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Diaspora as Politics, Culture, Commodity, Contrast

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Introduction to Diaspora

In our favorite reading of the semester, “Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender and Memory in the Third Reich,” Tina Campt writes that “the foundational notion of *diaspora* is the forced dispersal or displacement of a people.”¹ One definition, in concordance with Campt’s definition, describes Diaspora as the “scattering of language, culture, or people: a dispersion of a people, language, or culture that was formerly concentrated in one place.”² The definition includes the examples of the Jewish Diaspora occurring after the Babylonians conquered their kingdom in the 6th century and the African Diaspora, which is typically remembered as the colonial objective of capturing, enslaving, and shipping millions of people throughout the Americas. While the meaning of “Diaspora” inherently implies a fragmentation, a separation, and the rupture of the unity of kingdoms that were once home to so many people, the term “African Diaspora” has also come to represent the complete opposite. It is the manifestation of intangible spaces where the descendants of Africa come together. It is the body of languages we speak - our daily utterance that reminds us of the colonization of the histories and cultures of the great African continent. It is the brownness of our skin (or the lack thereof). It is the rhythm that makes us dance to a beat we’ve never heard yet inexplicably recognize. It is the reason we call ourselves Black, and the reason we can simultaneously call ourselves everything else. Essentially, while “Diaspora” may imply scattering, and some may envision it as the space of unification, we argue that it means *contrast*, because in reality, it represents both.

In this project, we interviewed three undergraduate students at the University of Pennsylvania who hail from Africa, the United States and Latin America. Our initial goal was not to understand the textbook definition of Diaspora, rather to understand where Diaspora exists and what it actually means to those people who see themselves as a part of it. If the African Diaspora exists as a symbiotic functioning of contrasts, what experiences shape those contrasts? As far as the “community” is concerned, why are some people automatically included and others of “questionable” membership? Why are some music styles labeled “Afro-centric” while others (also with Black origins) not? Why are certain ideologies, lifestyles, and cultural forms ranked as “more Black” than others?

Although we realize that interviewing a small sample of three undergraduate students could in no way holistically reflect all opinions on the definition of “Diaspora,” we attempted to remove ourselves, our opinions, and our experiences from the interviews and to let the subjects speak. Presenting the conclusions we found based on these three lives, and the definition that arises from their collective dialogue, we present Diaspora as “contrast.” We pay particular attention to the multifaceted contrasts present in “feeling Black” as an individual, versus simply feeling connected to Black culture, and how these two sentiments fit into the requirements for membership to the African Diaspora. We investigate three separate concepts of “Diaspora as contrast”: differing perceptions of Diasporic communities, America as the icon of the Diaspora, and different roles hip hop plays in youth Diasporic culture.

One of the most intriguing themes we found was the importance of self-identification and cultural belonging as prerequisites for membership in the African Diaspora. While identifying as Black and actually “feeling” Black culturally may not come as a surprise as components of the definition of Diaspora, the ways in which these sentiments were manifested during the interviews are completely contradictory. For example, on the surface our subjects were a Dominican who

doesn't necessarily feel Black, a Nigerian who cannot envision himself as anything other than Black, and an African American student who feels Black but does not completely understand why. The beauty of having subjects of such diverse ethnic backgrounds was that we could really get at the questions Camppt inquires of her readers in *Other Germans*. As modern members of the African Diaspora with seemingly diverging national histories, where do our paths, interests, and aims converge and digress? Where and why do Brent Edwards' instances of *décollage* occur? While sitting all three interviewees in the same room and asking them what they have in common, besides responding that they were all Penn students, they may not have all said they were Black, nor that they all belong to the Diaspora. However based on their responses, they do situate themselves and each other into this Diasporic community.

The interviews reveal that even the statement, "You're part of the African Diaspora so you must be Black" isn't so simple anymore because Blackness is constructed differently all over the world and continues to evolve. For example, many African Americans hold fastidiously to the "one drop rule"; nearly everyone with "one drop" of African ancestry is Black or belonging to the Diaspora in their eyes. Despite this understanding, many will see a Black man who dresses in a preppy fashion and listens exclusively to U2 and call him "white." Clearly the requirements have changed. As the descendants of African slaves continue to grow, evolve, mix racially and acquire independent national and ethnic identities, the black line of demarcation begins to fade. Perhaps because one can't determine race or ethnicity through phenotypic characteristics, a certain indeterminable amount of cultural awareness is necessary for membership to an ethnic group. Hence, knowing who Martin Luther King, Jr. was may award one point for Blackness yet sporting natural hair, being an Africana studies major, and watching *Family Matters* or *Living Single* could potentially award three more points.

Our Generation Y subjects affirm these changing qualifications across the board. One freshman, born in the Dominican Republic but now resides in New York, was asked how she would define "membership" in the African Diaspora. She responded as follows, "I think as long as they have the mentality. If you consider yourself Black, that you have the connection, then you are apart of it." Another student, a sophomore born and raised in Los Angeles, California agreed. She stated, "I think if you identify with the culture. Regardless of where you live..." Finally, when another freshman, born in Lagos, Nigeria and educated in England, was asked about how he defined the African Diaspora, he responded, "Anyone who believes that they are from Africa." Years ago a visibly Black person could not escape discrimination for not "feeling Black" that day, and a white person could not play on the basketball court with the Black kids just because she felt "connected to the culture." But skin color and naming often complicate this feeling of connectedness. One freshman includes a dose of reality to his idea of racial identification by adding, "It's so easy to judge by color rather than origin. I pre-judge." The sophomore comments on her discomfort with the ambiguity of the term "African American." She states:

"I have a problem with the term African American. It's different for people who are like, Haitian, and know where they come from and so when they're born here they say they are Haitian American, but I can't identify what the specific connections are. We (African Americans) don't have a language...I mean I don't know."

These interviews have shown that one does not need to have 300 reasons explaining why they consider themselves Black in order to fit into the Diaspora. As a matter of fact, it is enough not even to consider oneself Black and yet have a place in the Diaspora, as long as one feels a connection. For example, one freshman feels as though she belongs to a nation whose history is part and parcel of the Diaspora, but does not "feel Black" because of what it means to be Black in the Dominican Republic, and because of the cultural icons that are typically associated with Black people in America. She frequently discusses Blacks and Hispanics as two separate groups,

implying that she may not see herself as an Afro-Latino or does not view Hispanic as a possible ethnic subset under the racial classification of Black. She states, “It’s weird to come here and have people say ‘You’re not Spanish’. It’s weird to come here and have people say I’m American.” Finally, when I asked her why she felt herself to be a part of the African Diaspora she responded, “I think because of the things we (Dominicans) do, the African cultural associations, even if there are differences, everything is so close together.”

In light of the concept of Diaspora as contrast, the interviews displayed three themes that represent examples of this dichotomy. Perspectives from our African American and African informants affirmed the existence of a Diasporic community but also questioned the rationale of a unified community based on multilayered terms (i.e Africa, African American, Black, Hispanic, etc.). Continuing with this idea, the second theme understands the Diasporic culture as an extension of American culture. The international popularity of African American hip hop deems it a transnational and dominant representation of Black culture separate from American culture. Finally more deeply into hip hop, it begins to represent a token of American culture in communities of the Diaspora, but at the same time it deposits a specific Diasporic culture (African American culture) in places where the Diaspora already exists.

Perceptions of Diasporic Communities

Understanding Diaspora as a community as well as a sharing of differences, two participants expressed a doubt of a “sense” of Diasporas and “community” in the United States and in Africa because of an absence of shared characteristics. Within their own communities, both in the United States and Africa, the two felt there were distinct differences that can be viewed through the lens of contact with other cultures. One participant expresses her dissatisfaction with the term African American stating:

Do you consider yourself to be American?

“I consider myself American. I do because this is where I was born and this is where I’ve lived for my entire life. Therefore I’m American. My whole issue I guess... I mean I know that my descendents are from African and I feel like I do but in terms of... I just feel like I’m American but I don’t know what the specific association is. I don’t know what city in what part of Africa my descendents came from. I mean I know that they came from Africa but it’s general. I wouldn’t say that I’m African. I would say I descend from African culture and from the continent. I guess my culture is Black American.”

What does it mean to be American?

Chloe: I feel like it depends on the person. In theory America was supposed to be, you know, we left England because we’re oppressed here. Then starting in the thirties more immigrants came in so in theory we’re supposed to be this multicultural melting pot, in theory. The idea is to come here and be successful but in that’s all theory. I mean there are issues with that.

Do you think it’s culture?

“I wouldn’t say it’s culture because there are so many ideals and cultures like capitalism, coming from the bottom success stories but that is not culture. My personal culture isn’t... I mean I identify with being middle class and I want to be successful and get a job and make money. In terms of culture what kind of music, how I was raised that is based on African American ideals. I have a problem with the term African American. Its different for people who are like Haitian and know where they come form and so they were born here so they are Haitian American but I can’t identify what the specific

connections are. We don't have a language. If you're African Americans I guess it comes from Southern ideals but can you say that is your culture. I mean I don't know."

When asked if she was American, the participant immediately said yes but as she progresses she becomes uncomfortable with the term African American. She believes that identifying as African American comes with a specific connotation that you are African and you understand your specific genealogical lineage to a country within Africa. She feels this is a façade for those who identify as African American, as there is no way to trace one's specific genealogy in Africa. There is a break in the connection between Africa and African Americans. The term "African American" attempts to rectify this disassociation, but the informants seem to question if all those who use the term African American are aware of the way this connection is being mended. She believes that to have a specific culture, African Americans should have distinct cultural markers, for example, a "language," and differences that are not adopted from the surrounding American culture or that contrast with the dominant culture as "African American ideals". Though the participant finds problematic the usage of the term "African American", she does believe that African American traditions have shaped her while growing up. She also admits to what she believes represents Black culture in the United States early in the interview. This suggests that she envisions the Diasporic community within America to be one that includes those who are of African descent and are united by their culture even though there are many differences within the community itself. She also speculates as to whether these differences arise from the unique historical trajectories of Afro-Diasporic groups or if they are simply reactions in contrast with "American" culture- if the Diasporic groups in fact share anything other than skin color.

Another participant discusses the use of the term "African," embarking from the meaning derived when African nations and cultural groups employ it to understand themselves and thus communicate their collective identities to each other as well as to non-African audiences.

How do you define the African Diaspora?

"Anyone who believes that they are from Africa. If you look it up in the dictionary it means people who are of African descent. But it's hard for me to see people who are outside of Africa... I still see them as Africans. The color transcends Africa. Like for me the white people who lived in Zimbabwe but they called themselves Africans. But I didn't believe they were Africans. I mean I guess it's not their fault that they weren't oppressed. But I just saw that there was so much racism there. There are so many measures of counter-racism. Like I don't like the fact that they call people that."

Do you think diaspora is within people or is it cultural forms?

"Yes, definitely. Culture wise I would say that yes. I consider African Americans apart of the Diaspora. It's so hard for me... it's so easy to judge by color rather than origin. I pre-judge. I think being Black is apart of the Diaspora."

Who do you consider as being apart of the Diaspora?

(First participant) "I think if you identify with the culture. Regardless of where you live like in Jamaica or wherever but if you have the same cultural connections. Music, food, upbringing are apart of culture. It stems from tradition."

(Second participant) "If someone who describes the Nigerian culture like which tribe but if you step back can you mash them together? It's almost as if people who live in Nigeria who live outside of Nigeria are in the same brotherhood. You can definitely tell the different racial backgrounds. Do you think Arabian, tall, slim, fair featured with different types of hair would be considered apart of the same country? We would consider a

Ghanaian probably more than a Somalian. It's tradition. You can talk about Africans but in truth they are quite different."

The second participant seems to share the discomfort in ambiguity of the terms "African" and "African American." He believes in the idea of an African Diaspora but immediately connects the idea of membership in the African Diaspora as relating to skin color. He does not view the white citizens of Zimbabwe as being African because of their skin color and the assumption that they were not oppressed. This connection between skin color and oppression is what shapes the African Diaspora for this participant. He also expresses questions of doubt concerning the unity of Africans. He is Nigerian and believes that in non-African spaces there exists a transcending commonality between himself and a Somalian for example, but that this connection breaks in part when he compares his cultural group to those of other African nations. He highlights the main difference as the physical appearance of Somalians, believing they look more like Arabs. He highlights that if the term "African" is used it should be recognized that it represents a collective of different unique cultures within the continent. Therefore, although some people find their place in the African Diaspora solidified by their skin color and history of oppression, they do not share in a unified "African culture" that connects them specifically to those who live in the continent. Such a unified culture does not exist.

The participants' qualms about the usage of such terms as "African" and "African American" suggest a Diasporic community in America that initiates with skin color, bonds itself with a history of oppression, and is comprised of descendents of Africans (or African citizens themselves).

America, the African Diaspora

With the two perceptions of Africa and African Americans, the participants continued to talk about their visions for the future of the African Diaspora. When one was asked about the future of the African Diaspora he immediately assumed that we spoke only of the future of Afro-descendants in the United States, and did not consider the Diaspora's global presence. Later, when asked about his assumption, speaking of the African Diaspora solely as it pertains to the United States, he said that he felt one could not be talked about without starting with the other.

Do you have a vision for the future of this African Diaspora community?

"Yes. I don't know if I have an end vision. I can't see people being fully accepted. Even me if I speak a certain way at home I won't be accepted. In America I think it has to be becoming American even if you have to give up your quest for history. If you keep thinking about your personal (African) history you distance yourself from America."

You seem to be talking about African Americans. Not the Diaspora in America but the Diaspora as a whole including other countries. What is your vision for that?

"Oh you don't mean here in America. But you can't really discuss the future of the Diaspora without talking about America, eh. I mean if you're going to have a future for the Diaspora it would be here."

The participant's first thought when hearing "Diaspora" is associated with the idea of African Americans. As an international student hailing both from Nigeria and England, his association of the African Diaspora with only that of the United States and not in other countries interestingly suggests a general view of the United States as the international home of the concept of Diaspora, rather than Africa, "the motherland." When asked to re-evaluate his answer within an international context and not simply the United States the participant still believes that the

discussion of the future of an African Diaspora lies in America. He continues to assert that in America, African Americans or members of the African Diaspora above all must accept and assimilate into American culture. Over all, based on his personal experiences, this participant's view implies that the future of the African Diaspora lies in American culture.

Youth Diasporic Culture, Rap Music

As American culture was born out of the melting pot of many cultures worldwide, it is often viewed through a globally transcendent lens, one that is indicative of global influences but not necessarily representative of them. If the African Diaspora is seen as American culture this invites the idea that African Diaspora culture is transcending national and cultural traditions of countries worldwide. One form, particularly in youth culture, that transcends nationalism and cultures worldwide is rap music and hip-hop culture. This form is discussed among all three interviewees as something that they listen to and identify with.

In what context do you listen to music?

(Participant): I listen to old Samba and bachata at home. I just got into the hip-hop now because I didn't have MTV and VH1 before.

Do you think you go to parties where hip-hop is being played?

(Participant): Yes, because the only other option to party with is rock and it's hard to party to rock. I used to do the bachata all the time but I kind of like salsa if I could do it.

This participant discusses the music she listens to now as not being a result of the music her parents played while she was at home or even as a result of her being in an African American community at the University of Pennsylvania. She discusses her music choice of hip-hop as a result of her ability to view MTV and VH1 or popular American music television. It has also become a choice because of the popularity of hip-hop with youth on the University of Pennsylvania's campus. The ideas of partying and having a good time dancing are seen as synonymous with playing hip hop music. The two other participants shared many of these sentiments.

What types of music do you like and in what context?

(Participant 1): I like rap and hip-hop. Partying, I like hip-hop and techno. I like classical music when I'm trying to concentrate and do work. I like Nigerian music at any time. To put me to sleep Alicia Keys. I always liked Talib Kweli, Common and Mos Def.

(Participant 2): When I'm working I listen to jazz but I can't work with lyrics. If I'm doing whatever jazz is my chill music.

Do you think the majority of music you listen to is Black music?

(Participant 2): Yeah, I would say so.

(Participant 1): I don't know. Rock music is interesting. I like salsa. I don't know. I like Sting.

So like classic rock?

(Participant 1): Yeah.

So like U2?

(Participant 1): Yeah.

Is house music in Nigeria popular?

(Participant 1): House music among the younger generation and like rap is popular.

The second participant enjoys jazz as well as rap and hip hop, and the majority of the music she listens to can be classified as “Black music”. One element that can be taken away from these conversations is the global impact of African American hip-hop culture on the rest of the members of the Diaspora. It’s interesting to attempt to investigate what aspects of “American” culture come from “African Diasporic culture”, as well as what elements of “Diasporic culture” can be traced to African cultures. The constant lending and borrowing of African American culture with other Diasporic cultural groups (i.e. rap in Nigeria or reggaeton music in Puerto Rico) provokes the question as to whether these cultures are assimilating towards each other (at least in the aspect of music) and questions who has the upper hand in this exchange. What does this mean for the future of the African Diaspora?

Our research shows that Diaspora exists in many forms, and communication and cooperation between member groups requires actively working through the untranslatable patches. The interviews reveal that racial self-identification and a personal connection toward the Diaspora work hand in hand in describing the people who comprise this community. We see Diaspora everywhere. The Diaspora adorns an African American home with Kente cloth, and explains why African Americans speak English. Diaspora is danced in the Colombian national *cumbia*, and is spoken in the *Palenquero* creole language of the people of Palenque de San Basilio. Diaspora supports Marcus Garvey’s international movement and encourages the political alliances between the Congressional Black Caucus and Afro-Colombian land rights activists. The Diaspora is a contrast. While our research indicates that one must feel a “connection” in order to be part of the African Diaspora, that connection does not require that one identify as Black.

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