



Commentary: Aesthetic Forms, Homemaking, and Identities in Diasporic Cultural Production

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The papers in this cluster emanate from a panel at the African Literature Association's 2023 conference which was convened by Chichi Ayalogu, and they address questions about African diasporic aesthetic forms, homemaking, and identities. The two articles contribute to conversations surrounding how literary and cultural forms might inflect, extend, or unsettle the way we think about the African diaspora and how diasporic subjects interact with Africa and the diasporic spaces they inhabit.

These articles draw on a now well-established body of scholarship on the African diaspora. Prior to Paul Gilroy's seminal book (1993) on the Black Atlantic, scholars like St. Clair Drake (1975), Suzanne Valenti (1973), and Joseph Harris (1979) had theorized the African diaspora in terms of the cultural networks between Africa and Black diasporic subjects in both the United States and the

United Kingdom. Some of these studies focus on African trans-Atlantic modernity, which manifests through influences, identities, and cultural forms. Valenti's work, for example, reflects extensively on Négritude as an idea that manifests in African and Black American poetry, establishing the nexus between African diasporic writing and African cultural senses. Drake's focus was more on the framing of Africa as "homeland" (1975, 2) in Black American subjectivities. These early reflections on and theorizations of the African diaspora paved the path for Gilroy's (1993) work on Black counter-modernity and its accompanying transatlantic network that contests European modernity.

Although Gilroy focuses on the networks and interactions between Black diasporized subjects in Europe and America, he is mute about Africa and its contributions to this

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network. An archive of Black internationalist intellectual work, originating in 19th century Pan-Africanist writing and intersecting with anticolonial and Third World political movements in the 20th century, is far less so. Aesthetic and formal concerns were never far removed from the project of mid-20th century black internationalist intellectuals – including the Négritude poets – whose perspectives on diaspora, the Black Atlantic, and the complexities of transnational, transoceanic translation and solidarity are vital antecedents for the cultural texts that the authors of the articles in this special section take up.

The articles in this cluster attend to what has come to be referred to as the new African diaspora. Unlike the “old” diaspora, which refers to Africans whose migration was tied to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and which Isidore Okpewho terms “precolonial” (2009, 5), the new African diaspora refers to late 20th and early 21st century migrants who have sought to escape the socioeconomic and political crises of the postcolonial African state (Okpewho 2009, 6–7). Other scholars, such as Paul Zeleza (2010), tell us to make a distinction between an old, trans-Mediterranean diaspora, an equally old trans-Atlantic diaspora, and a contemporary African diaspora. The scholarship put forth in this special section thus enters into a dynamic and rapidly growing field of new African diasporic studies, including rich discussions on how contemporary diaspora reimagines home in terms of physical, emotional, and affective rootedness (Koser 2003; Ifekwunigwe 2003; Okpewho 2009); postcolonial exilic consciousness (Olaoluwa 2008; Tsaioor 2011; Oripeloye 2017); and postmodern cosmopolitan or “Afropolitan” diasporic subjectivity (Eze 2016; Gehrmann 2017; Mbembe 2017; Ede 2023). Henri Oripeloye, in particular, powerfully critiques a binary “here vs. elsewhere” approach to diaspora, foregrounding instead the image of the postmodern African diasporic flâneur who is both rooted and unrooted, an urban strider who takes the world or at least the fact

of Africanness as a single province, and de-emphasizes the imbrications of homemaking, both materially and affectively, in diasporic negotiations as well as in the reverse gaze at the diaspora from an embodied sense of home. This need to attend to diaspora’s multidirectional gaze and complex allegiances is central to the cultural texts explored in this special section, as well as to the theoretical and methodological choices of the authors.

The two articles attend to cultural creators who belong to what Lokangaka Losambe and Tanure Ojaide (2024) identify as the most recent and still emergent “waves” of new African diasporic subjects: the Janusian wave, which is defined by the “creative articulation of the past and the present for progressive future, [whereby] they simultaneously cast a critical gaze upon three life-worlds: the African societies they originate from, the Western world they presently live in, and the humanistic or globalist consciousness they project” (3), and by the Offshoots of the New Arrivants, or those who were not born in Africa and have not lived in Africa but who interact with the continent through “physical visits, archival research, and oral stories that they often produce as documentaries or integrate into their fictional narratives, dramas, and poetry” (5).

Building on Losambe and Ojaide’s work, these papers interrogate how new African diasporic subjectivities are framed and represented in literary and cultural production. Its authors pose, and endeavour to answer, questions such as the following: How do African creators reconstruct identity in new spaces? How do they engage with continental crises from overseas, and respond to state violence both in Africa and abroad? What are the ethics, politics, and economics of drawing on African cultural heritage in the service of diasporic critique and aesthetic production? How might we imagine the temporalities of African diasporic subjects?

Together, these articles invite us to rethink the complex and multilayered roles

diasporic subjects take with regard to affairs at home and the diasporic locations they inhabit. Formal diversity and interdisciplinarity have been hallmarks of African diasporic scholarship and aesthetic production since the inauguration of the field. The authors' investments

in different forms, as well as their yoking of aesthetic and sociological modes of analysis, extends and enriches this field, claiming a radically interdisciplinary, multimedia "home" for a new generation of African diasporic cultural producers of all types.

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