency and originality — of which Paul Gilroy's The Black Atlantic is a good example — that are valorized in the academy. To be sure, these studies offer timely correctives to the older tales of unremitting diasporic victimization and mimicry, but they are also eulogies to the cosmopolitan intellectuals themselves who produce and peddle these analyses.

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The African diaspora, together with the Jewish diaspora — the epistemo-
logical source of the term diaspora — enjoys pride of place in the pantheon
of diaspora studies. Yet, despite the proliferation of the literature, our
understanding of the African diaspora remains limited by both the concep-
tual difficulties of defining what we mean by the diaspora in general and
the African diaspora in particular, and the analytical tendency to privilege
the Atlantic, or rather the Anglophone, indeed the American branch of the
African diaspora, as is so clear in Gilroy’s seminal text.

This article is divided into three parts. It begins by trying to explore
briefly various conceptions and constructions of the African diaspora, high-
lighted by a critique of *The Black Atlantic*.3 This is followed by discussions
of what I consider to be the four dominant dimensions of the global African
diasporas, namely, the intra-Africa, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and
Atlantic diasporas. Finally, I examine the emergence of the new global
African diasporas. Unfortunately, for reasons of space, I do not look at the
engagements between Africa and its various diasporas, which is the subject
of a much larger project that I am working on for the Council for the
Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA).

*Conceptions, constructions and critiques of diaspora*

*The Black Atlantic* derives its power and popularity less for what it actually
says about the political, social, cultural and economic relations among the
triangular systems of Africa, the Americas, and Europe that make up the
Atlantic world — much of which is in fact omitted and has been better told
by others — but more for its anti-nationalist theoretical and ideological
politics and its singular focus on the African American diaspora. This
resonated, when the book was first published, with the anti-foundationalist
parade of the ‘posts’ (postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonial-
ism), the upsurge of controversies in African American studies triggered by
the Afrocentric paradigm and wider struggles over affirmative action, and
the perpetual search for new analytical brands in the American academy
with its channel-surfing intellectualism. Gilroy’s central concern was to
deconstruct the idea of the black race, to divorce it from any African
essence or presence, to demonstrate its fluidity, mutability and modernity,
and that black Atlantic cultural identities emerged in the transnational and
intercultural spaces of the diasporic experience itself, in response to the
terrors of racism and out of transoceanean transactions in which creolized

Mazrui (eds), *African Diaspora: African origins and new world identities* (Indiana University
Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 1999), p. xxii, suggests that the term Black Atlantic
was coined by Robert Farris Thompson, whom Gilroy does not acknowledge, who taught a
series of courses at Yale University in the 1970s on Black Atlantic civilizations.
and hybridized experiences, ideas and cultural artifacts, especially music, emerged and were exchanged.

Notwithstanding its considerable insights and contributions to diaspora studies and cultural studies, *The Black Atlantic* has been faulted for oversimplifying the African American experience and the role of Africa and African connections in its collective memory, imagination and thought; for androcentrism in privileging male figures in the construction of Atlantic blackness and modernity, despite its ritual gestures to gender; for universalizing the racialized ‘minority’ experience of African Americans (in most Caribbean islands African-descended people constitute the majority); for foreclosing the relationships and connections among the black diasporic cultures themselves beyond the Anglophone world (the largest African diaspora population is in Brazil and speaks Portuguese) and between them and African cultures; for its postmodernist phobias against essentialism, real and imaginary, strategic or slight, while at the same time desperately seeking a ‘black’, not a ‘white’, or ‘multicultural’ Atlantic; for its exclusionary epistemic cultural politics in its Eurocentric excision and disdain for Africa; and for mystifying modernity as the primary object of black Atlantic critique barring questions of imperialism and capitalism.4

It is somewhat ironic that *The Black Atlantic*, which constantly rails against the snobbery of African American analytical exceptionalism and seeks to underscore the enlightenment that travel in Europe bestowed upon the provincial horizons of W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and other African American icons, should end up being a monument to American self-referential conceit and myopia in its obsession with the cultural inventions of the African American diaspora. This is a tribute as much to the seductive power of African American expressive culture itself, including the very notions of diaspora or blackness, as to the hegemony of US imperialism, on whose multinational corporate wings it is marketed to the rest of the world, especially the Anglophone world and, in this case, the British Isles.

Clearly, the connections between the African diasporas of the United States and Britain, in the construction of black modernities, have been strong, if quite complex and sometimes contradictory. The same can indeed be said of connections between African Americans and Africans, say, black South Africans, as Masilela stresses in his critique of Gilroy, and as others have noted. For example, Kemp and Vinson argue that the trans-Atlantic circulation of African American expressive cultural practices, from

music to dress to language, were powerful signifiers of Black cosmopolitanism, and in such a highly racialized society they were adopted as performative tools that disconnected modernity from whiteness by subverting, mocking, and reversing the ‘racial time’ of white modernity ‘that locked Africans into static “uncivilized native” categories’.5

But we must be careful not to subsume the histories of Africans in Britain, or in Black London, and their Staying Power, to use the titles of three histories of the African diaspora in Britain by David Killingray, Gretchen H. Gerzina and Peter Fryer respectively, in the overpowering glare of commoditized African American popular culture.6 Laura Chrisman expresses this point very well:

I am arguing for new methods that articulate a version of black Atlanticism that does not contract African America, or the African diaspora, as a sovereign class or icon of modernity that then gets imposed upon African populations. If we are to retain the language of black modernity in our analyses — and I think we should — we need to open up its multiple geographical, economic, philosophical and aesthetic constituents, rather than using it as a singular term for a New World act of cultural selffashioning.7

As a historian and an African migrant who travels on a Canadian passport and is resident in the United States, a member of the so-called new or contemporary African diaspora for whom Africa — to which I go several times a year and where I plan to spend all my summers — remains a pressing existential reality, my concerns go beyond charting the contours of black modernities in the diaspora, to exploring the long and complex histories of African dispersals and diasporas in various parts of the world and their implications for and engagements with Africa. This agenda, historicizing and pluralizing the African diasporas and mapping their multiple identities and identifications with Africa, and sometimes the lack thereof, in fact transcends the racial essentialisms that worry Gilroy and his ilk so much, even as they spend most of their time talking about race and dissecting the ‘fictions’ of blackness or the dangers of ‘raciology’,8 all in the vain hope that the world will become, to quote Toni Morrison, ‘raceless or unraced by assertion’.9

It is not easy, but we must try to transcend the discursive politics of the term ‘diaspora’, which has, one author complains, ‘imposed a U.S. and English language-centered model of black identity on the complex experiences of populations of African descent’. After all, the term ‘African diaspora’ only emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, but African diasporas existed long before then in different parts of the world, and African peoples were mobilized using other terms, such as Pan-Africanism. Part of the difficulty is that many diaspora scholars, if they are not already ethnocentric in thinking that the experiences of their chosen community are representative of the African diaspora in its totality, are linguistically challenged, unversed in the many languages, and hence the literatures and discourses, of the African diasporas in the Americas, let alone in other parts of the world.

There are several conceptual difficulties in defining the African diaspora, indeed in defining the term ‘diaspora’. Contemporary Anglophone theorizations — for I have not investigated the discourses in other languages and intellectual traditions — of the term ‘diaspora’ tend to be preoccupied with problematizing the relationship between diaspora and nation and the dualities or multiplicities of diasporic identity or subjectivity, and they are inclined to be condemnatory or celebratory of transnational mobility and hybridity. In many cases, the term ‘diaspora’ is used in a fuzzy, ahistorical and uncritical way in which all manner of movements and migrations between, and even within, countries are embraced in its generous conceptual bosom, and no adequate attention is paid to the historical conditions and experiences that produce diasporic communities and consciousness, or the lack thereof.

I say ‘lack thereof’ because not all dispersals result in the formation of diasporas. In other words, dispersal does not automatically create a diaspora and, once formed, a diaspora does not live in perpetuity. Some diasporas disappear, some dispersals turn into diasporas long after the original dispersals. It will be noticed that I am still skirting around the issue of what

11. George Shepperson, ‘African diaspora: concept and context’, in Joseph E. Harris (ed.) *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, 2nd edn (Howard University Press, Washington, DC, 1993), p. 44, argues that none of the major intellectual forerunners of African diaspora studies from Blyden to Du Bois used the term African diaspora. The Negritude writers also did not use it, a clear indication that ‘it originated in the English-speaking world, where it received most of its development to date’. But he goes on to argue that ‘as a concept that is intrinsically comparative, the study of the African diaspora, although it owes much to Anglophone influences, now has everything to gain by approaches through other languages as well as English; the European languages of the slave trade and the transplanted slave cultures; the relevant Asian languages; the African languages of the slave trade, east as well as west; and the hybrid languages that have resulted from the very complex mingling over several centuries of African and non-African peoples’.
constitutes a diaspora. Before giving my own views — calling it a definition sounds a little pretentious — let me briefly refer to others who have invested more intellectual energies in studying diaspora than I have. Kim Butler, a fine historian of the African diaspora in Brazil, insists that ‘conceptualizations of diaspora must be able to accommodate the reality of multiple identities and phases of diasporization over time’. She offers a simple but useful schema for diasporan study divided into five dimensions: (i) reasons for, and conditions of, the dispersal; (ii) relationship with homeland; (iii) relationship with hostlands; (iv) interrelationships within diasporan groups; and (v) comparative study of different diasporas.13

Robin Cohen offers a suggestive schema based on what he regards as the nine common features of a diaspora.14 Using this schema, he proceeds to distinguish among various diasporas, such as the ‘victim diasporas’ (Africans and Armenians), ‘labor diasporas’ (Indians), ‘imperial diasporas’ (British), ‘trade diasporas’ (Chinese and Lebanese), or ‘cultural diasporas’ (the Caribbean). It is easy to pick holes in the categorizations, to say that these diasporas are not mutually exclusive. It is interesting that, whereas the other diasporas are defined in national or ethnic or even ideological terms, for Africa they are simply called African; whether the referent used is racial or spatial is not always clear. Also common are descriptions of African diasporas as ‘black’; rarely are diasporas from other regions draped in colour. Whatever the liberatory politics of a ‘black’ identity, the point is that other diasporas have ethnic names, national names, or even linguistic and religious names.

The homogenization and racialization of Africa is quite common in academic and popular discourses both outside and within the continent among those who either have no time for understanding its astonishing diversities or wish to impose an emancipatory Pan-African solidarity, while the homogenization and racialization of African diasporas is, Edward Alpers observes,
based entirely upon the Atlantic experience of forced migration, which is a phenomenon spanning the 16th–19th centuries. The Indian Ocean setting complicates this situation by having experienced both a much longer history of forced migration as well as a more modest tradition of free labor migration that muddies the waters. One could add that free labour and trade migrations characterized the waves of post-slavery African movements across the Atlantic. As shown in a growing number of studies, and as I will show later, these migrations and the formation of new African diasporas increased gradually during the course of the twentieth century and accelerated at the turn of the new century.

Diaspora, I would suggest, simultaneously refers to a process, a condition, a space and a discourse: the continuous processes by which a diaspora is made, unmade and remade, the changing conditions in which it lives and expresses itself, the places where it is moulded and imagined, and the contentious ways in which it is studied and discussed. It entails a culture and a consciousness, sometimes diffuse and sometimes concentrated, of a ‘here’ separate from a ‘there’, a ‘here’ that is often characterized by a regime of marginalization and a ‘there’ that is invoked as a rhetoric of self-affirmation, of belonging to ‘here’ differently. The emotional and experiential investment in ‘here’ and ‘there’ and the points in between obviously changes in response to the shifting material, mental, and moral orders of social existence. Diaspora is simultaneously a state of being and a process of becoming, a kind of voyage that encompasses the possibility of never arriving or returning, a navigation of multiple belongings. It is a mode of naming, remembering, living and feeling group identity moulded out of experiences, positionings, struggles and imaginings of the past and the present, and at times the unpredictable future, which are shared across the boundaries of time and space that frame ‘indigenous’ identities in the contested and constructed locations of ‘there’ and ‘here’ and the passages and points in between.

If the term ‘diaspora’ is to retain analytical specificity it has to be conceived in some bounded way, but not too narrowly if it is to remain useful for comparative study. In a broad sense, a diasporic identity implies a form of group consciousness constituted historically through expressive culture, politics, thought and tradition, in which experiential and representational resources are mobilized from the imaginaries of both the old and the new worlds. Diasporas are complex social and cultural communities created out of real and imagined genealogies and geographies (cultural,
racial, ethnic, national, continental, transnational) of belonging, displacement, and recreation, constructed and conceived at multiple temporal and spatial scales, at different moments and distances from the putative homeland. A diaspora is fashioned as much in the fluid contexts of social experience, differentiation and struggle, and through the transnational circuits of exchange of diasporic resources and repertoires of power, as in the discourses of intellectuals and political elites.

In the African academy the historic African diasporas tend to be ignored, except in the obligatory histories of Pan-Africanism and nationalism. Instead, far greater attention is paid to the contemporary African migrations to the North, but even here the discourse is firmly rooted in the economic preoccupations of development studies, rather than the culturalist predispositions of diaspora studies; the focus is on the implications of the ‘brain drain’ for Africa rather than of the cultural modernities of the Black Atlantic. To be sure, this is changing as the number of African academics working in the North increases and as they engage, intellectually and otherwise, with the historic diasporas and explore their own identities as migrant or new diasporic intellectuals.

As an intellectual project, the question is: how do we best study African diasporas, capture their complex histories, connections and disconnections, and compare their experiences? Darlene Clark Hine, thinking exclusively of the Atlantic world, suggests that black diaspora studies, as she calls the field, need to have three features: a transatlantic framework, an interdisciplinary methodology, and a comparative perspective. I would agree with the last two and revise the first as that African diaspora studies need to have a global framework. In the following sections, I outline, with the broadest of strokes, what such a framework might entail.

**Mapping the historic African diasporas**

There have been numerous dispersals associated with African peoples over time. Colin Palmer has identified at least six, three in prehistoric and ancient times (beginning with the great exodus that began about 100,000 years ago from the continent to other continents), and three in modern times, including those associated with the Indian Ocean slave trade to Asia, the Atlantic slave trade to the Americas, and the contemporary movement of Africans and peoples of African descent to various parts of the globe.

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Our tendency to privilege the modern diasporic streams, especially the last two, is a tribute to the presentist orientation of much contemporary scholarship and the epistemic and economic hegemony of the Euro-American world system which spawned these diasporas and created what Tiffany Patterson and Robin Kelly call ‘global race and gender hierarchies’ within which African diasporas are situated and often analyzed.19

I do not propose to discuss all the waves of African diasporas from the dawn of history in this article. While such a broad conception of diaspora might be a useful reminder of our common origins and humanity, it stretches the notion of diaspora too far beyond analytical recognition to be very useful. So I shall focus on the ‘modern’ historical streams of the global African diasporas. To my knowledge, there is no single text that discusses the global dimensions of the African diasporas, not even Joseph Harris’s edited collection under that title, first published in 1982,20 or Ronald Segal’s The Black Diaspora published in 1995.21 Studies of African diasporas focus disproportionately on the Atlantic world. A project on the comparative histories of African diasporas globally is long overdue.

It is quite encouraging that literature is growing on the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean diasporas, as represented by the books published by Shihan de Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst, The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean, published in 2003, and John Hunwick and Eve Troutt Powell, The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam, published in 2002.22 But the two books share the same definitional problem in so far as parts of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean worlds that they discuss are a part of Africa. Only three out of the eight chapters in The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean are on India and Sri Lanka; the rest are on the Indian Ocean islands of Madagascar, Réunion, and Mauritius. One of the authors recognizes the problem, noting the Indian Ocean Islands that are considered in this paper are usually classified geographically as African islands . . . In the geographical sense then the ‘African Diaspora’ would be an intra-African one: from the continent to its offshore islands so to speak.23

Hunwick and Powell seem even more troubled by the racialized division and diminution of Africa. Hunwick writes:

The compartmentalization of Africa into zones that are treated as ‘Middle East’ and ‘Africa’ is a legacy of Orientalism and colonialism. North Africa, including Egypt, is usually seen as forming part of the Middle East, though Middle East experts are not generally keen to venture farther west than the confines of Egypt. Northwestern Africa — the Maghreb — is generally regarded as peripheral to Middle Eastern studies and extraneous to African studies. . . . Northwestern Africa (from Morocco to Libya), despite the area’s close and enduring relationship with West Africa, has been excluded from the concerns of most Africanists.24

The questions of what is Africa and who are Africans are absolutely critical to analyses of African diasporas. This is not the place to go into an extended exegesis on the matter.25 I work on the assumption that Africa is a geography, a history, a material and imagined place, or constellation of places. Lest we forget, Ifriqiya, from whence Africa comes, originally referred to Tunisia. My Africa is the Africa of the African Union (AU) — the 54 states that make up Africa and its islands. The question then becomes: how legitimate is it to project this Africa backwards? My answer is that almost invariably history is filtered through the lenses of the present and the Africa of the Pan-Africanist founders of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the AU’s predecessor, is no less handy than the racist epistemic cartography of Africa invented by European imperialism and favoured by the intellectual descendants of Hegel.

In my opinion, then, the East African diasporas on the Indian Ocean islands and the West African diasporas in North Africa, are not extra-continental diasporas like the Atlantic diasporas. This is to suggest that the historic African diasporas can be divided into four categories in terms of their places of dispersal: the intra-Africa, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and Atlantic diasporas. Of these the Atlantic has the most developed historiography; the challenge is to build up the histories of the other diasporas, and to develop comparative methodologies that will yield a more comprehensive and complex picture of the global dimensions of the African diasporas over the last millennia.

The challenges of studying intra-Africa diasporas are quite daunting, given the extraordinary movements of people across the continent over time. In fact, at one time in the annals of nationalist historiography the dynamism of migrations — the most famous being the Bantu migrations — became a proxy for the dynamism of the African past. Clearly, it will not

do to see every migration across the continent as a prelude to the formation of some diaspora. More fruitful might be to focus on communities that have constituted themselves, or are constituted by their host societies, as diasporas within historical memory. And here we may distinguish five types based on the primary reason for dispersal: the trading diasporas (the Hausa and Dioula in western Africa); the slave diasporas (West Africans in North Africa and East Africans on the Indian Ocean islands); the conquest diasporas (the Nguni in southern Africa); the refugee diasporas (for example, from the Yoruba wars of the early nineteenth century); and the pastoral diasporas (the Fulani and Somali in the Sahelian zones of western and eastern Africa).

These intra-Africa diasporas have often been studied in their own right without using the term ‘diaspora’ except for the trading diasporas and the slave diasporas.\(^{26}\) It is not surprising that in the emerging comparative histories of global African diasporas, it is the slave diasporas that have received the most attention, for they are often transregional and seem to resemble most the dominant slave diasporas of the Atlantic. But we should not forget the other diasporas in so far as they existed and, more importantly perhaps, they served as historical switching stations to the emergence of the new African diasporas in the twentieth century, as the iron grid of national borders reinforced their diasporic identities and sometimes pushed them into the circuits of international migration.

Comparisons between the intra-Africa and extra-Africa slave diasporas raise fascinating questions. Hunwick and Powell wonder why the racialized voice of ‘black consciousness’ never rose among West African slaves in North Africa and more widely in the Mediterranean lands of Islam, although sentiments that could be described today as anti-black racism did exist. They attribute this to the complex place of slavery in the religious discourse of Islam, in which slavery was legally recognized without acknowledging distinctions based on colour or ethnic origin. Muslim societies, which obtained their slaves from all the surrounding continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa, differentiated between slave and free, Muslim and non-Muslim, so that conversion facilitated freedom and social integration. Also critical for the relative ease of integration compared with the Atlantic slave system was the fact that slaves were mostly used as domestic servants and soldiers and rarely employed in production.\(^{27}\)


For their part, the Indian Ocean islands have uncanny similarities to, but also significant differences from, the Caribbean islands. Long uninhabited, they imported slave labour from the East African mainland, Madagascar, and to a smaller extent Asia to work the European-owned plantations, so that a highly racialized society emerged. As in the Caribbean, slave revolts were quite common, and cultures and knowledge systems from the mainland and Madagascar were transferred to the islands, including music. More fascinating, but familiar to students of the Caribbean, are analyses of the complex processes of creolization and the contradictory effects of decolonization for the descendants of the East African and Malagasy slaves, now reduced to a marginalized minority, except in the Seychelles, thanks to the massive importation of Indian indentured labour after the abolition of slavery. These islands were new societies that brought together African, Asian, and European diasporas. The Indian Ocean trading system, linking Africa to Asia, preceded the settlement of these islands by many centuries and it brought Asian diasporas to Africa and African diasporas to Asia.

‘The African diaspora’, Jayasuriya and Pankhurst insist, ‘has very old roots in the Indian Ocean region, therefore, which are not entirely the consequence of the slave trade. Africans came to India as policemen, traders, bureaucrats, clerics, bodyguards, concubines, servants, soldiers and sailors from the 13th century onwards,’ or rather the records of their presence become abundant from the thirteenth century.28 Thus, unlike the historic Atlantic diasporas, the Indian Ocean diasporas comprised both forced and free migrants. The slave trade ebbed and flowed over the centuries, increasing from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries following the rise of the Portuguese seaborne empire and the entry of the other European powers, including the French, British and Dutch, but it never reached the levels of the Atlantic slave trade.29

It has been observed that Islam provided mechanisms for the integration of the slaves, so that ‘in Muslim India they were largely free from racial discrimination. They differed from slaves in America and the West Indies, moreover, in that they were not subjected to plantation labor. Many slaves in India entered the personal service of rulers and other politically important personalities . . . This enabled them,’ Pankhurst contends, ‘like such functionaries in many lands, to exercise immense power, not only as king-makers, but, after successful coups d’état, as kings themselves.’30 He records

29. Following the staggered abolitions of the slave trade, some of the Africans liberated at sea or from the mainland were settled on Christian mission stations in Bombay in India, Aden in Arabia, and the Seychelles. See Joseph E. Harris, ‘Return movements to West and East Africa: a comparative approach’, in Harris, Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora, pp. 56–8.
numerous rulers and dynasties established between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries by the Habshi (corruption of Habash, the Arabic name for Abyssinia), Sidi (corruption of the Arabic saiyid or ‘master’), and Kaffir (from the Arabic kafir or unbeliever), as the Africans were known, throughout India from the north and west (Delhi, Gujarat, the Gulf of Cambay, Malabar, Alapur and Jaunpur) to the north-east (Bengal), the south (Deccan) and the west coast.

Focusing on the contemporary Sidi of Gujarat, Helen Basu challenges the notion that the African diaspora in India has either been isolated or assimilated, even if some have disappeared from the historical record. She delineates the formation of Sidi identity that is embedded in cultic constructions of their past. The present-day Sidi are not descended from the Habshi nobility of the past, another indication of the diverse routes and roots of Africans who settled in India, but from domestic slaves who came from eastern Africa in the nineteenth century, ‘remembered for their peculiar ways of speaking Hindustani and their knowledge of Swahili’.31 Bava Gor, after whom the cult is named, is depicted as an Ethiopian and his sister as an Egyptian. The rituals of the cult enable the Sidi to stake land rights by claiming the spaces surrounding their shrines, enact kinship relations, and link themselves to the wider society in so far as their cult is part of the larger universe of Sufi cults and patronized by others.

The need to explore the histories of the African diaspora in other parts of Asia cannot be overemphasized.32 Another country that the collection *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean* looks at is Sri Lanka. Jayasuriya notes that Ethiopia had trading contacts with Sri Lanka from the beginning of the fifth century. As in India, the history of the African diaspora in Sri Lanka is complex, involving people who came freely and those who were brought as slaves or soldiers, especially by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British during their successive eras. Unfortunately, Jayasuriya is far more focused on retrieving the cultural retentions of the Kaffirs, as the African diaspora is called (whose numbers apparently peaked during the Dutch era 1658–1796), and the contributions they made to Sri Lankan society in terms of music, language, and material culture, than on the identities and diaspora cultures they constructed.33

Exploring the African diasporas in the Mediterranean worlds of western Asia and southern Europe is fraught with difficulties, not least the fact that

32. Joseph E. Harris, ‘Africans in Asian history’, in Harris, *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, offers tantalizing suggestions about the African presence in Iran. As with Pushkin in Russia who had a partial Ethiopian heritage, it is said that the esteemed Iranian poet, Abu ’Malakirin Mujir al Din, born in 1197, was the son of an Ethiopian woman.
until modern times this was the most intensive zone of cultural traffic and communication in which peoples, plants, and places were exchanged, enabling communities to straddle multiple spaces in complex networks of affiliation.

Before the Atlantic slave trade, the most significant African presence in southern Europe was the Moors from northwestern Africa who occupied and ruled much of Spain between the early eighth and the late fifteenth centuries, but they are rarely discussed in diasporic terms, as an African diaspora. Discussions of African diasporas in the Mediterranean world, which are still relatively scanty, tend to focus on ‘blacks’, that is Negroid peoples in ancient Rome, or in the Mediterranean lands of Islam, where the question has been posed: what happened to all those millions of Africans who were taken there? Hunwick disputes the suggestion that they disappeared because of the high proportion of eunuchs among the males or the high death rates and low birth rate, and suggests that it was due to the high levels of integration and intermarriage.

The literature on Africans in the lands beyond the Mediterranean littoral in pre-modern times appears to be even more sparse. Against this background, there is the captivating account by Allison Blakely, Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian history and thought. The origins of the scattered African communities on the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus Mountains are in dispute. Some argue that they were brought there between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries as slaves for the Turkish and Abkhazian rulers, while others trace their origins many centuries earlier as remnants of an Egyptian army that invaded the region in antiquity. Blakely believes the two explanations may not be necessarily contradictory, in that there were probably different waves of Africans.

If the limited quantity and quality of information poses the main challenge in reconstructing the histories of African diasporas in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean worlds, in the Atlantic world it is the sheer volume that is daunting. Yet, from a global perspective the historic African

diaspora in the Atlantic is a lot easier to comprehend, notwithstanding all its internal differentiations, because, despite Van Sertima's assertion that some came before Columbus, it was constructed in fairly recent times and was the product of the European slave trade and subjected to forms of exploitation and racialization as in perhaps no other slave system before. Studies of the Atlantic diasporas are often encrusted in the linguistic and national mythologies of the various countries that make up the region.

As indicated earlier, the diaspora in the United States often stands at the pedestal, the one against which to judge the identities of the other diasporas. The fact that Brazil has the largest African diaspora in the Americas, indeed in the world, is often lost in the clamour of exceptionalisms, of America's Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism and Brazil's lusotropical 'racial democracy'. The relative overabundance of knowledge about the African American diaspora is in part a product of the staggering size of the American university system and in part a reflection of the successes and failures of the civil rights movement.

Given the vast and rapidly growing scholarship, it is virtually impossible to delineate the contours and content of African diaspora experiences, cultures, and identities in a limited essay. Sheila Walker's notion of three puzzles provides a way of thinking through these issues. She suggests that the African diaspora in the Americas 'represents the intersection of at least three planes of multidimensional, intersecting, and interdependent puzzles', namely, what she calls 'the transitional African puzzle', 'the puzzle of the African diaspora per se', and the 'Pan-American puzzle'. The first refers to the question of those African cultures that 'have, over the past five centuries, managed to establish more or less evident overseas outposts in the Americas. This African substratum is now part of the foundational substance of the Americas, and appears in various forms in different places in myriad ways, many of which have yet to be decrypted.' The second concerns the comparative development of diasporic cultures and the ways in which this can sharpen understanding of the practices of specific diaspora cultures. The third is 'predicated on the intersection of these transatlantic African and African Diasporan puzzles with the Native American and European Diasporan puzzles of the Americas'.

This analytical agenda is intended, Walker argues, to contest the conceptualizations of America as a European construction, as some kind of Eurogenic creation, and to restore the African and African diasporic contributions to their rightful place in the histories of the Americas. After all, until the early nineteenth century,

37. Ivan Van Sertima, They Came before Columbus (Random House, New York, 1976).
hence for more than three hundred years of the five-hundred year modern history of
the Americas, Africans and their descendants were the Americas’ largest population.
Therefore, the demographic foundation of the Americas was African, not European. . . .
In the necessary process of re-creating themselves in their new milieu, these Diasporan
Africans invented and participated in the inventing of new cultural forms such as
languages, religions, foods, aesthetic expressions, and political and social organiz-
atations.39

Over the last two decades several important comparative histories of the
African diasporas in the Atlantic world have appeared.40 They consist
mostly of edited collections, however, in which the comparisons sometimes
do not go beyond placing articles covering different countries next to each
other. On the whole, studies of African diasporas in the Americas continue
to be heavily focused on national histories. If one can hazard a rather brazen
characterization of these studies, it can be said that they slide between the
three tropes of victimization, vindication, and volition, that is, the racial
structures of oppression and their impact, the affirmation of the Africans’
(whether of the diaspora itself or Africans more generally) histories and
humanity, and experiential and epistemic assertions of agency. The best of
the literature, in my view, eschews unilateralist Eurocentric or Afrocentric
fantasies of grandeur and seeks to capture the complex and dynamic inter-
sections between Walker’s three puzzles, or how the presences of Africa,
Europe, and the indigenous peoples of the Americas were and continue to
be navigated in the construction of ever changing African diasporic cultures
and identities.

In situations where the African puzzle or presence is denied, as is often
the case in the United States where it is assumed that Africa’s ‘backward’
cultures were pulverized by sheer contact with superior Anglo-Saxon
cultures, unlike in the less advanced Hispanic empires to the south, exca-
vating the dynamic import of the African cultural imprint has produced
some exciting scholarship, as Walker herself studies everyday practices in
New Jersey, and others have done for so many different aspects of American
life.41

39. Ibid., pp. 2–3.
40. Walker, African Roots/American Cultures; Segal, The Black Diaspora; Carlos Moore, Tanya
R. Sanders and Shawna Moore (eds), African Presence in the Americas (Africa World Press,
Trenton, NJ, 1995); Okpewho et al., African Diaspora; Darlene Clark Hine and Jacqueline
McLeod, Crossing Boundaries: Comparative history of Black people in diaspora (Indiana
University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 1999).
41. Sheila S. Walker, ‘Everyday Africa in New Jersey: wonderings and wanderings in the
African diaspora’, in Walker, African Roots/American Cultures, pp. 45–80. For a broad overview,
see Paul Tiymbe Zeleza, Africa and Its Diasporas: Dispersals and linkages . . . (Codesria Book
In societies that have tried to 'whiten' themselves, such as Argentina, the object has been to demonstrate the African demographic presence. It is not widely known that, by 1810, 30 percent of Argentina's and Buenos Aires's population was Afro-Argentinian, and that this was a vibrant community. By 1887 official documents claimed the population had declined to 1.8 percent. The alleged 'disappearance' of Afro-Argentinians was the product of both demographic cleansing — wars, disease, miscegenation, and European immigration — and ideological cleansing — the deliberate 'whitening' of the country's history and image, which included the misleading use of government statistics.

Similar attempts are being made to demystify Africa's 'absence' in the histories of other countries in America's southern cone: Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela, where the African diaspora is particularly oppressed and marginalized. In some of these countries there are also close relations between the African diaspora and the indigenous communities. The African diaspora also tends to be invisible in the mainstream histories of the US's immediate neighbours to the south and north, Mexico and Canada. In Mexico, the African diaspora found itself negotiating between the large Indian population and the Spanish colonizers.

Until recently, Canadian histories were dominated by the enduring Anglo-French solitudes, which frame national conversation as much as the Black-White divide structures the US national discourse, despite the presence of other racial groups and minorities. In the 1970s two landmark texts, Blacks in Canada: A history by Robin Winks and Black Loyalists by James Walker began to explode the silence by chronicling the histories of the various waves of Africans in Canada, from the early slaves (yes, Canada had slavery) to the loyalists who came in the aftermath of the American War.

45. Colin Palmer, ‘Afro-Mexican culture and consciousness during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’, in Harris, Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora; Ben Vinson, Bearing Arms for His Majesty: The free-colored militia in colonial Mexico (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2001); Herman L. Bennett, Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole consciousness, 1570–1640 (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2003). For a detailed collection of critical essays on Africans in South America and the Caribbean, see the two-volume collection by Norman E. Whitten and Arlene Torres (eds), Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 1998).
of Independence, to the American slaves escaping north on the underground railroad, the itinerant sailors, the postwar migrants from the Caribbean and the postcolonial migrants from Africa.  

For Brazil, the challenges for the African diaspora and writing its histories are quite different from those of countries where Africans were small minorities. Brazil is, according to Abdias do Nascimento, the Pan-Africanist intellectual, ‘demographically and culturally an African country’, despite ‘immigration for whitening campaigns’ and the racial ideology of *mestizaje* which, instead of providing Carl Degler’s ‘mulatto escape hatch’, seeks to reduce the African population by absorbing it into the mulatto population.  

Great store has been placed on explaining the remarkable survival and transformation of the Africans and their cultures, as well as exposing the brutal realities behind the mystifications of race mixture and cultural syncretism. Despite many commonalities, it is now clear that African Brazilian identities manifested themselves quite differently depending on the thrust of their oppression and marginalization. As Kim Butler has shown in her outstanding study of African Brazilian society and culture between 1888 and 1938, the assertion and defence of identity in Salvador took a cultural form, while in São Paulo it took a racial form because in Salvador, where African Brazilians were a majority, there were strong attempts to suppress their culture, while they were a minority in São Paulo and blackness was the pivotal basis of their exclusion.

With their large African populations, in many cases comprising the vast majority, the Caribbean islands reflect Brazil in terms of the evident demographic and cultural visibility of the African presence. Also as in Brazil this presence, ubiquitous though it may be, has not always been valorized. Until the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s, Stuart Hall maintains that the African presence, although present everywhere in everyday life, was ‘the site of the repressed’. Africa, he observes,

remained and remains the unspoken unspeakable ‘presence’ in Caribbean culture. Confronting and negotiating with the African presence was the colossal and corrosive power of the European presence, whose practices and philosophies became part of the
matrix of Caribbean identity. The ‘New World’ itself, as a site, was also a key presence, the reservoir to which the many cultural tributaries from Africa, Europe, and later Asia flowed and where the creolizations and assimilations and syncretisms were negotiated.50

Perched in the Atlantic in the middle of the middle passage as it were, the African diaspora in the Caribbean in fact embodies all the complex connections, crisscrossings, and cultural compositions of the African diasporas of the Atlantic. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, it shares striking resemblances with the intra-Africa diaspora of the Indian Ocean islands. The French-speaking Caribbean shares French departmental status and créolité with Réunion. Haiti and Liberia share triumphant and traumatic histories of early independence, the English-speaking Caribbean shares kinship with its linguistic and cultural cousins in Canada and the United States, while the Caribbean as a whole shares with Africa the histories of colonialism, struggles for independence, and the challenges of constructing viable postcolonial states.

Not surprisingly, Caribbean activists and intellectuals played a crucial role in all the transatlantic Pan-African ideologies and movements from Garveyism to negritude to socialism.51 The Caribbean became a vital centre in the transatlantic crossings and crisscrossings. Millions of its people moved to South, Central, and North America. In fact, Robert Fox even claims, ‘once the slave trade ended, the Caribbean arguably had a more powerful influence on the Africanization of the United States than did Africa’.52 Some from the African Caribbean diaspora found their way to Britain, thus becoming a new diaspora within the diaspora already there, one more indication of the complex diasporic formations in the Atlantic world, that there were diasporas within the diaspora. Thus, the entire Atlantic world, not just the United States, is constituted by Earl Lewis’s ‘overlapping diasporas’.53

Most comparative histories of the Atlantic diasporas tend to leave out the much smaller African diasporas in Western Europe formed during the era of the slave trade. This is unfortunate, for these diasporas have important stories to tell; their experiences and struggles and the identities they forged throw into sharp relief the intersections of race, racism, modernity and imperialism in Europe. I am still at too early a stage in collecting data on Africans in the countries of the major imperial powers of Western Europe.

from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, namely, Portugal, Spain, Britain, France, and the Netherlands, to say much at this stage. For reasons of linguistic competence, I am a little more familiar with the British literature on the subject.

As noted earlier, the outlines of the African presence in Britain are much better known today than thirty years ago when researchers began to challenge British historians who were, to quote Folarin Shyllon’s indictment, ‘busy extolling the virtue of their country in abolishing a commerce it had perfected’.54 While the history of Africans in Britain goes back to Roman times, during the era of the Atlantic slave trade Africans came either from the diaspora or directly from the continent; some were free, but many more were slaves until slavery was abolished. Out of these waves emerged a black British culture with its own associational life, expressive cultural practices, literature and political idioms, all forged in the crucible of unrelenting racial violence and oppression.

The contours of the contemporary African diasporas

The case of Africans in Britain demonstrates that not all Africans who moved through the Atlantic world during the era of the slave trade were slaves, and that the emergence of the new African diasporas in Europe, or in the Americas and Asia for that matter, did not start in the last two or three decades, as tends to be implied in some of the literature. For example, the recently published New African Diasporas by Khalid Koser focuses exclusively on migrations from postcolonial Africa. Also unfortunate is that this Africa explicitly excludes ‘significant migrant populations from the Maghreb . . . and migrants (including Black South Africans) from the Republic of South Africa’, yet it is claimed ‘this volume represents a departure from the dominant discourse on the African diaspora. It “updates” the “diaspora” concept in the African context’.55 Apart from providing new data, its analytical structure is firmly rooted in old conceptions of the African diaspora discussed earlier.

The geographical canvas for studies of the new African diasporas seeking to be global must be broad and must encompass the whole of Africa and all the major world regions rather than simply Western Europe and North America. Periodization poses its own special challenges. I prefer to talk of the ‘contemporary’ African diasporas to distinguish them from what I call

the ‘historic’ diasporas. The term ‘historic diasporas’ refers to the old
diasporas formed before the construction of colonial states, which have
profoundly altered the territorial identifications of Africans on the con-
\textit{tinent} since the late nineteenth century.\footnote{Jayne Ifekwunigwe, ‘Scattered belongings: reconfiguring the “African” in the English-
between pre-Columbian and post-Columbian African diasporas. The former would include,
for example, African diasporas in Asia before the fifteenth century, while the latter would
describe the Atlantic diasporas. It might be pointed out, however, that some of the African
diasporas in Asia were created during the post-Columbia era and some with the involvement
of the same European powers that controlled the Americas.}
Unlike their predecessors whose
communities of identity, either as imagined by themselves or imposed by
others, were either ethnic or racial (not to mention sometimes religious),
African migrants since that time have had to contend with the added
imperative of the modern nation-state, which often frames the political and
cultural itineraries of their travel and transnational networks.

It is in this sense, then, that I use the term ‘contemporary diasporas’, to
refer to diasporas formed since the late nineteenth century. In this context,
I distinguish between three main waves: the diasporas of colonization,
decolonization, and the era of structural adjustment, which emerged out of
the disruptions and dispositions of colonial conquest, the struggles for
independence, and structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), respectively.
The diasporas of colonization would include the students who went to study
abroad and stayed, seamen who became settlers, and many others who
could migrate and become citizens according to the prevailing immigration
regimes of the host countries. For example, before the 1960s Egyptians
treated as white in US immigration law had an easier time migrating to the
United States and becoming naturalized citizens than Nigerians. The
diasporas of decolonization include, besides the so-called ‘indigenous’
Africans, European and Asian settlers, such as the 32,000 Asians who were
driven out of Uganda and the tens of thousands of former Portuguese
settlers from Mozambique, who relocated overseas during the struggles for
independence and immediately afterwards. The diasporas of structural
adjustment have been formed since the 1980s, out of the migrations
engendered by economic, political, and social crises and the destabilizations
of SAPs. They include professional elites, traders (such as the Senegalese
vendors who trade the monolithic Africa of Afrocentricity on the streets of
in Koser, \textit{New African Diasporas}.} refugees (such as the Somalis, considered briefly below), and
many others.

As with the historic diasporas, the challenge is to map out the develop-
ment of these diasporas and their identities and relations with the host

56. Jayne Ifekwunigwe, ‘Scattered belongings: reconfiguring the “African” in the English-
between pre-Columbian and post-Columbian African diasporas. The former would include,
for example, African diasporas in Asia before the fifteenth century, while the latter would
describe the Atlantic diasporas. It might be pointed out, however, that some of the African
diasporas in Asia were created during the post-Columbia era and some with the involvement
of the same European powers that controlled the Americas.
in Koser, \textit{New African Diasporas}.}
societies. Needless to say, like the historic diasporas, the contemporary
diasporas are differentiated and their internal and external relations are
mediated by the inscriptions of gender, generation, class, political ideology,
and sometimes religion. Where they differ from the historic diaspora, and
what complicates the analysis, is that they have to negotiate relations with
the historic diasporas themselves and also with not just ‘Africa’, but with
their particular countries of origin, and sometimes the countries of trans-
migration. The revolution in telecommunications and travel, which has
compressed the spatial and temporal distances between home and abroad,
offers the contemporary diasporas, unlike the historic diasporas, unprece-
dented opportunities to be transnational and transcultural, to be people of
multiple worlds and focalities, perpetually translocated, physically and
culturally, between several countries or several continents. They are able to
retain ties to Africa in ways that were not possible to earlier generations of
the African diasporas.

A few examples will suffice before I turn to a broad survey of recent
African migrations, the wellspring of the diasporas of structural adjust-
ment. The Cape Verdean diaspora, embodying what some call a ‘bilateral
diaspora identity’, and itself derived from a creolized population, began
forming in the United States in the early nineteenth century and came in
different waves, often coinciding with drought on the islands, one indication
that there was free African migration to the United States even before the
abolition of slavery. By the late 1990s, the Cape Verdean diaspora in the
US numbered approximately 300,000, roughly equivalent to the homeland
population. Cape Verdeans also migrated to Argentina, where they were
allowed because of their Portuguese status before independence in 1975.58

Another early diaspora consists of the Kru migrants in Liverpool from
the late nineteenth century onwards. Kru identity was complex in so far as
they moved, as seamen, constantly between Sierra Leone and Liverpool,
while at the same time they also tended to settle or have families in Liver-
pool. The transience implied by their travels and racial hostility in the host
society helped sustain Kru ethnic identity as a protective identity, while at
the same time they were developing new diasporic identity because of their
local marriages, interactions with other Sierra Leoneans and Liberians
(they were originally from Liberia) and West Africans generally, as well as
Afro-Caribbeans, all of whom were creating a new political and cultural
identity as black British people. Thus, the Kru straddled different societies,
at one level those of Britain and Sierra Leone, and at another the black and

58. Laura J. Pires-Hester, ‘The emergence of bilateral diaspora identity among Cape
Verdean-Americans’, in Okpewho et al., African Diaspora, pp. 485–503; Molina and López,
‘Afro-Argentinians’.
white worlds of Liverpool itself. Their offspring, using the diasporic resources provided by encounters with African Americans during and after the Second World War, constructed a new black identity mediated by gender and sexuality.

The diasporas of the late twentieth century were even more globalized than earlier ones in the century in the multiplicity of their destinations and networks. The Somali diaspora is a good example of this. Mostly refugees from civil war and the collapse of the state, in the 1980s and 1990s tens of thousands of Somalis migrated to various countries in Western Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America, many of which had had no previous Somali residents. By the 1990s, more than 215,000 Somalis were estimated to be living and working in these countries. They built new communities in the host countries and transnational networks, while maintaining a fierce loyalty to Somalia, as manifested, for example, by the high levels of remittances and low rates of marriage outside the community. But, given the diversity of conditions in the countries where they settled and the internal divisions of class, clan, gender, and generation, 'it may be more appropriate,' argues Pérouse de Montclos, 'to speak of Somali diasporas in the plural'.

These three cases show the enormous diversities among the contemporary African diasporas which make it very difficult to make generalizations. African migrations are, of course, part of a much larger story of complex global migrations. The late twentieth century has in fact been characterized as 'the age of migration'. But the available evidence

59. Diane Frost, ‘Ethnic identity, transience and settlement: The Kru in Liverpool since the late nineteenth century’, in Killingray, Africans in Britain, pp. 88–106. Of course, not all migrants to Britain from West Africa identified themselves as ethnic groups. Many of them came as students and their political identities as West Africans or Africans were far more important than their ethnic identities. Moreover, while they responded to the conditions they experienced in Britain and they were influenced by the other diaspora communities they encountered, and acquired a diasporic consciousness of their own, even temporarily for those who returned, they remained, or became, even more focused on ideologies, interests, and identities tied to West Africa, as demonstrated by the kinds of nationalist organizations they formed, the activities they were engaged in, and their social networks. See Hakim Adi, ‘West African students in Britain, 1900–60’, John D. Hargreaves, ‘African students in Britain: the case of Aberdeen University’, and Marika Sherwood, ‘Kwame Nkrumah: the London years, 1945–47’, all three in Killingray, Africans in Britain, pp. 107–28, 129–44, and 164–94.


61. Small groups of Somalis lived in some parts of Europe earlier in the twentieth century. For example, there were 500 Somalis in Britain in 1930, most of whom lived in harbour towns. See Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, ‘A refugee diaspora: when the Somali go West’, in Koser, New African Diasporas, p. 44.

62. Ibid., p. 53.

indicates that, while the number of international migrants has indeed grown since the 1960s and there have been changes in the character and direction of international migration, the percentage of people who have left and remained outside their countries of origin has remained remarkably steady and small. According to Zlotnik, there was hardly any change in the proportion of migrants in the world population, which remained at 2.3 percent between 1965 and 1990, although there were considerable variations within each major region. In this context what is remarkable is that Africa’s migrant population grew at a faster rate than that of any other region in the world, so that between 1965 and 1990 the continent increased its share of international migrants from 10.6 percent to 13.1 percent, although Asia remained the region with the largest number and percentage of global migrants, followed by Europe, and then North America.64

While the majority of Africa’s migrants stayed in other African countries, growing numbers went outside the continent, especially to Western Asia and the global North. Migration to the North in the 1990s was characterized by several new trends amidst the persistence of old ones. There was a reduction in legal immigration flows in the majority of OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries from 1993, although migration still played a significant role in annual population growth as domestic fertility rates continued to fall and ageing of the native population accelerated. Also, there was a decrease in the number of asylum claims, but an increase in the relative importance of temporary and highly skilled workers in the total flows, while immigration for family reunion continued to predominate. Not only did the foreign labour force increase in almost all the OECD countries, it spread to more sectors, including services and self-employment, although foreigners continued to be more vulnerable to unemployment than nationals, particularly in Europe.

Amidst all this, the formation of new ethnic communities and ethnic minorities continued, reshaping the political and cultural landscapes of both the receiving and sending countries. In fact, as Tomas Hammar has observed, a new category of aliens was emerging, ‘neither aliens nor full citizens, but something in between which we might call “denizens”’.65 Still foreign citizens, they now possess considerable rights also in the countries where they are domiciled, including voting rights in local elections as is the case in Scandinavia and the Netherlands. It was in this maelstrom of rapidly changing international migration that African immigrants found themselves. African immigration to Europe has generally tended to follow the

historical and linguistic trails of colonialism, so that Britain and France are the preferred destinations of migrants from the former British and French colonies, respectively.  

France, after the Second World War, pursued expansive immigration policies to sustain economic reconstruction and growth and to boost its population. Moreover, there was widespread confidence in the country’s capacity to absorb and integrate the newcomers. The consensus for an open immigration regime crumbled as both the postwar boom and the self-assured Gaullist era came to an end at the turn of the 1970s. It was during this very period that African immigration began to expand, which ensured that immigrants would be at the centre of painful debates about French identity and citizenship, especially since, as in the other industrialized countries, it reflected important shifts in the composition of previous flows dominated by fellow Europeans and Christians. Immigration policy became increasingly restrictive as the traditional external control of borders and internal regulation of labour markets were reinforced by a new strategy of attacking and limiting the rights of established immigrants. While immigration flows stagnated in the 1970s and 1980s, so that the percentage share of the total immigrant population remained virtually unchanged from 1975 to 1990, African immigration continued to rise both absolutely and relatively, dominated by the three North African countries of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Altogether, African immigrants increased their share of the total immigrant population from 24.7 percent in 1975 to 33.0 percent in 1990. In the 1990s, over half of the immigrants into France from non-European Economic Area countries came from Africa.

In Britain, as in France, the composition of immigration began to change noticeably from the 1960s as immigrants flocked in from the ex-colonies, especially the Caribbean, the Indian sub-continent, and Africa. This also triggered bitter debates about immigration, leading to stringent restrictions that culminated in a clampdown by the Thatcher government in the early 1980s.  

66. This is changing as David Styan, ‘La nouvelle vague? Recent Francophone African settlement in London’, in Koser, New African Diasporas, pp. 291–325, shows, with the growing settlement of migrants from Francophone Africa, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Côte d’Ivoire, in Britain. Since 1990 some 12–15,000 people from the DRC and 5–7,000 Ivorians have settled in Britain, and they have established a vibrant community with their own periodicals, churches, and community associations.


68. For a detailed analysis of migration flows from the Maghreb countries, the emigration pressures in these countries, the policies adopted by their governments and those of the receiving countries, and the developmental impact of emigration, see the study by the International Labour Organization, Migration from the Maghreb and Migration Pressure: Current situation and future prospects (ILO, Geneva, 1998).
1980s. The racialization of the immigrants from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, R. Miles has argued, evoked and reinforced the racialization of earlier European immigrants, especially the Irish and the Jews, as well as the othering of the domestic working class, processes which were critical in the construction and reproduction of British national identity. 69 Notwithstanding the restrictions, migrants from the so-called New Commonwealth increased their proportion of the immigrant population. Specifically, immigration from western and eastern Africa increased from 79,000 in 1984 to 127,000 in 1995. Between 1991 and 2001 the African population in Britain rose from 214,000 to 514,000, a 140 percent rise, the sharpest of any group. 70 

Besides France and Britain, the other former colonial powers that have attracted immigrants from their former colonies are Belgium and Portugal. Belgium has been a popular destination for migrants from the Congo Democratic Republic. Between 1991 and 1996 Belgium attracted 12,700 Congolese immigrants, which was, however, a tiny fraction — 2.7 percent — of the total number of immigrants. For its part, Portugal drew immigrants from its former colonies of Cape Verde, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique. By 1996 there were 72,900 immigrants from these countries, 54.3 percent of whom were from Cape Verde, out of a total immigrant population of 172,900. 71

In the 1970s and 1980s noticeable numbers of immigrants from several African countries began flocking to other European countries with which they had no colonial ties. Among the most popular were Germany and the Netherlands. The leading African source of immigrants to these two countries was Morocco, whose inflows into Germany totalled 43,700 between 1988 and 1996, and into the Netherlands, 72,200 between 1986 and 1996. For its part, Sweden became an important destination for Ethiopians, whose numbers reached 13,200 in 1993.

Clearly, African immigration into Europe was marked by increasing diversification in the number of countries both sending and receiving immigrants. Particularly remarkable was the emergence as immigration countries of the southern European countries, such as Italy, Portugal and Spain, themselves

70. This figure is from Paul Brown, ‘Minorities up 40%, census reveals’, The Guardian (3 September 2003) http://www.guardian.co.uk. Accessed 23 September 2003. But it is not clear whether it includes only ‘black’ Africans or all African-born residents. The Financial Times reports that the black African population, which more than doubled from 163,635 to a projected 378,933, overtook black Caribbeans and is poised to overtake Indians in the present decade as the biggest ethnic group in London after whites. See Roger Blitz, ‘Big decline in white population of London’, Financial Times (2 December 2003), p. 8.
emigration countries. Their rise as countries of immigration reflects the complex transformations in the political economies of both Europe and Africa, and the construction of new transnational economic and political spaces and borders that recast patterns of migration and redefined regional and national identities. The Europeanization of these countries and the rebordering of the Mediterranean that it implied required the separation and stigmatization of immigrants from the South as disruptive and threatening, a discourse that promoted their racialization, marginalization, pathologization, and even criminalization, which in turn bred popular antagonism, institutional discrimination, and sometimes racist violence.72

Similar processes of rebordering and reshaping identities can be seen in the Eastern European countries, as far as Finland, aspiring to be a part of the Europeanization project, where discourses and institutional practices that sharply distinguish locals and nationals from immigrants and foreigners were borrowed and constructed. The racial violence and harassment that faced the new African immigrants in Finland bore resemblance to that experienced by the older immigrant communities in France, for example.73

Equally rapid was the growth of African migration to North America, especially to the United States. A systematic analysis of American census data covering the period 1850 to 2000 shows that the number of African-born migrants in the US population rose from 551 in 1850 to 2,538 in 1900, climbing to 18,326 in 1930, 35,355 in 1960, 199,723 in 1980, 363,819 in 1990, and 700,000 in 2000. Thus nearly three-quarters of the African migrants in 2000 had entered the country since 1980.74 While this number may appear large and has almost doubled since 1990, it represents a mere 2.5 percent, up from 0.4 percent in 1960 and 1.9 percent in 1990, of the total foreign-born population (estimated at 28.4 million, which

72. Liliana Suárez-Navaz, ‘Political economy of the Mediterranean rebordering: new ethnici-
73. The ILO has conducted several studies on discrimination and harassment of immi-
grants, especially in the labour market, in many countries. The rise of racism and xenophobia
against foreign workers, previously welcomed as guest workers, can partly be attributed to the
demise of the welfare state, which has raised the social and ideological costs of integrating the
domestic underclass and immigrants. T. Virtanen, ‘Racial violence and harassment in front of
deaf ears: experiences of immigrants in Finland’. <http://www.sub.su.se/sam/nyri/nyris/
(eds), New Xenophobia in Europe (Kluwer International, Boston, MA, 1995); Tore Bjorgo and
Rob Witte (eds), Racist Violence in Europe (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1993).
74. See the US Census Bureau, Profile of the Foreign Born Population in the United States (US
Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2001), and the detailed statistical report by C. J. Gibson
and E. Lennon, ‘Historical census statistics on foreign-born population of the United States:
tfps0029/tfps0029.html> Accessed on 26 June 1999; also see J. S. Passel and M. Fix, ‘U.S.
immigration in a global context: past, present, and future’, Global Legal Studies Journal 2, 1
accounted for 10.4 percent of the total US population, the highest since 1930). Rapid as this may seem, Africans accounted for a small proportion of immigrants to the United States.

The magnitude of the migration flows from Africa to the United States appears to be positively correlated, as Bernard Logan has argued, to population size, economic system and conditions, language policy, the development of higher education, and the colonial legacy, so that the largest numbers of African migrants have tended to come from countries with a large population; a pro-western, capitalist outlook; speakers of English, rather than any other European language; unstable economic conditions; a long history of well-established higher education; and a colonial legacy that had not been too culturally dominant. The African migrants in the United States are well-educated: in fact they enjoy the highest levels of education of any group in the United States, foreign-born or native-born. According to the US 2000 Census, among the African-born residents, 49.3 percent had a bachelor’s degree or higher as compared with 25.6 percent for the native-born population and 25.8 percent for the foreign-born population as a whole. The irony of people from the least educated continent in the world having the highest levels of education in the world’s lone superpower is quite striking.

Canada has also become an increasingly attractive destination for African immigrants. Africa’s immigrant population in Canada increased from 101,700 in 1981 to 114,400 in 1986, and 166,200 in 1991, that is, at an annual rate of 6.3 percent. As a percentage of the total immigrant population, the African share rose from 2.6 percent in 1981 to 3.8 percent in 1991, while the share of the immigrant population in the total population remained steady at 16.1 percent both in 1981 and 1991. Women constituted a little over half the total immigrant population. The share of African women among African immigrants was slightly less than half. Specifically, they comprised 47.7 percent of African immigrants in 1981 and 46.6 percent in 1991.

Conclusion

Clearly, the stories of the African diasporas are far more complex and fascinating than they often appear in the narrowly constructed but universalizing narratives that seek to homogenize these diasporas, whether in the names of pan-African political solidarity, shared cultural heritage, commonalities of the experiences of racial exclusion and oppression, or an
overriding sense of double consciousness, Gilroy’s preferred trope. The challenges of mapping out the dispersals of African peoples over the last millennia are truly daunting. Also extremely difficult to delineate are the changing engagements between these diasporas and Africa.

There is need to shift the focus and scholarship on the African diaspora from the ‘Black Atlantic’ perspective, both in its spatial and racial pre-occupations with the Atlantic world and with ‘blackness’. One of the key reasons for the predominance of this paradigm has been the weight of African American scholarship in the field of African diaspora studies, itself a reflection of the global hegemonies of the United States and the English language. African American political and cultural interests are, of course, legitimate, but their scholarly and political passions should not be allowed to dominate discourses of the global African diasporas.

Greater engagement by African scholars in African diaspora studies is crucial to shifting the debate in terms of linguistic, geographical, and racial referents. Linguistically, the fact that African scholars are, collectively, multi-lingual in European languages, thanks to the fiat of colonialism, means that they can and should help in the reading and production of diaspora studies and discourses beyond English to include Portuguese, French and Spanish, among the key languages of the Atlantic diasporas. Africa is also home to Arabic and several European and Asian languages that are part of the languages of the African diasporas in the regions using those languages. Geographically, involvement by scholars in different regions of the continent would help expand the spatial horizons of African diaspora studies. For historical and cultural reasons, historians from western Africa are more likely to focus on the Atlantic diasporas, those from northern Africa on the Mediterranean and Red Sea diasporas, and those from eastern Africa on the Indian Ocean diasporas. Finally, in so far as African scholars from the different regions, especially from northern Africa and among those of Asian and European descent, may not be preoccupied with ‘blackness’, this would free studies and discourses of African diasporas from their racialized trope.

Tracing more systematically the patterns and processes of the dispersals of African peoples across the globe is essential to decentralizing the Atlantic and putting it in its proper perspective. As we study Africa’s engagements — demographic, cultural, economic, political and intellectual — with its multiple diasporas and conjunctures or that structured the configurations of Africa’s patterns of integration into the world system, new lines of inquiry will open up that transcend, and might enrich, diaspora studies focused on the Atlantic. In this article I did not even attempt to map out the nature and dynamics of these engagements, because my research is still in its early stages and I am trying to work out an analytical framework that can make sense of the complexity of the
processes and patterns of these linkages. This is a project that one individual with limited linguistic and analytical skills cannot adequately handle. It requires the energies and expertise of an international and interdisciplinary team of scholars in all the major regions of the diaspora and in Africa itself. That will, in itself, ensure that we begin to go beyond the ‘Black Atlantic’.

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