"Something Ironic Happened on the Way to the Black Revolution"[1]

The Politics and Power of Definition and Identity Construction within the Historiography of the African Diaspora

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> The main ingredient in the power of the weak state is the image it has in the minds of decision makers in the powerful states.
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> — Onwudiwe, E. and Ibelema, M. (eds), 2003, p. 4).

The field of diasporic studies is a complicated one. Not only is it genuinely interdisciplinary – drawing contributions from history, cultural studies and English literature, among other fields – but the term "diaspora" itself lacks a clear, widely accepted definition. This poses a unique problem for historians on two different fronts. From

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1   The inspiration for this title came from a line in Paulla A. Ebron's chapter "Strike a Pose: Capitalism's Black Identity" in Recharting the Black Atlantic: Modern Cultures, Local Communities, Global Connections. See Ebron (2008) for more details.

a methodological perspective, one needs to be able to define their subject of analysis in order to know what to look for within the historical record. Secondly, and more importantly, historians are poised to play a key role in theoretically crafting this definition themselves, as understanding the past is indispensable in categorizing the present. An examination of the historiographic record on diasporic formation suggests that there has been no shortage of attempts by historians to engage in this very task. Many of these conceptions of diaspora are, indeed, valuable and have served their purpose of guiding and developing research. However, when these are examined in sum, and in light of their impact on identity formation within the diasporas themselves, it becomes clear that there are some severe theoretical flaws in the way many historians have talked about this issue thus far.

The notion of "diaspora", as a historical construction, can be considered problematic, because it is conceptualized as a fundamentally reactionary phenomenon that restricts diasporic identity to the historical past while simultaneously dehistoricizing the present. This way of thinking precludes a discussion of the power relations that influence the labelling of a group as "diasporic", and, furthermore, of the ways in which the academic treatment of diasporic identity can work more closely with agency-conscious, community-defined identities, which are tools by which these power relations can be challenged. The African diaspora within North America and the Caribbean will be used as a case study as its long history of exploitation, the depth to which it has been studied, and its interrelationship with issues of racism will make for a particularly fruitful examination. This paper will begin with theoretical concerns surrounding the process of historical construction, then assess and critique recurring elements within conventional definitions of diaspora, and examine the way these definitions have been influenced by global and national power structures. It will then proceed to posit potential elements of a more proactive, agency-conscious definition of diaspora,

with an eye for the ways in which this new definition can be practically used in a positive way.

It should be noted that the goal of this paper is not to decisively prove that certain ways of thinking about diaspora should be abandoned outright, or to pose a conclusive, watertight solution to the problems being discussed. I can also not pretend to speak for a community of which I am not myself a member. The goal, instead, is to simply discuss ways in which the current method of thinking may be improved upon, and to open doors for discussion and further exploration at a future date. It is also important to mention that the members of what is termed the "African Diaspora" are an extraordinarily diverse group of people hailing from all corners of a large continent and can have very different histories, cultures and conceptions of community. Also, as Anthias (1998) highlights, there are power relations at work within these smaller groups, such as historically-rooted clan disputes or instances of gender inequality. Although it is very important to acknowledge these internal power differentials and their impact on each individual's ability to craft their own sense of identity, diasporic or otherwise, addressing some of the issues with macro-community identity is a positive first step in opening doors to dealing with some of these inequalities in the future. While acknowledging these issues, the term African Diaspora will be used in this paper, both because it is precisely the usage of this term that is the subject of analysis, and as an umbrella concept in order to facilitate a broad-based theoretical exploration that could potentially be applied to more specific groups within the diaspora at a later date.

Comparing Communities

The problems associated with the construction of units of analysis are not new to those who study history and are highlighted by comparative historian Michol Siegel. Some of the critiques of comparative history discussed by Seigel (2005) are particularly salient for

diasporic studies because, by defining a diaspora, one is inherently engaged in a level of comparison. Seigel defines comparison as "the relational process of self-definition," on the geopolitical, national, and community levels as well as that of the individual (p. 64). A "diasporic" community lives in the same place as, often has a similar socioeconomic makeup to, and is sometimes not even visually distinguishable from the general population, thus, a level of comparison is necessary to determine what actually differentiates one community from another. The very creation of a definition of diaspora is, itself, a comparative act. With this in mind, we can now assess comparative history's critiques of subject formation as they apply to demarcating a diasporic community.

Seigel (2005) argues that comparative studies focus necessarily on differences between two groups being studied in order to demonstrate that a comparative study is actually valid in that case. This precludes a discussion of the overlap, dynamism, and exchange between the groups, which are integrally important because they have the potential to obscure power relations (p. 64). In the context of diasporic communities and their relationship with the general population, ignoring the extent to which diasporic culture is being subsumed by that of the host country's majority population or, conversely, the extent of positive cultural pluralism, can prevent the historian from identifying the diaspora's actual position within the social structure, as well as what elements of any working definition are indigenous to the diaspora, and which are the product of cultural exchange.

Seigel assigns special importance to the role of the academy within this process. By creating definitions that are based on the problematic process of comparison, and discussing them without acknowledging their constructed nature, they go through a process of reification and are no longer really problematized, both within the academic community and outside of it. The definition becomes "fact," for all intents and purposes. Also, the position and bias of the

historian him/herself is rarely, if ever, acknowledged. This has the potential to affect parameters chosen for study, as well as which of the units is better understood, or receives more analysis (Seigel, 2005, pp. 64-5). In the context of diaspora studies, this notion of reification can be troublesome because, as Chowdhury (2010) states, diaspora is not a "sociopolitical configuration" so much as a "theoretical construct". Through the very process of using the term "diaspora" to describe something that exists in the world, historians *make* it a sociopolitical configuration that can be called upon, discriminated against, commandeered, or glorified by real people in their own lived experience.

Werner and Zimmerman (2006), in their article "Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisee* and the Challenge of Reflexivity" also provide arguments that can be added to this discussion. Expanding on Seigel's points about the role of the academic in the process of subject formation, they discuss the ways in which historians are not only inherently biased, but are incapable of escaping their own context (p. 33-4). This implies that if you asked American historians of different races – one black and one white – to define the African diaspora, you would likely get two very different answers due to both the nature of their education and the communities that they interacted with in their personal life. It can be argued that this problem can be overcome by historians taking a specifically reflexive approach to their research. Reflexivity, however, requires intentionality and it remains perfectly possible for historians to study and publish within the diasporic studies field without ever having to critically examine their own place in the research. Now that we have examined some of the methodological challenges involved in using diasporas as an academic unit of analysis, we can now move to a discussion of the ways that these challenges have manifested themselves in the literature.

Defining Diaspora

The term "African Diaspora" was first used by George Shepperson in 1966, likening the movement of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the expulsion of the Jews from Palestine in the thirteenth century. By the 1970s, the term "diaspora" had become commonplace within the academy and was used to refer to any group of people living away from their ancestral homeland. (Chowdhury et al., 2010, p. 2). Robin Cohen (2008),James Clifford (1994), and Paul Gilroy (1993) provide some of the most widely discussed, if not necessarily widely accepted, definitions of diaspora as it applies to those of African ancestry.

Robin Cohen (2008) posits nine features of a diaspora. He acknowledges that all diasporas do not necessarily possess all nine characteristics, but instead intends the list to be used as a rough guide whereby diasporic communities can be distinguished from non-diasporic ones. His nine characteristics are emigration from an original homeland, often forcibly and under traumatic conditions to at least two foreign destinations; expansion from homeland for trade, work, or as a result of colonialism; preservation of myth and memory regarding the homeland; idealization of ancestral home and commitment to its maintenance and prosperity; development of a return movement; ethnic consciousness and sense of difference; troubled relationship with host country; sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members elsewhere in the world; and potential for enriching the cultural life of the host country (p.6). Cohen further characterizes the African diaspora as a Victim Diaspora, similar to the Jewish community in that they both have long histories of servitude or enslavement, forced migration, and the inability to return home. Cohen (2008) does acknowledge that Jews have not been technically enslaved *en masse* for thousands of years, and do not experience the same level of racism within their adopted communities as members of the African diaspora do (p. 40).

James Clifford (1994) puts forth another complementary definition. He says:

> Diaspora is different from travel (though it works through travel practices) in that it is not temporary. It involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home (and in this it is different from exile, with its frequently individualistic focus). Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots *and* routes to construct what Gilroy describes as alternate public spheres, forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference. Diaspora cultures are not separatist, though they may have separatist or irredentist moments. (p. 308; emphasis in original)

Clifford's definition is particularly important because it emphasizes, perhaps more than Cohen's, the fact that diasporas exist necessarily within another community. If they did not fulfil this requirement, they would not be considered a diaspora by any standard. It also emphasizes, implicitly, the importance of geographic separation from "home" as part of the definition but also that multiple "homes" can exist.

Paul Gilroy (1993), in his widely-referenced book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and the Black Atlantic*, adds a further dimension in that his conception of diaspora strongly emphasizes the impossibility of full assimilation. He makes the argument that the defining feature of the African diaspora is their "double consciousness"; their ability to be, simultaneously, both African and European (p. 2). Consequently, each of these identities is by nature incomplete. Gilroy pushes for a greater acknowledgement of the fundamentally transatlantic character of the African diaspora in an attempt to get around these issues of unfinished identities (p. 16). However, in order to properly embrace transatlanticism, diasporic communities may never fully assimilate into their host communities, which requires making a choice between the practical expediencies of increased assimilation into one's long-term home, and the full maintenance of one's heritage in its most genuine form.

Although Cohen, Clifford, and Gilroy provide but a brief taste of the myriad of definitions of "diaspora" that exist, they provide a sufficiently representative sample of the existing work for the purposes of this paper as these definitions enable us to discuss what I believe to be three of the most common themes within conventional conceptions of diaspora: the dichotomies between self- and other-ascription, between historical sameness and contemporary community, and between "home" and "away". These themes may initially appear to be progressive in nature, but, through an evaluation of their theoretical underpinnings and implications, it will be shown that they are deeply problematic.

Deconstructing a definition

Perhaps the simplest way to define a diaspora is that it is a group which individuals choose to identify themselves. As long as there are people who choose to make this identification, a diaspora exists. As soon as they no longer wish to, it becomes relegated to history (Chowdhury et al, 2010, p. 5). Robin Cohen (2008), however, suggests that it is not so simple. He agrees that self-identification is important for the creation of a diasporic community, but he also says that what the outside population thinks cannot be discounted completely (p. 5).

Cohen (2008) has a decidedly valid point. It would be theoretically possible for a white South African to move to North America and self-identify as a member of the African diaspora. By many definitions, they would be perfectly justified in doing so. However, many members of the African diaspora would likely reject their self-identification, as would many members of the outside community, because of the political and historical implications of being a white African. Yet, if a black youth whose family has lived in North America for centuries decides independently to identify as a member of the African diaspora even though his/her parents or community do not,

it is arguable that she would have a much easier time having this identity accepted both within the black community and outside of it. Thus, it is clear that in terms of identity creation, it is *both* one's own self-perception and the way they are viewed by others that are significant.

This raises a number of significant problems. First and foremost, one must question, as Radhakrishnan (2003) does, whether these two contributors to diasporic identity are "hierarchically structured" (p. 121). Radhakarishnan's work centres on the place of Indian immigrants in American society, but his analysis has currency for other communities and within other contexts as well. He asks whether or not one's individual identity necessarily becomes subsumed by that of the majority population by simple force of numbers, and whether individual conceptions of identity that are not corroborated by the "other" can survive at all. Even if they can, he wonders: "...[W]ould society construe this as a non-viable 'difference', that is, experientially authentic but not deserving of hegemony?" (p. 121) Thus, we can see that defining a diasporic community in practical terms requires the cooperation and basic agreement of all parties involved, not all of whom have equal power in the relationship. This issue will be explored in more depth below.

The second major theme to be found within definitions of diaspora is the juxtaposition between the shared history of a community, and their contemporary interactions. Patrick Manning has been one of the foremost scholars discussing this issue and his work on the African diaspora brings to light interesting points. Manning (2009) argues that the black diaspora shares a generally common historical past with some internal variation, and it is contemporary community interactions in the context of this history that are significant for creating and defining the structure of the grouping. He believes that the ideas of "inherent black unity" and conceptions of a "shared ancestry", which are sometimes used to define the African diaspora are actually the product of the extreme longevity of some of

these community interactions and traditions that date so far back that they are often conflated with racial traits in public discourse (p. 12).

Manning goes on to say that black people themselves are the ones responsible for creating the community that would come to be known as the diaspora, chiefly as a reaction against racism. What he terms "black identity" was born out of a rejection of homogenizing discourse but, ironically, black identity itself is homogenizing as well. Communications advances in the twentieth century allowed this conception of diasporic identity to be dispersed on a much wider scale than ever before, and have resulted in transnational, transatlantic expressions of solidarity between blacks in North America and Europe, and those in Africa. He uses television personality Oprah Winfrey's charitable work in South Africa as an example of this (p. 338).

Manning's arguments, although recognizing the agency of black people in the creation of their own communities, are also flawed in a number of ways. Manning acknowledges the diversity that exists on the African and American continents, but he does not significantly question what are seen to be the defining events of this supposed "shared history". Discourses of African diasporic history are often centred on the slave trade and colonialism, both of which involve severe exploitation of black Africans by white Europeans.

There was a history of internal colonialism, and certainly of internal slavery, in Africa long before European contact and although the European-implemented version was by far the most severe incarnation, to imply that it is the most significant, because it involved *Europeans*, is problematic. It is by no means being argued that the transatlantic slave trade or European colonialism were not enormously significant and detrimental episodes in African history, nor that it is necessarily incorrect for Africans to define their history in terms of these events, but such a definition is fundamentally reactionary, defining an entire group of people in terms of the negative

parts of their history. When history-bound definitions of diaspora have as much power to affect individuals' identity as they do, this pessimism can have detrimental impacts. Manning does point out that many cultural rituals practised by slave communities, and reincarnated as modern popular culture, have roots in pre-contact African cultural rites (p. 334). This would be a much more positive reference point for community identity than a long history of exploitation, yet it does not receive the appropriate recognition by historians.

Finally, perhaps the most prevalent theme within definitions of diaspora is that of the "home" and "return movement," something easily seen in both the Cohen and Clifford definitions. A key defining feature of diaspora for many is a perpetual linkage to a "homeland" that is geographically separate from the location in which they currently reside. This linkage needs to be continually emphasized not necessarily by physical migration back "home", although this is sometimes present, but the culturally expressed desire to one day return and the explicit acknowledgement that the community's physical home and cultural home are not, and can never really be, the same.

Defining "home" is, similarly to the construction of diasporic identity, a two-way street. If a member of a diaspora wishes to call their adopted country home, this desire must also be reciprocated by an equivalent wish from the majority population to welcome them. Braziel and Mannur (2003) define the home-nation as "a place of belonging and civic participation" (p. 6). They argue that discourses about what constitutes a real home-nation " devalu[e] and bastardiz[e] the states of displacement or dislocation, rendering them inauthentic places of residence" (p. 6). Radhakrishnan (2003) asks if this discursive separation between "native" residents and "diasporic" outsiders is one of the ways by which individual identities are regulated by the state (p. 123). By having the diaspora defined as historical outsiders by both themselves and the majority community, dis-

cussions of inclusion and material citizenship for these communities gets sidelined. The possibility of a diaspora without an ancestral home seems to be a problematic one, and, although beyond the scope of this paper, an exploration of its theoretical possibility is certainly merited.

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2010) also notes that the concept of "Africa" as we are familiar with it today in no way existed at the time when slaves were being transported to North America, so many of the inaugural members of the diaspora would have had no conception of themselves as "African" at all. The idea of a monolithic Africa emerged with the beginning of the Pan-African political movement during Africa's decolonization period in the 1950s and 1960s (p. 5). This is evidence of the way that contemporary political concerns have influenced representations of history and presents practical difficulties in terms of actually pinning down what a return to Africa movement might look like today.

For the African diaspora, the task of returning home has been somewhat problematic as descendents of slaves do not always know exactly what part of the continent their ancestors came from originally. Sierra Leone, Libera, and Ethiopia have all been adopted as "ancestral homes" for members of the diaspora, the first two being explicitly created for that purpose and Ethiopia being adopted due to its association with perpetual independence on the continent (Cohen, 2008, p. 44). Desires of returning "home" have proved to be extremely problematic in the case of the Jewish diaspora, and similar problems exist for Africans as well (Cohen, 2008, p. 125).

Firstly, the concept of return is incredibly dehistoricizing, as not only does it assume that simply sending people back where they come from will make amends for their forced removal in the first place, but it also assumes that people of African descent would be just as happy in one part of Africa as another, and, furthermore, that they would be happy there at all. Individuals whose ancestors have lived in North America or Europe for many generations, even if they

continue to culturally identify with the continent of Africa, are not necessarily prepared to go back and live there permanently. Building on this point, those of African ancestry whose families were taken to North America in the seventeenth century have had extraordinarily different historical experiences than those who remained. How much in common does an African, who has experienced slavery, have with an African who has experienced colonialism? How much does an African who has experienced racism and disadvantage have in common with an African who lives in absolute poverty? Is the experience of exploitation enough, or does it go deeper than that?

These are critical questions in unpacking dichotomies of "temporary" and "ancestral" homes.

It has thus been argued above that the recurring themes throughout conventional definitions of diaspora have potentially severe theoretical problems within them, generally stemming from questions about who has a stake in defining diaspora, defining historical significance, and reconciling the necessity of a theoretical return movement with the difficulties of ever having one in a practical sense. If we want to move past some of these issues, a deeper understanding of the role of power relations in diasporic identity construction will be necessary. Three main issues are examined: discourses of indigeneity (who becomes conceived of as indigenous and how this process unfolds); the conditions of possibility that allow for the formation of diasporic identity; and, the limited actions and practical options available to those who wish to take diasporic identity further.

Exploring the footprint of power relations

In exploring the potential parameters of definitions of diaspora, Chowdhury et al. (2010) point out that North American aboriginal groups are not considered diasporic and, indeed, that white North Americans have taken on the label of indigeneity as well. They ques-

tion the manner in which one comes to consider oneself indigenous to any one location. On the surface, indigeneity seems like a fairly straightforward concept, but there is a great deal of variation in interpretations of what exactly this word should mean. Chowdhury et al. (2010) mention briefly the argument that central Africans are the only truly indigenous people as everyone else migrated out from Africa at some point in human history. Thus, even North American aboriginal populations, with whom the term indigenous is most generally associated, are immigrants too (p. 4). The other end of the spectrum has been briefly mentioned already and forms the dominant, or at least the relatively unquestioned, position. Descendants of Europeans have lived in North America for so long now that they are considered by most to be *bona fide* indigenous to the continent in that there is no longer any realistic expectation that they will one day go back to where they came from. This latter position is the one most applicable to diasporic studies as they are understood today.

Returning briefly to the idea of comparative definitions that was discussed previously, it would be very difficult to talk about the African diaspora at all if there were not another large group that was not considered diasporic to juxtapose them against. Yet, Europeans in North America fit almost half of Robin Cohen's (2003) nine criteria of diasporic communities. This begs the question of how they came to move from a diaspora to an "indigenous community" within popular discourse. This is not a question that has an easy answer, and certainly not one that can be explored fully within the confines of this paper but one can speculate that the answer could lie in the Euro-North Americans' control of the state, and, thus, their ability to define citizenship criteria, national myths, history curriculum and the like. It is also debatable as to the possibility that members of the African diaspora could ever achieve the same level of adopted "indigeneity" to North America, as much of an oxymoron as it is.

Virinder S. Kalra et al (2005) ask if American society would be constructed any differently if it were conceptualized as a "land of

diasporas" rather than a "land of immigrants" (p. 15). They argue that it might not change things significantly, but it would begin to challenge the seemingly un-challengeable hierarchy that exists between immigrants or diasporas and the white population. They write: "[T]o be called diasporic can only be constituted as a threat when it interrupts the black/white divide" (p. 15). In this way, it becomes clear that a diaspora does not exist in a vacuum, or even in a society in which all else is equal. Diasporic identity can only be defined in relation to a majority community that has deemed itself to be "indigenous" to their locality, regardless of the majority's actual historical origins. Consequently, there can never be a diasporic community that is in a position of social power. What begins as a simple recognition of historical origins and unique cultural practices is, in reality, an admission of subordinate status. This has implications for the other power structures that will be discussed below.

Martin Sokefeld (2006) argues that the construction of a diaspora requires what he calls opportunity structures, such as communication channels and open political structures (as cited in Cohen, 2008, p.13). What is meant by this is that people of a common background and a common cultural tradition need to be free and able to associate with one another in order to form a diasporic community. James Clifford (1994) expands on this idea and says that the number of people who identify with a diaspora, and the strength to which they identify, changes depending on the prevailing opportunity structures of the time (p. 306).

Within the context of opportunity structures, Virinder Kalra and his colleagues make a particularly interesting point. When writing about the implications of the racism prevalent in the 1970s British government, they quote Ambalavaner Sivanandan as saying: "The time was long gone when black people, with an eye to returning home, would put up with repression: they were settlers now. And state racism had pushed them into higher and more militant forms of resistance." (p. 26) This is crucially important because it implies

that an element of exploitation is necessary for a diaspora to come together as a community and identify as such.

Not only do diasporas exist as subordinate groups within the social structure, as previously discussed, it is this subordination that causes them to identify with others and a "home" they may never have been to, and to resurrect or create cultural practices that symbolize home to them, giving them a reason to gather together as a community with others in a similar situation. However, coming back to Sokefeld's argument, they are unable to accomplish this without the requisite opportunity structures. The questions remain as to what they are who creates these structures in the first place. The political and legal systems, as well as freedom of communication and association are all regulated by the state within much of the global north. As previously argued, diasporic communities very rarely constitute a dominant population, let alone form the state itself. Members of a diaspora may work within the state, but almost always in a minority position. Consequently, in authoritarian, racist, or otherwise unfree countries, in which the potential for exploitation and thus the need for community solidarity is the highest, these structures may not exist, and the diaspora will not form to any meaningful extent, or may be pushed underground. Thus, the formation of a diasporic identity, as has been alluded to previously, requires the cooperation and tacit agreement of the rest of society, especially the state, which can be problematic in situations where diasporic identity is being purposely suppressed.

The last issue to be discussed in relation to the operations of power structures within experiences of diaspora are the limitations in which these identities can be mobilized towards action. This issue will be examined through the example of the underpinning rationale for the Garveyism movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Garvey's main goal was to have the African diaspora contribute to the development of "modern civilization" in Africa. C. Boyd James (2009, p. 6) argues that this desire was not rooted in

materialism or political economy, but in Garvey's own personal interpretation of "black redemption" and how those of African descent relate to the communities and nations around them. Central to Garvey's philosophy was the concept of black imperialism, in which members of the African diaspora had to bring capitalism to the "backwards tribes" in Africa, whereby they could be "civilized". James argues that black imperialism was not rooted in materialism, but in what Garvey saw as the divine mandate of the African diaspora to assist those on the "home" continent and to eventually return there (James, 2009 p. 7).

The example of Garveyism is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it shows that the ways in which members of the African diaspora could interact with Africans themselves was extremely limited by the dominant discursive paradigm of the time. Western society did not yet know how to talk about African people as equals, and had only ever interacted with them from a position of presumed superiority, be it either through the slave trade or colonialism. Consequently, members of the diaspora, despite the common history and common cultural traditions they identified as sharing with Africans, they were themselves unable to create their own way of interacting with them outside of the European framework – through the lens of imperialism.

James (2009, p. 101) argues that this was largely a result of the fact that African Americans had never been given the opportunity to see themselves as agents of their own history; they were simply spectators. As a result, the very acts of enslavement and colonialism were normalized into part of the natural order of things whereby the European lost the label of oppressor and simply became white and the African lost the label of oppressed and simply became black. Indeed, Garvey viewed the experience of slavery as a necessary step in the African diaspora's advancement to the point where they were able to "assist" those remaining in Africa (James, 2009, 145). This example illustrates the way that the discursive paradigm of a particular time

has the power to define how a community can conceive of them-selves and their own history in such a way that it is barely noticeable.

Thus far, we have seen that the concept of a diaspora began as a historical construction which has gone through the process of schol-arly reification to the point where it is now a discernable and defin-able entity. Conventional definitions of diaspora in historical litera-ture have been shown to be problematic based on the fact that they do not acknowledge the function of global, national, and local pow-er relations in determining which communities "qualify" as diaspor-ic, who becomes a member of these communities, and what that means for them and their own lived experience. In order to begin to move past these problems within diasporic studies, we need to begin to think about a different way of speaking about diasporic commu-nities.

Moving forward

Scholars engaged in work on the African diaspora, and other groups in similar situations, should resist the urge to try and craft the one, singular, "accurate" definition and instead focus on finding a way to talk about diaspora in an academic forum while still provid-ing latitude for communities encompassed by this definition to make it meaningful in their own circumstances. Two potential solu-tions are posited below: using the language of Max Weber's "ideal types" more explicitly to help prevent academic constructions from becoming unconsciously reified in popular discourse, and by basing definitions on negative, rather than positive, ascription.

Max Weber's theoretical concept of the ideal-type is an extreme-ly useful tool for addressing some of the problems that arise through the process of historical construction (Cohen, 2008, p. 5). The ideal-type can be defined as: "'an ideal type is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view" according to which "*con-crete individual* phenomena … are arranged into a unified analytical

construct'; in its purely fictional nature, it is a methodological "utopia [that] cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality"(Sung Ho, 2008; emphasis in original). Similar in nature to Robin Cohen's definition of diaspora, yet more explicit in its intention, the ideal-type is simply a collection of specific examples of a social phenomenon distilled down to their most fundamental characteristics, without which they would not exist as they do. These characteristics are then combined into a single definition for the purposes of making it methodologically easier to discuss these phenomena both within the academy and in popular discourse. The most important part of the ideal-type is the explicit acknowledgement that it does not actually exist in any practical incarnation.

This concept can be useful both for discussing diasporas, in general, and in specific terms. Definitions rooted in the discourse of ideal-types can enable historians to more easily talk about disparate social phenomenon without worrying about claiming sweeping generalizations as factual when indeed these generalizations may not be one hundred percent representative of all lived experience. When discussing a specific group, like the African diaspora, seeing it as an ideal-type can help historians acknowledge the elements of historical and cultural commonality across the diaspora, while still leaving room for the discussion of particularities within it, which is crucial for a self-defined but other-accepted definition of diasporic identity.

The second way in which definitions of diaspora can be modified to better reflect the needs of the communities themselves is by discussing what diasporas are *not* rather than what they *are* (Clifford, 1994, p. 307). This does not mean that definitions should be based on conflictual relationships, or that they should ignore purely introspective assertions of identity. Instead, given that diasporic communities are sometimes not in a position where they have complete control over the formation of their own identity, by defining themselves in opposition, they can create the discursive space necessary to engage with their history on their own terms.

As discussed previously in the context of opportunity structures, African diasporic identity was often formed in the context of late twentieth century state racism in Europe and North America. Similarly, we have talked about the ways in which discourses of indigeneity were used by the dominant majority to construct ideas of difference between themselves and "diasporas". In both of these cases, it is the dominant majority that has engaged in "othering" the diaspora, but both of these concepts can also be turned on their head, allowing the diaspora to actively separate themselves from the general population for their own set of strategic reasons.

Paulla A. Ebron (2008) makes some very interesting arguments about the prevalence of black style and culture within "oppositional" and "anti-capitalist" movements in North America that are applicable to this discussion. The crux of Ebron's argument is that hiphop and "street culture", which evolved within the African diaspora as a mode of resistance against racism and economic exploitation has ironically become one of the major marketing strategies for large corporations (p. 319). What is significant here is the fact that Ebron does not attribute this process solely to the process of "co-option". Instead, she emphasizes "...the role of contingency in creating new structures of culture and political economy" (p. 319). This comes back to the issue of Clifford's (1994) opportunity structures that have been discussed previously. It was argued above that the dominant majority, and by extension, the state were the ones with the power to create and define opportunity structures, and thus to create and define the time and place in which diasporic identity could be constructed. What Ebron's argument suggests, however, is that "opposition" itself may be able to create opportunity structures of its own. Opposition or rejection of dominant structures can be the starting point, the initial commonality, that brings similarly affected communities together later to articulate themselves as a diaspora.

Building on Ebron's use of the hip-hop example, the relationship between rap, race, and the state in Cuba provides some interest-

ing insights here. The discourse of the Cuban Revolution, which very much persists to the present, worked to reinforce the idea of a unified Cuba where all were now equal under the socialist banner, irrespective of race or former class. Racial tension between Cubans of African descent and those with Spanish ancestry is, however, still common in certain parts of Cuban society, yet this goes unrecognized by the state for the reasons mentioned above. As with so much of political debate in Cuba, issues surrounding race and racism are consequently discussed in unconventional ways, in this case, through the lyrics of rap and hip-hop artists, many of whom are Afro-Cuban themselves. Because race lacks a formal platform for discussion in public political life, Cubans who experience racism or discrimination often have nowhere to turn for support outside of their own immediate social landscape. By combining a political message with a cultural form particularly resonant with Afro-Cuban youth, hip hop, in this context, has the potential to act as a bridge connecting disparate groups with similar experiences of disenfranchisement and discrimination.

What is even more interesting is the relationship between Cuban rap artists and the state. For obvious reasons, having racial tensions exposed in the public sphere is undesirable for the government, as it undermines the concept of a unified Cuban people that is so crucial for the continuity of the revolution. However, the hip hop scene is tacitly tolerated by the state due to the fact that rappers rarely criticize the principles of the revolution itself outright. Instead, their criticism is targeted at the fact that all Cubans have not equally experienced the revolution as it was laid out in 1959. The state chooses to interpret this as a call for continuing improvement of the revolution and thus does not engage in active censorship (Baker, 2005, p. 373). Whether or not the artists or their audiences intend the music as criticism of the revolution is another question entirely and one that is not easily answered. This illustrates that conversations about issues that affect the diasporic community which begin

outside the arena of the state can, once developed, be brought into the public arena to raise awareness and spark debate on issues that would normally not receive that level of attention.

By using structures of resistance as a starting point, fledgling diasporas can position themselves discursively outside of the majority population, thus creating the space they need to articulate their own commonalities without initially having to worry about "other-ascription". Once this strong community identity is formed, the diaspora is in a much more advantageous position from which to engage with the dominant majority about issues of inclusion and respect within the society. The only thing that remains is to discuss the implications of changing the way diaspora is talked about and defined within the academy and popular discourse, and whether doing so would be a positive step for members of the diasporic community. It is argued there are two main issues related to new conceptions of diaspora: diaspora could act as a challenge to the modern conception of the nation state, and could help to achieve development goals for the "home" countries of the diaspora.

Diaspora as a challenge to the nation state and to nationalism is a prevalent concept within the literature. As indicated above, diasporic communities that do not feel welcome within their adopted nation state can begin to take action against it, but even just the presence of a large, active diaspora community can potentially be enough to destabilize the notion of a homogeneous, self-contained state (Chowdhury et al. 2010, p. 5). Nation states require at least a basic historical and cultural definition in order to justify their existence as separate from their neighbouring countries. Some countries allow immigrants to participate in more of their own cultural traditions than others, but they still need to be open to participating in, accepting or, at the very least, tolerant of the national culture in order to be considered "citizens" with all the benefits that citizenship entails.

This is not as easy as it may initially sound, however. James Clifford argues that diasporas are fundamentally different from immigrant groups, because they cannot by definition be assimilated (Clifford, 1994, p. 307). If a black community in North America identifies firstly as African and, secondly, as American and their presence is, at least in theory, only temporary, then there is no reason they should wish to be considered "American". The idea that all those who live in America, even if their families have lived there for hundreds of years, are not "Americans", calls into question what it actually means to be an "American". It is in this way that diasporic groups, through a strong assertion of their diasporic roots and individual identity, can challenge concepts of national identity.

Diasporic identity can also challenge "us and them" narratives that exist within the discourse of nationalism. Not only does a strong African cultural presence in Europe and North America challenge the eurocentric, and sometimes racist, binarisms that existed during the colonial period, but it also challenges similar discursive separations that exist even within postcolonial studies or the development industry (Braziel and Mannur, 2003, p. 4). It problematizes the idea that those in the West are fundamentally different from those in Africa, and that they are better suited to "solve" Africa's problems of poverty, because "Africa" is not just "over there", it is present in the West as well. This can decrease instances of othering, both conscious and unconscious, that continue to exist within both postcolonialism and development studies.

Robin Cohen (2008, p. 168) states that diaspora, in addition to rhetorical support, can provide much more concrete assistance to development initiatives back "home". Cohen notes that the idea of remittances sent from members of the diaspora back to the native country shares some common themes with the Garveyism movement discussed previously, in that they both mobilize the diasporic community to contribute to the material well-being of those still back "home". There is a key ideological difference though. Gar-

veyism's concept of black imperialism advocated the expansion of capitalism into Africa, requiring the diaspora to actively engage in this process, bringing the market to the "uncivilized" (James, 2009). Remittances do not have this same prescriptive element, and can be more accurately described as a redistribution of wealth from the diaspora back to Africa without any strings attached to how it is spent.

Manning (2010) suggests that the creation and constant revisiting of histories of exploitation is key in preventing the dominant majority from repeating past actions, and serves as an ever-present implicit reminder in an active African diasporic community can help with this (p. 346). He writes that he worries that the history of slavery and the slave trade will one day be forgotten in America, (p. 349) but by creating this historical memory, this can be prevented.

Conclusion

Through an evaluation of the discursive and historiographic trends within diaspora studies, it can be concluded that the concept of diaspora is a problematic historical construction that defines membership in terms of historical experience, yet simultaneously dehistoricizes diasporic members' present experiences. This is largely a result of the influence of local, national, and global power structures on who can be defined as a diaspora, how they are able to construct this identity, and what that means for individual lived experience. By promoting a discussion of a more self-defined, agency-conscious definition of diaspora through the creation of new discursive spaces, these communities have the potential to mobilize this identity against concepts of nationalism, inequality and false narratives of "progress." Due to the fairly recent popularization of world historical studies, many conversations surrounding the practice of world history are still very much confined to the theoretical realm as practitioners attempt to work out the parameters, philosophical foundations, and methodological practices of the field. By engaging

in exercises such as the problematization of diaspora studies, historians can work towards some of these goals while also thinking about the real-world implications of their work. By bridging the gap between theoretical history and its practical application, we can better understand the discursive framework that we as historians operate within, our role in perpetuating it, and the ways in which we can work towards challenging it.

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