

4

HOW THE WEST WAS ONE

On the Uses and Limitations of Diaspora

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, and the like 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 not only tends to elide differences in Black cultures (even within the same region or nation-state), but also 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 (translational) 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, and so on. 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 Revolution.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” that 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, transoceanic 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 internationalism.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 antislavery 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 eighteenth and early nineteenth 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 demonstrates not only how the rise of the transatlantic system helped forge the concept of Africa and create an “African” identity, but also 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.

I am indebted to all who participated in “Transcending Traditions,” especially its distinguished organizers, Tukufu Zuberi and Farah Jasmine Griffin. I owe my greatest debt to Tiffany Patterson; many of the ideas in this essay come out of my collaborations with Patterson, who coauthored a longer piece with me about the African diaspora, to appear in *The African Studies Review*.

NOTES

1. See George Shepperson, “African Diaspora: Concept and Context” and St. Clair Drake, “Diaspora Studies and Pan-Africanism,” in Joseph E. Harris, ed., *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982); Jacob Drachler, *Black Homeland/Black Diaspora: Cross Currents of the African Relationship* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1975); St. Clair Drake, *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); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which*

Africa Played in World History (New York: Viking Press, 1947); John P. Henderson and Harry A. Reed, eds., *Studies in the African Diaspora: A Memorial to James R. Hooker (1929–1976)* (Dover, Mass.: Majority Press, 1989); Martin L. Kilson and Robert I. Rotberg, eds., *African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); Franklin Knight, *The African Dimension in Latin American Societies* (New York: Macmillan, 1974); Sidney J. Lemelle and Robin D. G. Kelley, eds., *Imagining Home: Class, Culture, and Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (London and New York: Verso Press, 1994); Vincent Thompson, *The Making of*

the African Diaspora in the Americas, 1441–1900 (1987); Robert Weisbord, *Ebony Kinship: Africa, Africans, and the Afro-American* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973).

2. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Peter Linebaugh, "All the Atlantic Mountains Shook," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 10 (autumn 1982): 87–121; Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); and an excellent essay by Kim D. Butler, "What Is African Diaspora Study?: An Epistemological Frontier," forthcoming in *Diaspora*.

3. Works that examine African survivals in the New World include: Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941); Sandra T. Barnes, ed., *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Leonard Barrett, *Soul-Force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974); Roger Bastide, *African Civilisations in the New World* (London: C. Hurst, 1972); Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of the Interpretation of Civilisations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); George Brandon, *Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Joseph Holloway and Winifred Vass, *The African Heritage of American English* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Joseph Murphy, *Santeria: African Spirits in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988 and 1992); Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Karen Fog Olwig, *Cultural Adaptation and Resistance on St. John: Three Centuries of Afro-Caribbean Life* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1985); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Jim Wafer, *The Taste of Blood: Spirit Possession in Brazilian Candomblé* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American*

South and the British Caribbean, 1736–1831 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Joao José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Monica Schuler, *Alas, Alas, Kongo: A Social History of Indentured African Immigration into Jamaica, 1841–1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983); Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

4. Nahum Chandler, "Force of the Double: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Question of African American Subjection" (book manuscript, forthcoming).

5. There is a growing literature on whiteness and new ways of understanding Euro-American identities. Some of the best work includes Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race; Volume One: Racist Oppression and Social Control* (New York and London: Verso, 1994); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (London and New York: Verso, 1990); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

6. See especially Claire Robertson, "Africa into the Americas?: Slavery and Women, the Family, and the Gender Division of Labor," in *More than Chattel: Black Women in Slavery in the Americas*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine and Barry Gaspar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

7. Lisa Brock, "Questioning the Diaspora: Hegemony, Black Intellectuals and Doing International History from Below," *ISSUE: A Journal of Opinion* (Vol. XXIV, No. 2, 1996): 10; Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000 [orig. 1983]); Robin D. G. Kelley, "'This Ain't Ethiopia, but It'll Do': African Americans and the Spanish Civil War," in *Race Rebels: Culture Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Robin D. G. Kelley,

Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

8. Franklin Rosemont, ed., *André Breton: What Is Surrealism?: Selected Writings* (New York: Pathfinder, 1978), 37 passim.; "Murderous Humanitarianism," in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard, (London: Wishart and Co., 1934); reprinted in *Race Traitor (Special Issue— Surrealism: Revolution against Whiteness)* 9 (summer 1998): 67–69; Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, S.A., 1989 [2nd ed.]); Robin D. G. Kelley, "Introduction: A Poetics of Anti-Colonialism" to *Discourse on Colonialism*, by Aimé Césaire, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); Brent Edwards, "Black Globality: The International Shape of Black Intellectual Culture" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1997); Michael Richardson, ed., *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, trans. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (London: Verso, 1996); Cheikh Tidiane Sylla, "Surrealism and Black African Art," *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion* 4 (Chicago: Black Swan Press, 1989), 128–29.

9. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*; Brent Edwards, "Black Globality: The International Shape of

Black Intellectual Culture" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1997).

10. Joseph Harris, *The African Presence in Asia: Consequences of the East African Slave Trade* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1971); Harris, "A Comparative Approach to the Study of the African Diaspora," in Joseph Harris, ed., *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982), 112–24; Edward Alpers, "The African Diaspora in the Northwestern Indian Ocean: Reconsideration of an Old Problem, New Directions for Research," *African Studies Review* (forthcoming 2000).

11. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); see also Peter Linebaugh, "All the Atlantic Mountains Shook," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 10 (autumn 1982), 87–121; Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Privates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

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