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HOW THE WEST WAS ONE: ON THE USES AND LIMITATIONS OF DIASPORA

by Robin D. G. Kelley

MOST READERS of the *Black Scholar* know fully well that the concept of an African diaspora is hardly new. Even if we limit our discussion to scholarly investigations of the African diaspora, we will discover a rich discourse dating back at least to the 1950s and 1960s, if not before. It served as both a political term with which to emphasize unifying experiences of African peoples dispersed by the slave trade, and an analytical term that enabled scholars to talk about black communities across national boundaries. Much of this scholarship examined the dispersal of people of African descent, their role in the transformation and creation of new cultures, institutions, and ideas outside of Africa, and the problems of building Pan-African movements across the globe.¹

Nevertheless, the diaspora has recently returned to analytical prominence in Black Studies, fueled in part by current debates about “globalization.” Indeed, some of the latest efforts to develop a diaspora framework have profound implications not only for our understanding of the black world, but for the way we write the history of the modern West. The making of the African diaspora was as much the product of “the West” as it was of internal developments in Africa and the Americas. At the same time, racial capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism—the key forces responsible for creating the modern African diaspora—could not shape African culture(s) without altering Western culture.² The purpose of this very brief article is to map out points of convergence where the study of the African diaspora might illuminate aspects of the European-New World encounter. At the same time, I

want to draw attention to the ways specific formulations of diaspora can also keep us from seeing the full-range of black transnational political, cultural, and intellectual links. I end with a few speculative remarks on how we might broaden our understanding of black identities and political movements by exploring other streams of internationalism that are not limited to the black world.

ONE OF THE FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS central to African diaspora studies is to what degree are New World black people “African” and what does that mean? It is an old question posed as early as the publication of Sir Harry Johnston’s amateur anthropological writings in his prodigious and enigmatic book, *The Negro in the New World* (1910).³ Whether we employ metaphors of survival, retention, exchange, transformation, acculturation, or conversation, the remaking of African New World cultures has enormous implications, not just for the study of the African diaspora but for the Atlantic as a whole. We can ask similar questions and consider similar methodologies for studying the making of New World European and even Native American cultures, identities, and communities. The idea of a “European” culture or even “English” culture is often taken for granted and hardly ever problematized in the way that “African” is constantly understood as a social construction. For example, we might follow Nahum Chandler’s lead and think of early New World Euro-Americans as possessing Du Bois’s notion of “double-consciousness,” say, English and American, with whiteness as a means of negotiating this double-consciousness.⁴ Or

we might consider the “New World” as a source of Pan-Europeanism in the way that it became the source of Pan-Africanism—both fundamental for building modern racial identities upon ethnic and national foundations.⁵

The question of New World cultural formation has also been critical for the study of gender in New World African communities. For example, African historians have begun to ask questions such as: how much of the idea of women as culture bearers embedded in Western thought conflicts or resonates with ideas coming out of West and Central African societies? In much of Africa spiritual access or power was not specifically gendered as male, so women priests and diviners were fairly common. In the Caribbean one sees women practitioners of vodun, myalism and obeah; yet, in the institutional black churches there is a clear male-dominated gendered hierarchy. We might also consider the transfer of technology, especially in agriculture. In much of West and Central Africa women were cultivators; yet Europeans assumed that men were both responsible and knowledgeable about cultivation—so how did Americans learn rice cultivation from Africans? Which Africans? Did the passage of this knowledge to men change power relationships? And when we look deeper at the gender division of labor under slavery, did women’s participation in field work, hauling, lifting, etc., free them of constraining notions of femininity, or was it consistent with their gendered work and lives in Africa?⁶

ON THE OTHER HAND, the “Africanity” question has recently been met with caution, if not outright hostility, by scholars concerned with essentialism and interested in locating hybridity and difference within black cultures. This is understandable; thinking of cultural change as a process of “destruction” or loss does more to obscure complexity than to illuminate the processes of cultural formation. Furthermore, emphasis on similarities and cultural continuities tends not only to elide differences in black cultures (even within the same region or nation-state), but it does not take into account the similar historical conditions in which African people labored, created, and

re-created culture. Forced labor, racial oppression, colonial conditions, and capitalist exploitation were global processes that incorporated black people through empire building. They were never uniform or fixed, but did create systems that were at times tightly coordinated across oceans and national boundaries. This raises a number of questions. Were the so-called “cultural survivals” simply the most effective cultural baggage Africans throughout the world used in their struggle to survive? Or were they created by the very conditions under which they were forced to toil and reproduce? Are the anthropological studies from which many of these scholars draw their comparisons and parallels valid in view of the fact that they were made while Africa was under colonial domination? Is Pan-Africanism simply the recognition that black people share the same timeless cultural values, as some nationalists would have us believe, or is it a manifestation of life under racism and imperialism?

ONCE WE BEGIN TO TALK about how diasporan identities are constituted, we are confronted with the limitations of “diaspora” as a way of comprehending the international contexts for “black” identities and political movements. Too frequently we think of identities as cultural matters, when in fact some of the most dynamic (transnational) identities are created in the realm of politics, in the way people of African descent sought alliances and political identifications across oceans and national boundaries. My point here is that neither Africa nor Pan-Africanism is necessarily the source of black transnational political identities; sometimes they live through or are integrally tied to other kinds of international movements—Socialism, Communism, Feminism, Surrealism, religions such as Islam, etc. Communist and socialist movements, for example, have long been harbingers of black internationalism that explicitly reaches out to all oppressed colonial subjects as well as to white workers. Although the relationships have not always been comfortable, the Communist movement enabled many different people to identify with other oppressed peoples, and to reject patriotism and national identity. Black

people across the globe could find each other, in some cases become African again, and they could also identify with the Spanish or Chinese or Cuban or even Russian revolutions.⁷ Similarly, during the interwar period a group of black intellectuals from the French, Spanish, and English speaking world were drawn to Surrealism for its militant anticolonialism and fascination with the unconscious, the spirit, desire, and magic. Many figures, such as Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, the Afro-Chinese Cuban painter Wifredo Lam, René Menil, would go on to play a central role in the formation of *Négritude* or the promotion of African culture in the diaspora.⁸

FINALLY, let me close with some reflections on the usefulness of the African diaspora for constructing “global” narratives of the past. The concept of the African diaspora, for all of its limitations, is fundamental to the development of the “Atlantic” as a unit of analysis (which, we should recognize, is not new but a product of imperial history). Indeed, we might just as easily talk about a “Black Mediterranean” which is far more important in the Francophone and Italian worlds than in Britain.⁹ Likewise, Edward Alpers and Joseph Harris have made significant contributions toward identifying, for want of a better term, a “Black Indian Ocean.” Their work suggests, once again, that large bodies of water are not barriers but avenues for transnational, trans-oceanic trade, cultural exchange, and transformation. Indian Ocean crossings brought together many diverse peoples from East Africa, India, and the Arab world.¹⁰

We can see the promise of such a framework in studies by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker. In their forthcoming book, “The Many Headed Hydra: A History of the Atlantic Working Class,” they explore how merchant and industrial capital, with its attendant maritime revolution, and the rise of the transatlantic slave trade, created a brand new international working class of which Africans were a part, created misery and immiseration, and simultaneously gave birth to significant political movements such as republicanism, Pan-Africanism, and new, often suppressed, expressions of internation-

alism.¹¹ Likewise, Julius Scott’s forthcoming book, “The Common Wind,” which examines New World black people in the age of the Haitian Revolution, invokes the “sailing image” both literally and metaphorically to illustrate how networks of oral transmission and shared memory were the crucial dimensions of Afro-diasporic politics and identity. The main characters in “The Common Wind” are black republicans not long out of Africa, and they develop their own politically driven, relatively autonomous vision of an anti-slavery republicanism that is in many ways far more radical than anything being pursued in France or Philadelphia. Scott also demonstrates the level of ideological debate and international organization that existed among African-Americans in the New World—a crucial element in the unfolding of the revolution. At the very least, Scott demonstrates how an Afro-diasporic approach can force us to rethink the creation of New World republicanism, systems of communication in the 18th and early 19th century, the political and cultural autonomy of African people in the West, and the crucial role that black sailors played in the age of democratic revolutions.¹²

WE NEED TO MOVE BEYOND unitary narratives of displacement, domination and nation building that center on European expansion and the rise of “racial” capitalism. In some ways, destabilizing unitary narratives is what Paul Gilroy does in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and what Cedric Robinson had already begun to do in his magnum opus, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983). Their work not only demonstrates how the rise of the transatlantic system helped forge the concept of Africa and create an “African” identity, but that the same process was central to the formation of a European/“white” identity in the New World. These scholars and those who came before them see the fundamental importance of black people to the making of the modern world: slave labor helped usher in the transition to capitalism; black struggles for freedom indisputably shaped discourses on democracy and the rise of republicanism; and the cultures, ideas,

epistemologies taken from Africa or created in the "New World" have deeply influenced, art, religion, politics, philosophy, and social relations in the West. Hence, just as Europe invented Africa and the New World, we cannot understand the invention of Europe and the New World without Africa and African people.

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– Robin D.G. Kelley.

Endnotes

1. See Shepperson, George, "African Diaspora: Concept and Context" and Drake, St. Clair, "Diaspora Studies and Pan-Africanism," in Joseph E. Harris, ed. *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1982); Drachler, Jacob, *Black Homeland/Black Diaspora: Cross Currents of the African Relationship* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975); Drake, St. Clair, *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History and Anthropology* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro American Studies, University of California, Vol I 1987; Vol II, 1990); Du Bois, W.E.B., *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa Played in World History* (New York: Viking Press, 1947); Henderson, John P. and Harry A. Reed, eds., *Studies in the African Diaspora: A Memorial to James R. Hooker (1929-1976)* (Dover, Mass: Majority Press, 1989); Kilson, Martin L. and Robert I. Rotberg, eds., *African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976); Knight, Franklin, *The African Dimension in Latin American Societies* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1974); Lemelle, Sidney J., and Robin D. G. Kelley, eds., *Imagining Home: Class, Culture, and Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (London and New York: Verso Press, 1994); Thompson, Vincent, *The Making of the African Diaspora in the Americas, 1441-1900* (1987); Weisbord, Robert, *Ebony Kinship: Africa, Africans, and the Afro-American* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973).
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5. There is a growing literature on whiteness and new ways of understanding Euro-American identities. Some of the best work includes, Allen, Theodore

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12. Scott, Julius, "The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communications in the Era of the Haitian Revolution," (book manuscript, forthcoming).

