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## RECONCEPTUALIZING AFRICAN DIASPORAS: NOTES FROM A HISTORIAN

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*This commentary interrogates Clarke's paper on African diasporas. It argues that though Clarke seeks to open new analytical lenses on African diasporas by focusing on postslavery African diasporas, it does not advance the scholarship on the subject because of its limited conceptions of Africa and the global dimensions of African diasporas. As is common in Eurocentric African studies, "Africa" is seen as coterminous with sub-Saharan Africa, and Clarke universalizes the histories of Afro-Atlantic diaspora to the histories of Afro-European and Afro-Asian diasporas. Her notion of humanitarian diasporas also limits the scope of the engagements between Africa and its diasporas. My commentary tries to offer an alternative historiography of the global dimensions of African diasporas.*

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Clarke's paper seeks to widen the analytical lenses of African diaspora studies by interrogating the field's conventional conceptions and boundaries. She urges us to transcend the conflation of African diaspora formations with the histories and geographies of Atlantic slavery by invoking the new postcolonial diasporas of voluntary migration. The new diasporas, she points out, maintain active engagements with Africa less predicated on the impulses of cultural and racial identity in the diaspora characteristic of the old diasporas than on the imperatives of developmental and humanitarian interventions in Africa. These engagements and interventions are often mediated by transnational agencies including the United Nations. She introduces the concept of humanitarian diasporas as a defining feature of the new diasporas using the example of the Sudanese diaspora and the Save Darfur Coalition.

This is a welcome addition to the emerging body of scholarship on African diasporas. The paper indeed offers us an opportunity to reflect on some of the key conceptual challenges that have bedeviled the field. In this endeavor, I submit, the debate is moved in some instances, but not in others. The paper's insistence that we need to transcend the old

historiographies is salutary. Clarke suggests that the fixation on Atlantic slavery and the ruptures of the Middle Passage not only oversimplified the complex histories of the old diasporas themselves, but also froze their engagements with Africa. It produced unproductive debates about black identity, in which cultural retentions and change, African origins and diasporic modernity, were often counterposed simplistically ignoring the continuous engagements, the dialogic exchanges, between Africa and the diaspora that formed and transformed both. More crucially, the old paradigms offer limited analytical power to capture the movements—spatially and socially—of the new diasporas, the intense interconnections between them and Africa facilitated by the new information and communication technologies and transnational reflexivities.

Clarke notes that the rising popularity of African diaspora studies is in part engendered by the discovery of the new diasporas as a developmental asset, as a remittance pipeline, by international agencies and African governments. The new diasporas have become Africa's biggest donor whose remittances—between US\$50–150 billion a year—exceed all foreign direct investment and official development assistance. But their potential contributions are more than pecuniary. These diasporas also possess an enormous stock of social capital—skills, knowledge, networks, civic awareness, cultural experience, and cosmopolitanism—that can provide not only access to global markets and investment and stimulate technological innovation, but also invigorate democracy, strengthen civil society, and encourage the growth of new philanthropic cultures. Moreover, diasporas serve as crucial intermediaries between Africa and the outside world, as humanitarian brokers, a subject she examines with reference to the Save Darfur Coalition, the U.S. based organization that has mobilized international opinion against the genocide in Darfur.

The popularity of the term *diaspora* can be attributed to other factors as well. The history of ideas tells us that concepts often encompass ideological, intellectual, and institutional tendencies within and

outside the academy. Needless to say the scholarly and popular articulations of discourses are not always complimentary. In the case of the term *African diaspora*, it is clear that its usage is quite recent; it was certainly not used by the great Pan-Africanists from W. E. B. Dubois to Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Sedar Senghor to Aime Cesaire, George Padmore to Frantz Fanon. Its emergence in academic discourse can be attributed to the rise of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and globalization studies, which collectively recast the questions of culture, identity, and transnationalism in African studies previously dominated by structuralist perspectives and notions of African marginality, that the continent was splendidly isolated from the rest of the world. The diaspora paradigm reconnects Africa to its peoples dispersed around the world and globalizes Africa, repositions the continent in world history. Accompanying these intellectual imperatives are institutional dynamics, the establishment of centers, institutes, or programs of diaspora studies, the emergence of journals, book series, and research funding on the subject. The rapidly expanding institutional infrastructures promoting diaspora studies have been facilitated and reinforced by ideological imperatives, the investment by states and various publics in diaspora communities, the popular discourses by and on diaspora populations, perspectives, problems, and possibilities.

This is merely to point out the obvious that the concept of “African diaspora” has an intellectual history. It seeks to capture and explain specific historical and contemporary processes and formations, which are subject to different conceptions in different times and spaces. In so far as ideas embody particular historical geographies, the question that arises, then, is to what extent are our current conceptions of “African diasporas” universal or peculiar to the Anglophone, or indeed, American academy? How are the phenomena and processes the concept refers to conceptualized, perceived, or described in other intellectual traditions—in Afro-Latin America, Afro-Europe, Afro-Asia, and the various regions of Africa itself? It would seem to me that a truly comprehensive accounting and critique of the concept of “African diaspora” that Clarke implores us to undertake has to go beyond auto-critiques within American studies and historiography; it has to encompass serious and sustained engagements with the intellectual traditions of other world regions where African diasporas exist, otherwise this becomes another homage to American intellectual naval gazing or imperialism.

Like the term *diaspora*, the term *Africa* also has a complex history; it encapsulates divergent intellectual, ideological, and institutional historical geographies. The way we conceptualize *Africa* is critical to the way we understand and analyze *African diasporas*. What is “Africa” and who are “Africans” that constitute, when dispersed and reconstituted, “African diasporas?” As we all know, the idea of “Africa” is an exceedingly complicated one with multiple genealogies and meanings, which make any extrapolations of “African” culture, identity, or people, in the singular or plural, any explorations for African authenticity, quite slippery as these notions tend to swing unsteadily between the poles of essentialism and contingency.

As I have argued at length elsewhere, Africa is as much a reality as it is a construct whose boundaries—geographical, historical, and cultural—have shifted according to the prevailing conceptions and configurations of global racial identities and power, and African nationalism, including Pan-Africanism. At the beginning of the 21st century, the maps and meanings of *Africa* and *Africanness* are being reconfigured by both the processes of contemporary globalization and the projects of African integration and diasporaization. One common approach is to distinguish between Eurocentric and Afrocentric paradigms of what constitutes *Africa* and *Africanness* derived from “European” and “African” perspectives. The difficulty with this method is that it inscribes an epistemic division between the two approaches that are otherwise deeply implicated with each other.

A more prosaic framing that avoids this rigid binarism would suggest that there are at least four main constructions of Africa: Africa as biology, as space, as memory, and as representation, that is, African identities, peoples, and cultures are often and differentially mapped in racial, geographical, historical, or discursive terms. As with the highly ideological Eurocentric–Afrocentric dichotomy, there are no discursive Chinese walls separating the four typologies, but they do have heuristic value. I work from the assumption that “Africa” is a material and imagined place, a historical geography, the constellation of the places and peoples embedded in its cartographic and conceptual bosom. It is an invention as much as “Asia” or “Europe” or the “West” and all such civilizational spaces, but it has a physical, political, paradigmatic, and psychic reality for the peoples who live within or who are from its cartographic and cultural boundaries, themselves subject to shifts.

Clearly, exclusive claims to Africa based on the sands of the Sahara or doses of melanin represent the spatialization and racialization of African identity that are historically spurious. My “Africa” is the “Africa” of the African Union, which recognizes the entire continent, from Egypt to South Africa, and all peoples on this vast landmass from the Algerians to the Zimbabweans as “Africans,” and which has recognized the “diaspora” as Africa’s sixth region. 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 OAU, the predecessor of the AU, is no less handy than, indeed preferable to, the racist epistemic cartography of “Africa” invented by European imperialism that divided Africa into two, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa—Hegel’s “Africa proper.”

This means, quite simply, that African diasporas should include all those peoples dispersed from the continent in historic and contemporary times, who have constituted themselves or been constituted into diasporas. The key words are “historic times” and “constituted,” for all humans originated in Africa. At a technical workshop convened by the AU in Trinidad in 2004, in which I participated, the following definition of diaspora was adopted: “The AU has committed itself to providing representation to the African Diaspora in its policy process. For this purpose, we recommend that the definition of African Diaspora refer to the geographic dispersal of peoples whose ancestors, within historical memory, originally came from Africa, but who are currently domiciled, or claim residence or citizenship, outside the continent of Africa.”

From this vantage point, Clarke’s “African diaspora” unfortunately reinscribes the old Hegelian conception of “Africa” as “sub-Saharan Africa,” a racialized, some would even say racist, construction of “Africa” that has haunted African studies in Euroamerica over the last century and which some of us have vigorously tried to deconstruct and dethrone. This reflects the dominance in the Euroamerican academy of the Atlantic and race in the fields of African studies in general and African diaspora studies in particular. Quite predictably, “black” is the paradigmatic trope in Atlantic diaspora studies, the pivot around which discourses of “African” diaspora identities, subjectivities, transnationalisms, or engagements are framed and debated. But *Africa* is not interchangeable with *black*; *Africa* and *Africans* of course include blacks but are not confined to them. It makes more sense to talk of “black” and “African” diasporas as comple-

mentary, but not coterminous collectivities. Perhaps the Ethiopian founder of the international journal, *African and Black Diaspora*, based at DePaul University in Chicago, had such considerations in mind. In my opinion, “African diaspora” studies will remain narrow if they continue to be limited to the Atlantic world, whether or not we incorporate the new diasporas. The real challenge is not to advance more refined conceptions of blackness but to widen the geographies, deepen the histories, and diversify the experiences of African diasporas, to globalize, in other words, African diasporas, to de-Atlanticize and deracialize them.

In global terms, there are at least three sets of African diasporas, the trans-Indian Ocean diasporas, trans-Mediterranean diasporas, and trans-Atlantic diasporas. Each of these diasporas has its own histories; the three share similarities, differences, and parallels that are exceedingly difficult to analyze. Much of our analytical paradigms and preoccupations, at least in the North Atlantic world, tend to be derived, almost exclusively, from the experiences of the trans-Atlantic diasporas, the most recent, historically, of the African global diasporas. From my work on the subject, it is clear that for each of these three regions, there are complex subregional patterns of dispersal and diasporization.

If we take the case of Asia, for example, the following dynamics are apparent. In temporal terms, African interactions with Asia long antedate the Atlantic movements and their phases are far more varied. Similarly, the spatial dimensions of these interactions involve a wider span of Africa including the Mediterranean–Red Sea corridor (linking northern Africa with Western Asia), the Red Sea–Indian Ocean corridor (linking northeastern Africa with western and southern Asia), the Indian Ocean corridor (linking eastern Africa with Indian Ocean islands and Asia). The patterns of dispersal were extremely varied and complex if we take into account the temporal and spatial dimensions noted above. They involved both free movements—as merchants, proselytizers, entertainers, sailors and soldiers, and unfree movements—as slaves in the Arab and later European slave trades. Thus, in comparison with the Atlantic diasporas, the African diasporas in Asia have a much older history, their patterns of dispersal were more varied, and the processes of diasporization more complex.

Not surprisingly, African diasporic consciousness in Asia and the Americas tend to be quite different. In Asia, the relatively steady and long duration of African migrations facilitated assimilation

into host populations. In other words, the African migrations and dispersals lacked the temporal and geographic concentration of the Americas. Also, varieties of names by which Africa and the Africans were known in Asia undermined the development of collective identities as “Africans” or “black.” They were often known by their specific regions of origin in Africa or their status in their new homelands rather than as Africans. In addition, the complexities of color and race in Asian societies, the integrative mechanisms of Islam in parts of Asia, the absence of systematic violence, legal segregation, racial and ethnic discrimination compared with the Americas, and the relative absence of leadership to develop and articulate diasporic consciousness and interests played a role.

No less complex are the histories of African migrations to Europe that go back to ancient times and before the 15th century, and include the African conquest and occupation of the Iberian Peninsula between the 8th and 15th century. This was followed by the eras of what I call colonial Europe—16th to mid-20th century Europe, and postcolonial Europe—mid-20th century to the present. Africa’s diasporas in Europe bring the complexities of African diasporas into sharp relief: historically, they have encompassed conquest, free and unfree diasporas, and sub-Saharan and Northern Africans. The connections between these diasporic formations are fascinating indeed, if we remember that the conquest of the Americas emanated from the Iberian Peninsula only recently liberated as African kingdoms, as a Moroccan historian calls the Andalusian period.

We need to develop better and more comparative understanding of the histories of Afro-Asia, Afro-Europe, and Afro-America. It cannot be over-emphasized that there are subregional differences among these diaspora collectivities; the histories of Afro-Latin America and Afro-North America have not been mere replicas of each other. Such comparative analyses will, almost as a matter of course, help de-center the hegemony of the Atlantic model of diaspora studies and some of its unproductive paradigms that Clarke has identified so well, the preoccupation with slavery as the formative basis of all African diasporas, which fails to incorporate the so-called new diasporas.

It would also help us better comprehend the latter in locating their difference not in the nature of their migrations—free movement—for there were many other free movements to Asia and Europe even before and during the era of Atlantic slavery, and even to the Americas—the Moriscos from the Iberian Peninsula come to mind, so do the Cape

Verdians, but in the specificities of their historical moment. A global view also helps us eschew our fixation with the Americas even for the new diasporas: After all, today, the country with the largest number of African born migrants is France, followed by Saudi Arabia, and in third place is the United States.

In France, for example, there are at least four “overlapping” African diasporas: long-standing French communities of African descent, Antillean blacks, Africans from West and Central Africa, and Africans from North Africa. These communities have complex relations with each other and with the French state and society, in which the schisms and solidarities of race, religion, and region of origin play significant and shifting roles. West Africans, for example may racially identify with the Antilleans, religiously with the North Africans, and subregionally with the Central Africans. Even for the Sudan, the focus of Clarke’s paper, the majority of its diaspora is in Western Asia—the Middle East of imperial mapmaking: how do the composition, experiences, agencies, and engagements with Africa and their countries of origin of these different diasporas compare? I would imagine that the Sudanese in Saudi Arabia have different experiences, their bodies are read and their diasporan identities are constructed differently from their compatriots in Western Europe or the United States. It will also of course depend on whether they are Muslim or not, and on their ethnicity.

I was intrigued by Clarke’s notion of humanitarian diasporas. It is indeed useful, for analytical purposes, to identify various modes of diaspora formation and engagement with Africa, but we need to refrain from reducing diaspora communities, even individuals, to singular boxes of identity or connectivity for the simple reason that the histories of African diasporas including those of the so-called new diasporas are too messy, too complex, too varied for such neat categories. In my own work, I have argued and tried to demonstrate that when it comes to engagements, linkages, connections, dialogues—pick your term—between Africa and its Atlantic diasporas they have always been intense, subject of course to the shifting mediations of particular historical moments. The diasporas and Africa have served as signifiers for each other subject to strategic manipulation. The engagements have encompassed movements of people, cultural practices, productive resources, organizations and movements, ideologies and ideas, images and representations. Clarke’s notion of humanitarian diasporas would seem to encompass political and ideological engage-

ments between Africa and its diasporas. But this is only one aspect of the linkage, there are a lot more dimensions to the relationship both for the diasporas themselves and their countries and communities of origin subject to the changing constructions of their respective identities, social positionalities, and political economies.

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