

Editorial

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Reflections on the meanings of diaspora

In 2005 the African Union (AU) officially recognised a role for the African diaspora in the future of continental Africa. That same year it adopted *The African Protocol on Women*, a document which seeks to enhance women's human rights across the Union. These official actions by a body representing the vision of a more unified Africa marks a new stage in a history of uneven, ambivalent but ever present interactions, conversations and collaborations between Africa and its diaspora as well as a renewed commitment to gender equity on the continent.

After much deliberation, the African Union in 2005, agreed to the following definition of the African diaspora – “*peoples of African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union*”. It includes communities created by the movements and cultures of persons from the continent of Africa and their descendants throughout the world – Asia, The Pacific, Europe and the Americas including United States and Canada, the Caribbean, South and Central America.

The concept of diaspora itself is a highly contested one and has become increasingly interesting to scholars in recent times. James Clifford includes it among “an unruly crowd of descriptive/interpretive terms” which now “jostle and converse in an effort to characterize the contact zones of nations, cultures, and regions: such as *border, travel, creolization, transculturation, hybridity and diaspora*” (Clifford, 1994: 303). While the concept emerged initially to refer to the Jewish, Greek and Armenian dispersions, in the last few decades the concept has been applied with new vigour to what was perhaps a much earlier dispersion, that of persons from what we now know as the African continent.

There is continued debate on what precisely can be defined as diaspora; yet Clifford calls for a shift from precise defining characteristics to a focus on discourses of diaspora which focus on both the routes *and* the roots in order

to create a community consciousness and solidarity of difference. In other words diaspora should be seen as “a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement” (Clifford, 1994: 308). With such an understanding of this concept, it would be interesting to see the extent to which the idea of Africa continues to have resonance in the African diaspora and the forms that this takes. It is also important to track the ways in which this process has been gendered as well as the diversity in the experience of diaspora among sexes, classes, and nationalities.

In some parts of this world, a memory of Africa had long been lost (Wade, 2005) if it ever existed; for example in parts of Central and Latin America e.g. Mexico and in South Asia such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka¹. Yet with the re-emergence of identity politics in the 20th and early 21st Centuries we see an emergence of diaspora consciousness throughout the world including parts of African diaspora where this has not traditionally been the case. The emergence of *Afrodiascent* movements in South and Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean are reflections of this. These have often been accompanied by women’s movements as discussed in the paper by Helen Safa for the case of Brazil. What is important to note is that Africa as a conscious entity did not exist at the time of these earliest dispersions therefore the idea of Africa is something which has had to be constructed in response to the experiences of these dispersed peoples and their descendents in diverse parts of the world. This has been accelerated through the increased movement of people and ideas from the last years of the 19th Century to the globalizing era of the late 20th and 21st centuries.

This action by the African Union, represents in many ways the culmination of decades of work by diaspora activists as well as the recognition of the economic benefits to be derived from the increased interaction with diasporic communities. This is a phenomenon recognised by other countries such as India and China in the wake of newer diasporic movements, as they all seek to maximize the benefits of ancestral belonging which the new identity politics creates even within a context of capitalist globalisation.

Africa’s diaspora has emerged through different disconnected moments, most significantly the forced removal of untold millions in the Trans-Indian Ocean and Transatlantic slave trade(s). More recently these movements have taken place under diverse conditions of “choice” and uncertainty – migration as wage-workers, sex workers, professionals, scholars and exiles from the political and economic challenges which have dogged Africa’s recent history.

Since the early 20th century, the notion of pan-Africanism, originating in the diaspora, has focused on the politics of African identity and resistance in the face of structural systems of racism, colonialism and neo-colonialism. While this has been the focus of much recent reflection and consideration, the important contribution of pan-Africanist women and feminist activists to this movement has not received the attention it deserves (Reddock, 2001; Altink, 2004). Indeed the diasporic connections between one Mrs Kinloch, a South African woman (African) and Henry Sylvestre Williams an Afro-Trinidadian Lawyer resulted in the formation of the African Association in London in 1889 by Williams who first coined the term Pan-African around 1900 (Hooker, 1975; Reddock, 2001²). This Pan-African consciousness and vision would continue throughout the 20th Century through the leadership of men like W. E. B. Dubois; Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, C. L. R. James, and others. One high point of this was the historic 1945 Fifth Pan-African Congress held in London.³ But the movements' relative success was also the result of Caribbean Pan-Africanist feminist women such as Amy Ashwood Garvey and Una Marson (Adi and Sherwood:1995; Reddock, 2001).

Recent scholarship problematises this notion of the African diaspora, and among others, acknowledges the varied and sometimes contradictory ways in which 'blackness' and 'Africanness' is defined, experienced and understood. Paul Zeleza in a paper commissioned by CODESRIA⁴ drew attention to the debates within Africa itself on the definition of Africa citing competing definitions including – "the transatlantic, sub-Saharan, continental, pan-Arab and global definitions of Africa (AU, 2004: 11). He also identified four spatial dimensions of the African diaspora as – the Trans-Indian Ocean; Trans Mediterranean and Trans Atlantic diasporas; and two temporal periods – the prehistoric flows and the modern flows. Finally, while he also recognised the varied bases for these diasporic movements – demographic movements; cultural flows; economic flows; political flows; ideological flows and most importantly the flow of images (AU, 2004: 11). Zeleza's framework for understanding diaspora is useful as it complicates what is often perceived in simplistic terms. He also acknowledges the difficulties first in the definition and then with the meaning of Africa as well as the varying ways in which diaspora is understood and experienced. I would challenge his temporal conceptualisation however, as I would argue for at least four temporal levels – the prehistoric; the pre-modern (14–15th Centuries); the transatlantic slave trade and contemporary migratory movements.

In this recognition of difference, the most obvious differences, those of “gender” and class, appear to have received the least attention of all within the broader scholarship on diaspora and pan-Africanism. Yet since the 1980s, a steady scholarship on women in the African diaspora has emerged. In 1981, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, an anthology edited by Filomena Steady was one of the first of these efforts. In 1996, the reader – *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* edited by Roslyn Terborg Penn and Andrea Benton Rushing appeared also in the USA. In both cases these volumes were published in the USA and included articles on Africa, the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean. Since that time a number of other anthologies emerged including special issues of journals. More recently in November 2005 at Duke University, USA a symposium entitled *Gendering the Diaspora, Race-ing the Transnational* was followed in 2006 at the University of Toronto, Canada by another entitled *Diasporic Hegemonies*. According to the organisers the symposia “brought feminist transnational critique into an extended conversation with scholarship on the African diaspora to think critically about some of the various “hegemonies” that have shaped these fields. Focusing on difference, genealogies, indigeneity, unequal circulations and configurations of culture, power and politics” they sought “to formulate a gendered transnational analysis of the relations of diaspora that rethinks the implications of globalisation in generative and dynamic ways.⁵ In addition the conferences of African and African diaspora Intellectuals organised by the African Union in Jamaica (2005) and Brazil (2006) have included women academics and feminist intellectuals and facilitated new avenues of cooperation and collaboration.

These publications and symposia have provided opportunities for scholars to collaborate cross-culturally and reflect on the diversity as well as the commonalities of the diasporic experience. What is interesting about diasporic actions including scholarship is that they have in the past originated outside of Africa. Today we are seeing more simultaneity in that initiatives are also originating from within the continent. The journal *Feminist Africa* has been an important voice for feminists and scholars within the continent, making a space for continental voices in a world dominated by voices from the North including those of diasporic women. The publication of this issue from within the continent and edited by a woman from the economic South is an important development which opens up new possibilities for South-South collaboration and debate within the African diaspora.

But the diasporic experience is not limited to those of African descent and must include all those who share and inhabit these diasporic spaces. Many

parts of the world are today becoming spaces of inter-locking diasporic communities for example from Asia, Africa, China, Europe and even the Middle East. The papers written by Helen Safa and Theresa Ann Rajack-Talley and the standpoint by Patricia Mohammed are cases in point. This volume sought to recognize this and to include the voices of women who inhabit these complex and multi-ethnic locations..

Diaspora feminisms and the meaning of Africa

This issue set out to explore diaspora feminist engagements with the idea and reality of Africa; the gendered experiences of diaspora populations and the influence of the diaspora on gender relations and feminist engagements *within* Africa. We sought contributions that engaged critically with hegemonic discourses of pan-Africanism, gender and feminism as well as those that problematised the relationships as well as those that build bridges among diaspora populations as well as between Africa and the diaspora. This last aspect is reflected in the paper by Rajack-Talley where she evaluates the contentious discourses on African retentions in relation to the Afro-Caribbean family. In a different way Gillian Marcelle, a Caribbean woman, reflects on her experience in Salvador de Bahia in the street festival of *Lavagem do Bonfim*. Her descriptive reportage resonates with the gender image base on Africa and the Caribbean developed by Edna Bay and Patricia Mohammed and reflected on by the latter as a standpoint in this volume.

Eudine Barriteau on the other hand, examines the relevance of Black Feminist thought not only for the diaspora but for feminist theory generally. Her paper provides what she calls “a long-overdue evaluation and documentation of the contribution of US Black Feminist thought to Feminist thought more generally” and bemoans the continued marginalization of this important school of thought from some mainstream volumes on feminist thought. Black feminist thought, as with much scholarship not originating in the Euro-American North, is often consciously and subconsciously perceived as “ethnic” and therefore relevant only to other “ethnics”. Barriteau argues quite convincingly that black feminist theorizing brings important insights to the process of creating knowledge, not only about black women’s lives, but with relevance to all women’s lives.

As a Caribbean member of a diasporic population I was honoured to have been asked to edit this volume. I am honoured for this opportunity to engage in this global conversation which has Africa as its starting point, reaching

inward and outward, and not the other way around as is often the case. What emerges in this collection is that movement is continuously taking place within the diaspora. The essays, reviews and profiles in this volume address events and themes relating to Brazil, the English-speaking Caribbean, Britain, the United States and Latin America. Interestingly the essays are not necessarily written by women originating in these areas. It suggests first – mobility within the diaspora as well as a concern with issues beyond the geographical boundaries of ones' immediate location.

At the outset efforts were made to attract contributions from geographic locations not often represented in publications on the African diaspora. I was particularly interested in the Indian Ocean diaspora especially as in January 2006, a conference organised by TADIA – The African diaspora in Asia – was held in Goa, India bringing together African diaspora scholars from various parts of the world. This conference, along with a range of other diaspora conferences of various kinds testifies to the significance of issues of nation and identity in the current historical period. But they are also reflections of the efforts of governments of the African Union, and the governments of India and China to capitalize on their diaspora as potential markets; sources of investments, suppliers of trained personnel and other forms of virtual and real support in an increasingly competitive global environment. Of course these diaspora are not pure entities. Many diaspora locations comprise more than one diasporic population. These ancestral pulls therefore have particular meanings for nation states as well as relations among citizens of these nation states.

It is a pity that no contributions were submitted that explore what Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo (1998) refers to as *double Diaspora – those who have formed new diasporic communities in other parts of the world such as Afro-Caribbeans in Central America and North America and Afro, Chinese, Euro and Indo-Caribbeans in North America. More recently scholars have been documenting the movement of African Americans to Israel, pointing to continued processes of *diasporisation* through contemporary processes of globalisation.

The essays in this volume represent both a documentation of the ongoing movements of women of African descent in various parts of the world as well as a celebration of diaspora feminisms; feminist scholarship and the gendered experiences of diasporic lives. They however, also present cogent critiques of movements and individuals reflecting a sensitivity which goes beyond mere celebration that a “sister has made it” to a larger attention to the ethical and moral demands of a movement and women’s responsibilities

to community as well as to social justice and equity on a global scale. Carole Boyce Davies' paper tackles head-on the contradictions of such situations; in this case, the contentious location of Condeleeza Rice, United States Secretary of State. Boyce Davies asks the questions – “What happens when members of a subordinated group rise to power within an oppressive system? Who do these people end up representing? How does a US black woman manage the internal/domestic histories while understanding her location in diaspora and the transnational? (Boyce Davies, this issue)”. Similar feelings of disappointment can be discerned in the standpoint of Anneka Leolyn Marshall in her “Trek for a Sense of Belonging”. In a way this reflects some of the restlessness of the diasporic spirit searching constantly for “home”, no doubt contributing to the “doubled diaspora” phenomenon mentioned earlier.

At the same time the contribution of some outstanding women may be shadowed by their association with influential men, the tribute to Coretta Scott-King, the late widow of Martin Luther King, by Simi Dosekun is a sensitive re-evaluation of one woman's contribution to the cause of social justice in her home country and on the African continent.

The structure of *Feminist Africa* allows for the documentation and critical reflection of its subject matter through a variety of formats – feature articles, standpoints, tributes, profiles, interviews and book reviews; this allows for a lively and comprehensive engagement with key issues. I trust that this volume will do just that in giving voice to Africa's diaspora.

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Footnotes

- 1 See for example the work of the TADIA project – the African Diaspora in India.
- 2 Williams also hosted the First Pan-African Conference in London in 1901 attended among others by W. E. B. DuBois and Anna Julia Cooper (Reddock, 2001).
- 3 Participants at this conference included – Jomo Kenyatta, Nmandi Azikiwe, Obafemi Owolowo, L. T. A. Wallace Johnson among many others (George Padmore in Adi and Sherwood, 1995).
- 4 CODESRIA – Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa.
- 5 University of Toronto, Women and Gender Studies Institute, Conference Programme, October 2006 available at <http://www.utoronto.ca/wgsi>.