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Leaving area studies behind: the challenge of diasporic connections in the field of African studies

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In recent years, diaspora has become one of the key terms of social analysis in various fields. Emphasizing the multiple trajectories out of which present identities - inasmuch as political or economic realities - are forged, the concept forces us to reconsider the scope of classical area studies (and associated disciplinary boundaries) in radical terms. The article looks at the colonial foundations of African Studies as area studies and examines some ways by which to overcome enduring colonial epistemologies. The author suggests a theoretical framework in which Africa herself is considered as diasporic. Moreover, she calls for a critical perspective that will facilitate the comparative analysis of different diasporic discourses and practices.

Keywords: African studies; diaspora; area studies; colonialism; ‘race’; methodology

Introduction

The reassessment of the paradigms that direct African Studies today is a difficult task. It raises serious doubts about whether it is possible at all to define a discipline (any discipline, for that matter) as a strictly bounded entity, ideally guided by a set of methodological principles and empirical orientations. Nevertheless, of course, one cannot ignore the fact that disciplinary boundaries are also put in place: departments are named and all subjects have a political and academic history that greatly influences their present shape and therefore needs to be taken into account.

With regard to an evaluation of the field of African Studies, I would like to consider two interrelated issues which seem most important to me. On the one hand, I want to ask about the effects of postcolonial criticism on a discipline that was so closely linked with colonial systems of governance and thought. On the other hand, I want to consider how Africanists can respond to the recent methodological and theoretical challenges that go along with an acknowledgment of the central importance of multiple diasporic movements crisscrossing time and space. None of those issues invites an easy or comfortable answer; they rather attest to the complexities of social reality and the difficulties entailed in any attempt of ‘disciplining’ (Clifford 1997) it. To me, thinking about diasporic connections as constitutive elements of contemporary (African) reality runs counter to any area studies approach, or at least calls for a radical reconsideration of its scope and meaning.

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Thus, my reasons for rejecting the limitations of African Studies as area studies are founded on historical and political as well as theoretical grounds that I hope to explicate further throughout this article. I want to start this examination with a brief discussion of the problems that occur with the designation of ‘Africa’ as a singular conceptual unit. From there, I am going to explicate my understanding of diaspora as a way of transcending colonial epistemologies. Finally, I will discuss some of the theoretical consequences brought about by the call for a ‘multi-sited ethnography’ that George Marcus (1995) has suggested in response to the collapse of the notion of a bounded field in anthropology (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

Africa: The construction of a field

What (or who) is the subject in African Studies? As the use of the plural suggests, African Studies is comprised of a range of subfields – from politics, economics, history, and literature to anthropology, which, at least in the United States, is again divided into archaeology, linguistics, and sociocultural and biological anthropology (cf. Segal and Yanagisako 2005).1 The common denominator of all these areas of interest is the vast geographical entity called ‘Africa’. Or more precisely, it is Africa south of the Sahara. Thus, despite the proliferation of constructivist critiques of essentialist notions of ethnicity or identity as they have dominated Africanist research over the past 30 years, the conception of area studies still clings to older, and rather holistic, disciplinary boundaries. It demands that African Studies deal with Black2 culture(s) alone, whereas, for example, Maghrebian societies are considered the domain of ‘Oriental’ or Islamic Studies. In this understanding of specialized fields of study, the Sahara appears as an insurmountable rift, separating two worlds – worlds that are constructed as homogeneous wholes. Ignored are the numerous pathways that have always crossed the desert; multifaceted routes that connect people’s histories and futures.3

Ironically, even the inclusion of Egypt as part of Africa in Afrocentric writing from Edward W. Blyden to Cheikh Anta Diop follows a racialized scheme of identification – in order to be considered relevant for the study of Africa, ancient Egyptians need to be Black. My point here is not to deny this fact, nor to say that its assertion is not of political importance in the face of ongoing White supremacy. Yet such racialized classification applies contemporary standards (and problems) to a time where those standards were of no meaning. As Martin Bernal (1987) has shown, the ‘whitening’ of Ancient Greece followed a similar logic: it was a process of historical selection, done by European (White) scholars in order to corroborate the founding myth of Europe as the ‘cradle of civilization’ (cf. Patterson and Kelley 2000, p. 45, n. 6). What I am questioning are therefore the categories of analysis that often underlie debates within area studies and the inherent danger of reproducing, and thereby manifesting, colonial epistemologies. Let me explicate this further.

Neither Africa nor the Orient (nor ‘Europe’ for that matter) can be regarded as natural facts. Instead, those perceived entities of culture, ‘race’, and territory need to be considered as the outcome of ongoing processes of cultural production and historical reflection. These (re-) constructions never occurred in a vacuum, but they were, and continue to be, embedded in wider political contexts. As Edward Said (1995 [1978]) and V. Y. Mudimbe (1988) have demonstrated in their respective works, it was at first the close collaboration between Western academia and colonial
administration that helped in the ‘invention’ of Africa or the Orient as areas to be studied as well as governed and exploited. With reference to the power/knowledge complex, Said contends that,

without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively. (1995 [1978], p. 3)

The violence of European colonialism, starting from the conquest of America and the transatlantic slave trade and extending to the more formalized colonization endeavor of the nineteenth century, not only depended on weaponry but also on powerful schemes of thought that supported the hierarchical organization and subjugation of people and territories accordingly. Africa in particular was constructed as Europe’s radical Other, the Hegelian continent ‘without history’. In addition, scientific racism produced categorical orders of difference among various ‘races’ that were said to be strictly separated from each other. This discourse placed the European, ‘White’ subject (considered as the epitome of man) on top and ‘Black’ Africans on the bottom-end of ‘civilization’.

In the nineteenth century, African Studies were an indispensable part of the colonial enterprise: from the practical aspect of providing language training for administrators or receiving military and financial backing for research projects to the theoretical position of evolutionism that openly supported the ideology of colonialism. In order to understand this symbiosis, one should keep in mind Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s (1995) assertion that academic discourses are always a product of their times and cannot be dissociated from the societal climate in which they develop. With regard to the decisive historical moment of the Haitian revolution, Trouillot demonstrates that this event was ‘unthinkable’ in Europe, even to the most radical among White scholars (at a time when academia was a lilywhite and exclusively male institution) and political activists. They could not transcend the context in which they operated, a common frame of mind that took White agency for granted, but ruled out the possibility of a Black revolution. Political practice had to precede its conceptualization.

Since then, of course, much has changed in the political and academic landscapes. It is by now widely accepted that there is no biological foundation for the division of humankind into ‘races’. Racial classification is arbitrary, and genetic variation within any so defined group is far greater than between groups. Nevertheless, of course, practices of racialization and racism remain highly visible (cf. Omi and Winant 1997). ‘Race’ therefore continues to constitute a social and historical reality – in terms of structural discrimination and other forms of violence. It is also an important political category, for example, as a medium for the expression of group solidarity and/or resistance against White supremacy; but also in the much less obvious form of ‘White privilege’ (Lipsitz 1998) that is also enjoyed by White liberals and anti-racists and by far not as easily acknowledged and confronted by them as the violent hate crimes of open racism (cf. hooks 1992).

The distinction between ‘race’ as an essential vs. a practical reality is significant. First, it implies the rejection of conceptions of Blackness (or Whiteness) as biological givens, where the concentration of melanin would determine people’s intrinsic character or culture. Instead, it encourages the analysis of the politics of race as a
historical and contemporary phenomenon. Secondly, it also directs attention at the researcher and his or her specific positioning in relation to the problem under study. There is no neutral or objective point of view, since each of us is historically and socially positioned.

This positioning greatly influences our respective approach to any given problem, yet it does not foreclose the possibility of polylogue between different outlooks. Even though one should not naively assume that ‘pure’ discursive spaces, where the established hegemonic order would suddenly be disabled, do exist, one should likewise be prepared to acknowledge the multitude of factors that determine people’s encounters with each other. What I mean by this is that there is no privileged knowledge connected to any type of ‘racial’ identity – neither in the positivist claims of universalism that often mask White particularity, nor in the contrasting assertion that scholars of a particular ‘racial’ background would have automatic access to the lives of people who belonged to the same broadly defined group, or that their work was immediately more legitimate than that of outsiders. Insider/outside dynamics are never fixed, and power is at work in all research constellations, as class, gender, ethnicity or status are equally important factors in the establishment of relationships between people (cf. Narayan 1993). Again, this stresses the point that knowledge formation is always political and contextual. The resulting complexity should therefore be reflected in the research process as well as in writing.

Furthermore, the ambiguity of ‘race’ also needs to be taken into account when thinking about ways to overcome the methodological restrictions of area studies. On the one hand, there is the need to deconstruct those colonial epistemological foundations by which Black Africa (alongside the whole range of colonized areas around the world) has been stereotyped as cultural Other. As Liisa Malkki (1992) and others (cf. Appadurai 1988, Thomas 1991) have argued, part of this discourse is still alive in the scholarly practice of equating people, culture, and territory. Indeed, this cultural confinement resembles a ‘prison-house of culture’ (Çağlar 1990) where ‘natives’ are said to be placed, whereas the Western cosmopolitan researcher is supposedly free to roam around and give his or her interpretation. In her study of Hutu refugees, Malkki demonstrates that the analytical framework of area studies is particularly unsuited to conceptualize the dynamics of movement and emplacement that was so pronounced in the situation of refugees. Instead of applying the language of rootedness vs. uprooting, she calls for a ‘rhizomatic’ approach towards questions of identity, one that considers people’s engagement in multiple spheres.

On the other hand, one cannot ignore the strong claims of cultural belonging that are being articulated by (post-colonial) nation-states inasmuch as by minority groups and activists within the state or broader transnational movements such as Pan-Africanism. Just as ‘race’ continues to be a powerful concept in popular as well as academic discourses, so does culture. They cannot be brushed away in a sweeping deconstructive endeavor but need to be studied as central elements in diverse processes of social formation. Yet again, a strict area studies approach does not seem to be helpful in such analysis, because it tends to overlook the irreversible intermingling of a multiplicity of factors in the constitution of contemporary cultures.

European colonialism has left its mark on both colonizer and colonized – be it in terms of economic impact, political history, religion or conceptions of science. This mark signifies violent destruction, but also resistance and ongoing creativity. In his
analysis of the colonial situation, Frantz Fanon (1952, 1961) describes the colonial condition as first and foremost pathologic. He suggests revolutionary violence as the only way to arrive at a new, transformational, and liberated state. Nevertheless, while such a revolution would end direct European oppression, it would not wipe out the painful common history or the ongoing connections between former colonizer and colonized. The Algerian Civil War, on which Fanon built his interpretation, is a good case in point. It put an end to the French colonial presence in Algeria, but the war, alongside the colonial history by which it was framed, continues to reverberate in Algerian as well as French political life – from questions of commemoration and demands for reparations to contemporary transnational networks of capital or migration. Neither the ‘West’ nor the ‘Rest’ (cf. Hall 1992) can therefore be analyzed in isolation.

To give another example: Kwame Nkrumah (1970) was certainly one of the strongest proponents of Africans’ self-determination and freedom from colonial rule in the twentieth century. Yet, when he spoke of the ‘triple heritage’ of Muslim, Euro-Christian, and various indigenous influences as constitutive elements of the ‘African personality’, he also recognized that there was always an intrinsic historical connectivity that bound different cultures and areas together and therefore needed to be taken account of in cultural politics as well as intellectual analysis. In his Pan-Africanism, he consequently followed two directions, a trans-Saharan as well as a trans-Atlantic route. While the first historical linkage has received comparatively little scholarly attention (for an exception cf. Hunwick and Powell 2002), the African diaspora across the Atlantic has become an important subject in contemporary social science theorizing. Yet, whereas it can be said that a concern with continental Africa has been at the center of political Pan-Africanism, the current academic discourse puts far greater emphasis on the emergence of diasporic identities outside the continent and thereby neglects an important dimension of diaspora. Out of this situation arises a particular challenge for African Studies, since it is called upon to investigate the continuous relationship(s) between continent and diaspora (cultural, historical, and political), but at the same time to avoid easy recourse to essentialist notions of origin and belonging (cf. Magubane 1987, p. 7).

**Diasporic Africa: How to situate it?**

In common usage, the term ‘diaspora’ is associated with the violent dispersal of a people from its original homeland, accompanied by a strong collective memory of that place and a persistent myth of eventual return. This application has been greatly influenced by the Jewish interpretation of the scriptures, referring to the destruction of the Temple and the expulsion of the Jews from Palestine which resulted in their scattering all over the world. In that understanding, catastrophe, coercion, violence, and trauma became the major characteristics of diaspora.

In the nineteenth century, it was Edward W. Blyden, one of the greatest forebears of modern Pan-Africanism, who drew parallels between the destiny of the Jewish people and that of those Africans who were carried off to the Americas during slavery (cf. Blyden 1971, p. 10). He showed his appreciation for Theodor Herzl’s Zionist ideology and saw many linkages to his own vision of a return movement to Africa and his advocacy for the political project of the colony of Liberia. To Blyden, the Africans’ original dispersal and suffering were the precondition for their ultimate
return to the homeland and the glory that was to follow. Both aspects were regarded as constitutive parts of the Black racial destiny. Blyden's philosophy was in many ways consistent with the intellectual climate in which he operated (cf. Trouillot 1995), namely that of evolutionism and scientific racism. However, he rejected the racial hierarchy that was propagated by Eurocentric writers such as Arthur de Gobineau, thereby providing a ‘warping reworking of the most negative theories of the century’ (Mudimbe 1988, p. 114). Many of Blyden's ideas are still very popular in Black cultural-political discourse and practice, where the notion of diaspora has gained wide acceptance as a synonym for the unity of the ‘African family’ (cf. Schramm 2004a).

The 1960s was an important turning point in the popularization of the concept of an African diaspora. On a political level, there was the very concrete cooperation between the African independence movements and the US-American civil rights movement. The two phenomena were closely connected by the idea of a common struggle against racial discrimination and oppression as well as the strong assertion of Black Power (cf. Skinner 1994). This new linkage between continent and diaspora was by no means limited to the United States, but Caribbean intellectuals like George Padmore and Ras Makonnen were equally important figures in the new solidarity network.

This political dimension was but one aspect of the Pan-Africanist project that aimed to reconnect continent and diaspora. Another side of it was the positive evaluation of Africanness as such which was supposed to lead to a clear and unquestionable affirmation of cultural unity. A good example for this particular tendency among diaspora communities is the African American festival of Kwanzaa, which brings together elements from East and West Africa (e.g., Swahili language and kente-cloth) with those from the Americas (e.g., the agricultural products of thanksgiving feasts or the red, black, and green flag of Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)). Designed by Maulana Ron Karenga in 1966, Kwanzaa has since entered the US-American mainstream. Paralleling these developments in North America and the Caribbean were many continental voices that joined in the chorus of Black cultural nationalism. Cases in point for this continental outlook are the négritude-movement and the great arts festivals of the period, such as the ‘Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres’ which took place in Dakar in 1966.

In addition to this growing awareness about diasporic linkages in the spheres of popular culture and politics, historians and anthropologists began to use the terminology of diaspora in their respective theorizing of African and African American history. According to Joseph E. Harris (1993, p. 4), it was during the International Congress of African Historians, which took place in Tanzania in 1965, that the term ‘African diaspora’ began its career as a new theoretical model in historical debates. Here, the focus was on the slave trade and the emergence of a global African presence in its aftermath, with a particular emphasis on the Atlantic world. At the same time, US academia witnessed the foundation of the first Black Studies departments, which gave priority to a Black perspective in the study of African American as well as African cultures.

Two understandings of diaspora can be distinguished in this brief outline: the ontological, cultural-nationalist one, which started with Edward W. Blyden and is still prevalent in modern Afrocentrism; and a more constructivist one that is
attentive to the political contexts and historical trajectories in which present identifications develop. Whereas the former shares many features with the area studies approach that I have already criticized, the latter is certainly less idealistic, but carries the potential of a counter-hegemonic discourse (cf. Lemelle 1993) and may thereby help in the process of transforming the paradigms by which African Studies have long been operating.

To me, the following formulation by Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. Kelley aptly captures what is at issue in the study of Africa in a diasporic framework. They argue,

linkages that tie the diaspora together must be articulated and are not inevitable, and . . . the diaspora is both process and condition. As a process it is always in the making, and as condition it is situated within global race and gender hierarchies.

(Patterson and Kelley 2000, p. 11)

Moreover, the underlying relationship between the ‘here’ and an ‘elsewhere’, the simultaneity of longing and belonging, are potentially conflictive. This productive tension represents a major starting point for the development of new theoretical perspectives on contemporary politics of identity.

Patterson and Kelley partly build their concept on a theoretical framework that was first introduced by authors such as Stuart Hall (1990), Paul Gilroy (1993), and James Clifford (1994). Their interpretations divert significantly from those concepts that place special emphasis on the vital importance of the connection with an original homeland in the study of diaspora. Instead of advancing a view which privileges the past as a time of wholeness, the cultural studies approach highlights the contemporariness of diaspora, which must be seen as a result of multiple disruptions and re-connections. As Clifford (1994) has argued, what is of interest in the study of diaspora is not so much the notion of shared origins but rather the various experiences of displacement, suffering, adaptation or resistance that have constantly shaped diasporic identifications and cultural productions.

Yet, while this approach is certainly innovative and inspiring (even after more than fifteen years of debate), it also tends to be biased towards one side of the diasporic correlation, namely, the one away from the ‘original homeland’. When, for example, Gilroy (1993) speaks of the ‘Black Atlantic’ as a complex configuration of various movements and their numerous intersections, he is successful in creating a theoretical framework of diaspora in which ‘all roads do not point to Africa’ (Brown 1998, p. 293). In the process, however, Africa loses its contours as a place (or many places) with a reality of its own. It continues to be represented solely as a mythical point of reference for diasporic groups – even if the need for such a refuge is permanently questioned. As a result, this particular stance neglects the numerous ways in which Africa herself ought to be regarded as diasporic.

First, there is the fact that the slave trade caused a deep and long-lasting rupture, not only for those people who were taken away, but also for those who were left behind. Africans were involved on many levels in the slave trade: as raiders as well as targets, as profiteers as well as victims. Consequently, the slave trade had profound effects on social and economic relations within and between African societies. As Charles Piot (1999), Elizabeth Shaw (2002), and others have demonstrated, even though the memory of slavery may not follow immediately accessible paths, this does
not mean that there is no collective remembrance of it. Rather, this memory is encoded in ritual practices, landscape perceptions, and housing styles or modes of political debate.

The acceptance of the theoretical agenda of diaspora as an important stream of thought in African Studies necessarily entails a critical examination of the interfaces between those different experiences and discourses, i.e., the heterogeneous positions that are to be found on the African continent as well as beyond its territorial bounds. It means to look at their common ground, but also at the conflicts and tensions that develop between them.

The recognition of Africa as part of the Black Atlantic, which I have discussed above, still focuses on the transatlantic slave trade as the decisive moment in the formation of an African diaspora. Therefore, in a second move, other dimensions of diasporic Africa should also be taken into account when considering future fields of study. Recently, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2005) has identified three such additional routes: the trans-Saharan, Indian Ocean, and inner-continental trails. In this model, the transatlantic slave trade ceases to be the sole reference point for the explanation of the African dispersal. Instead, the previously neglected northern and eastern slave routes are also taken into consideration. Moreover, Zeleza suggests that trade connections and recent migration networks (voluntary or forced) should be regarded as additional features in the study of global African diasporas.

The use of the plural tense is not accidental. It rather attests to the diversity of destinations that contemporary transnational movements aim at, as well as to the multiplicity of experiences that are generated in the process. In his collection on ‘New African diasporas’, Khalid Koser makes very strong claims for such a differentiation of several diasporas in order to understand ‘the changing patterns and processes of inclusion and exclusion, in a wide variety of ways’ (2003, p. 9). However, I would like to argue that the recognition of this diversity must again go hand-in-hand with the critical examination (or at least an awareness) of the mutually overlapping discourses and practices of diaspora. Such an approach fosters an understanding of diaspora that goes beyond any culturalist conception of connectivity between the African continent and African descendants elsewhere. Instead, it accentuates the situatedness of identity claims and cultural affiliations, which speak of power relations and diverse political placements as well as the influential role of contemporary global flows of images and ideas on those locations.

Global connections: Multiple diasporas

The transnational currents of people, ideas, goods, and images necessarily expand the partial focus of classical area studies. Certainly there are justifiable reasons for arguing that globalization is not such a new phenomenon after all – in fact, any reference to the slave trade and colonialism calls for a reconsideration of the novelty of those world-spanning interconnections. Nevertheless, there is also a new quality to global mobilities and the associated social transformations. The sheer speed by which economic and cultural goods travel nowadays as well as their (world-)wide accessibility via new communication channels are central aspects of this paradigmatic shift. A further facet opens up in the changing relationship between nation-states on the one hand and transnational networks on the other and the contemporary ethnoscapes (cf. Appadurai 1990) that develop out of this situation.
The ‘new African diasporas’ (cf. Koser 2003) can be seen as one result of such ongoing interpenetration. Yet another effect, and one that is even more important to the argument presented here, is the above-mentioned overlapping of all kinds of diasporic discourses and practices.

For example, this interplay of multiple diasporic affiliations is at work in the process of homecoming by African Americans to Ghana, be it in the form of actual repatriation or as pilgrimage/tourism (cf. Schramm 2004b). Whereas the return as an ideal aims to put an end to the state of homelessness that is associated with the condition of diaspora, the reality looks quite different. For many of the people who decide to return, the slave trade and the Middle Passage continue to function as central points of reference (cf. Okofo 1999). The healing that is expected from the journey is a partial one: it cannot lead to complete wholeness in the sense of an essential African identity.

History remains a haunting presence that needs to be addressed continuously. Moreover, even though the homecoming is often advertised as a family reunion between Ghanaians and their diasporan brothers and sisters, the differences in experience among them remain evident and mutual expectations differ. As a result, repatriates find themselves as an African American diaspora in Africa, because their shared memories of the ‘original’ diaspora across the Atlantic (now to be considered as another elsewhere) form a vital part of their collective identity in Ghana. In addition to these complex entanglements, there is the ‘new African diaspora’ of Ghanaians abroad, whom the Ghanaian state addresses in a language of homecoming that is borrowed from African American discourse.13 Along these lines, dual citizenship or the right of abode respectively (demands that have long been articulated by African Americans in order to facilitate easy repatriation) are now offered to Ghanaians with foreign citizenships, whereas African Americans still find it difficult to achieve this legal status.

This diasporic interface partly becomes apparent because information and discursive styles are obviously spread across the borders of strictly defined interest groups. This interchange is by no means limited to realm of African diasporas alone. Debates concerning the question of African cultural authenticity or the demands for reparations are not developed in total isolation, but are the outcome of active exchanges with other groups. They are also embedded within wider commercial trends (such as the global heritage industry) as well as counter-hegemonic struggles.

Overlapping and frictions, fusions and synergies are all evident in the diasporic situation that I’ve attempted to describe. Again, as Trouillot (1995) has argued, practice precedes concepts. It is therefore always necessary to adapt existing disciplinary frameworks to these new realities. Donald Carter describes this task as follows:

Theorists seek to contain a certain disciplinary cartographic anxiety through the care with which their subject of analysis comes to be neatly parcelled out, distributed across regions, cultural domains and otherwise well-defined areas of specialization. Those who live in the diaspora, by contrast, confound such notions as Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas in daily practice. Between the categories of the theorist and others engaged in these lives we must seek out a way of understanding the coming and going at the core of this process through an exploration of the relationship between the diaspora theory and experience. (Carter 2003, p. xv)
In this article, I have attempted to show some ways by which to advance in the direction demanded by Carter. One aspect emerges as particularly important: if the discipline wants to retain its meaningfulness, then African Studies must pay close attention to those ties that transcend the bounds of area and ‘community’.

Notes

1. In Germany, where I am based, the situation is different. African Studies departments are predominantly directed at linguistics, with very few exceptions where the study of literature and history supplements this linguistic focus. Social anthropology as ethnology is strictly separated from archaeology or biological anthropology. German institutes of anthropology do have broad regional specializations (Africa, Asia, etc) that are also announced in their respective self-descriptions.

2. I regard Blackness and Whiteness as powerful socio-historical concepts that are by no means irrelevant for our interactions but rather shape people’s place in the world.

3. To my knowledge, this particular separation of ‘fields’ still exists, despite the growing attention towards diasporic movements across the Atlantic or Indian oceans to which I am going to turn below.

4. The debate on the ‘invention of tradition’ was started with Hobsbawm’s and Ranger’s (1983) famous collection of the same title and was taken up by Mudimbe in his discussion of African gnosis and Africanism. The term ‘invention’ has since then been widely criticized for its assumed intentionality. In his study on modern nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1987) preferred the term ‘imagination’ in order to account for the less conscious aspects of nation-building. The challenge for scholarship remains to bring together a historical-constructivist approach with the recognition of the actually existing constraints and boundaries of social reality.

5. Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang (1996) rightly argues that ‘the rain began to beat [Africans]’ long before the formal colonialism of the nineteenth century, which was the focal point of Chinua Achebe’s original remark, where he calls upon Africans to critically re-examine the historical foundations of their present condition.

6. Elsewhere (Schramm 2005) I discuss the historical entanglement of anthropology and colonialism with regard to the problematique of whiteness.


10. For attempts at a classification of ‘diaspora’, cf. Cohen (1997, p. 26) and Safran (1991, pp. 83–84). Their schemes include a few more aspects than those that are prevalent in the popular discourse I am referring to (especially the ambiguous relationship with ‘host societies’). Both authors aim at an opening of the concept so as to be able to incorporate a vast range of experiences.

11. Of course, this connection was forged from older streams of Pan-Africanist discourse and practice – from Marcus Garvey or the Harlem Renaissance to the Pan-African Congress Movement and its decisive moment in 1945, when the Manchester Congress set the points towards African independence (cf. Lemelle and Kelley 1994, Schramm 2004a).


13. A striking illustration for this strategy was the so-called ‘Homecoming Summit’ which was held in July 2001 at the Accra International Conference Centre. It explicitly addressed Ghanaian professionals abroad who were asked to reverse the brain drain by boosting the Ghanaian economy.
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