CONTEMPORARY THEORIZINGS OF DIASPORAS

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OVERVIEW

- Contemporary theorizings of African diasporas examine the coming together of various black people in global spaces.

- They also challenge the prescriptions of Safran, Cohen and others, and interrogate the notions of a fixed point of origin, unidirectional movement, and a single historical moment of forced dispersal.
THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

- For example, the African diaspora is often described as the result of the forced removal of black people from Western Africa during the centuries of the transatlantic slave trade.

- This conception only serves to homogenize Afro-descendants around the world by framing their global presence in terms of a specific historical event (the slave trade), that began in one place (Africa), and moved in one direction (out from Africa), for one purpose (slavery).
AFRICAN DIA SPORAS

- This conception elides a whole set of realities for black people who moved around the globe, from multiple places, at different times over the course of history, and for a variety of reasons.

- In addition, this conception of African diasporas ignores contemporary Africans and Afro-descendants who migrate to other countries.
The work of Paul Gilroy represents an important shift in African diaspora theorizing because he de-centers Africa as a fixed point of origin, and he disputes the unilineal trajectory of black people from the continent. However, Gilroy still privileges the transatlantic slave trade as a defining moment.
Gilroy claims that there are nodes of contact, exchange, and interaction, which reveal a more complex understanding of diasporic relationships and activities in an “ex-centric communicative circuitry” (1993:210-211).

His work highlights the constant movement of black people and the complex networks in which they exchange ideas, goods and cultural capital.
Gilroy (1993) discusses the “Black Atlantic” as a site of constant, multi-directional criss-crossing between Africa, Europe, North America and the Caribbean.

Gilroy envisions the Black Atlantic as a transnational community.
GILROY’S BLACK ATLANTIC (continued)

- Gilroy describes the Black Atlantic as a “system of cultural exchanges” (1993:14) and he describes how black activists, artists and intellectuals were agents of cultural history, a moving force of political, cultural and ideological exchange whose history is unincorporated in English and Euro-centric identities (1993:5).
The Black Atlantic as a space of “counterculture to modernity” illustrates how black people played an integral role in the economic and cultural development of the West.
For Gilroy, the African diaspora does not stem from the one-way extraction of black people out of Africa. It is more like the rhizome, a multi-spatial, multi-temporal series of networks in which black people are linked together by “strange attractors” through the shared experiences of victimization, racism and oppression (1993:210).
These “strange attractors” that bring black people together help create “safe spaces” of understanding and connection through the shared experiences of racism, oppression and victimization. (Gilroy 1993:210).
Although Gilroy decenters Africa as a singular point of origin, he still focuses on the transatlantic slave trade as a defining moment in the formation of the African diaspora.
A NEW AFRICAN DIASPORA?

- Kamari Clarke (2010) calls for a different ontology—one that de-centers the Middle Passage and transatlantic slavery and highlights contemporary issues of African states.
- She proposes a “new African diaspora” (2010:59) that is less about slavery and more about Africa’s economic development, humanitarian crises and political turmoil.
She discusses “new diasporic configurations,” in which diasporic communities are positioned to align with powerful institutions and mobilize their resources for political activism and development in the homeland (Clarke 2010:59).
However a new ontology—one separated from the slave trade experience—that delineates the “old” African diaspora from the “new” may stop short of recognizing “new possibilities emerging out of new forms of recognition and consciousness revealed by and through Diaspora as an ideology of Black mutual recognition.” (Rahier 2010:69)
Contemporary theorizings focus on how the various and diverse communities of the African diaspora relate to each other, and how they express solidarity and mark differences (See Rahier 2010, Hintzen and Rahier 2010).

Examining these meetings, interactions, negotiations, and confrontations helps us understand the limitless manifestations of blackness that are constantly reformulated in diasporic spaces.
Some scholars criticize Gilroy for presenting these spaces of encounter between black people as “safe” because it dismisses hierarchies of power between black people.

Within the African diaspora there are hierarchies and tensions that inform ever-changing black subjectivities, social formations, and identity performance (Thomas and Clarke 2006; Hintzen and Rahier 2010; Brown 2005).
The notion of the Black Atlantic as a transnational community masks the diversity of experiential subjectivities that are affected by global processes.

The processes inherent to globalization reinforce racial and economic disparity, spurring processes of hierarchization that “solidify particular kinds of hierarchy within diaspora.” (Thomas and Clarke 2006:32)
HIERARCHIES AND POWER

Diasporic communities are engaged in strategies that may “subvert the hegemony” of globalization, but are always linked to global processes and the “contexts of particular histories and hierarchies of power and knowledge” (Thomas and Clarke 2006:8).
While hierarchization does exist, there is also a coming together of different forms of blackness that informs, enriches, and expands the possibilities of what blackness can be (See Hintzen and Rahier 2010).

Diasporas then must be considered not only in terms of tensions and conflicts, but also in terms of connections, influences, mergers and exchanges (See Hintzen and Rahier 2010; Clarke 2010; Brown 2005).
The work of Jacqueline Nassy Brown (2005) in Liverpool, England demonstrates this point very well.

Black people born in Liverpool were affected by the hierarchization and friction that existed between them and the African American GI’s that were stationed in Liverpool right after World War II.
Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail
(continued)

- In a collision of diasporic spaces, (intonating occasional conflict), Black Americans ingratiated Black Liverpool racial production with the transmission of diasporic resources.
- Black Americans brought music, iconography and ideologies (Brown 2005:42) that profoundly inspired Black racial and political identity formation in Liverpool.
For Black Liverpudlian men the pervasive American hegemony was a source of contention as Americans flaunted wealth and dated local women.

In spite of the antagonism though, Black Americans exuded a “masculinist inspiration” (Brown 2005:54), and in the face of English nationalist racism, American resistance ideology “may be credited with providing the very means for Black identity to become such a formidable political force in this particular British context” (Brown 2005:41).
CONCLUSIONS (1)

- Contemporary theorists have walked away from understandings of Diaspora that focus on a fixed point of origin, forced dispersal, and unilineal movement.
- The work of Paul Gilroy has been pivotal in disrupting rigid definitions of the African diaspora.
CONCLUSIONS (2)

- By examining the coming together of black people in global spaces we see that different forms of blackness deeply influence black subjectivities and identity formations.
CONCLUSIONS (3)

- Ethnographic data combined with theoretical inquiries illustrate the complexities of movement, networks, relations and exchanges that characterize Diasporas (See list of recommended readings).
CONCLUSIONS (4)

- We now have a more nuanced understanding of Diasporas and can see beyond Safran and Cohen’s prescriptions and categories. By studying Diasporas we can better understand the processes of globalization and transnationalism that involve contact and exchange between people.