The Dangers of Diaspora
Some Thoughts About the Black Atlantic

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Diaspora Studies – studies of transnational interrelations, cultural contact zones, and cosmopolitan conditions – have come to replace regional studies, as well as traditional literary and cultural scholarship concerned with national traditions and constellations. The concept of the 'Black Atlantic', in particular, has received much attention in the context of this rearrangement of focus. My own work testifies to the productivity of Paul Gilroy's metaphor, which envisages a black history of modernity "that defiantly reconstructs its own critical, intellectual and moral genealogy in a partially hidden public sphere of its own."[1] In what follows, however, 1 would like to point out an inflationary use of the term, whereby I would first like to place the debates on diasporas and transnationalism in an historical context - they are, after all, to be seen as a reaction to Cold-War discourses of literature as a self-contained and ahistorical phenomenon. In the USA, in particular, the Cold-War practice of literary and cultural analysis was very much demarcated by the logic of exceptionalism, favouring an isolationist approach to the study of the USA. I will develop my critique of current practices and concepts on the grounds of an engagement with this earlier approach, and I will argue that there are more analogies between the outdated doctrines of exceptionalism and today's fashionable theories than might at first meet the eye.

1 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993): 37 38.

I would like to begin with a brief history of what could be regarded as a master text from my discipline - a text with which American studies came into its own in the 1950s. Perry Miller's study *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956) traces what has later been called "the Puritan origins of the American self,"[2] a history of thought which Miller made out to be unique and exceptional - American in contrast to European or English traditions. By leaving Europe and settling in America, the new 'promised land' and the 'city on the hill' for all the world to watch, Miller argues, the Puritans initiated a new history of thought and culture and thus inaugurated "the uniqueness of the American experience."[3]

This line of reasoning might sound a little surprising coming from a scholar who made his name in the American academy of the Cold-War period. Yet in his preface to the study, Miller chose an odd way of enacting his own initiation into the field of American studies. The preface states that the quest for the origin of the American self started, surprisingly enough, in Africa. In the 1920s, Miller recounts, as a young college drop-out disillusioned with a life of books and theory in which everything seemed already said and done, he hired out on an oil tanker crossing the Atlantic, looking for "adventure" where a British traveller of the nineteenth century might have looked for it, too: in Africa. He did not find what he was looking for. Like so many of his European contemporaries, Miller was disappointed by Africa, which did not seem to live up to the high expectations of exoticism and jungle thrill he had entertained. Yet "The adventures that Africa afforded were tawdry enough," he writes in his introduction to *Errand into the Wilderness*, "but it became the setting for a sudden epiphany (if the word be not too strong) of the pressing necessity for expounding my America to the twentieth century."[4] At Matadi, on the "banks of the Congo," while engaged in the trivial occupation of supervising, "in that barbaric tropic, the unloading of drums of case oil," Miller first encounters the "mission" which was to shape his entire academic career - the mission of recording America from 'the beginning': "it seemed obvious that I had to commence with the Puritan migration."[5]

2 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven CT: Yale u p , 1975).
3 Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1956): ix.
4 Miller, *Errand*, vii.
5 Miller, *Errand*, viii.

With this curious anecdote, Miller exemplarily and certainly unconsciously brings to the fore a pattern of representation in American cultural history in which Africa or, rather, africanity, is always there yet never present. His insistence on perceiving Africa as an uncultured and ahistorical wilderness, as the space of uninscribed and alien 'otherness' from which the study of the 'self takes off, must seem doubly problematic. First, he refuses to see the Congo - or America, as it were - as part of a whole or, rather, as part of a web. By thus blinding himself, he also refuses to perceive American (literary and cultural) history as something that is intricately and inextricably interlinked with world history.[6]

In keeping with his line of reasoning, Miller explicitly excludes that other and 'earlier' beginning of North American colonization (the Jamestown colony in Virginia) from his study. Indeed, to start an American cultural history with Virginia would have meant telling a different story. After all, the first African slaves in North America arrived in Virginia with its plantation culture; a circumstance made all the more ironic by the fact that these Africans entered the New World a year before the Puritans made it to Plymouth Rock.

One could, of course, go even further back in time. Columbus's pilot Pedro Nino, Paul Gilroy reminds us, was an African. To look for a 'pure' beginning for 'Project America' or the project of americanization is to engage in simplification - America was always already inscribed with difference, and not only because the continent was by no means an uninhabited wilderness, as Miller had it, but also because, from the very outset of the colonial venture(s), Africans were involved in the process of settlement and takeover. Thus, to focus on America in isolation is to present a picture with many blind spots.

Yet to criticize isolationism and exceptionalism in cultural studies these days is not considered very radical. In fact, to call for a transnational perspective in literary and cultural studies has almost become a ritual in recent years; the very existence of the Association of the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL) is a case in point. At this juncture, I would like to contrast

6 Numerous critics have taken issue with Miller's preface; the most extensive and insightful critique is by Amy Kaplan, "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan & Donald Pease (Durham NC: Duke UP; 1993): 3-21. See also Gesa Mackenthun's introduction to her study *Metaphors of Dispossession: American Beginnings and the Translation of Empire, 1492-1637* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1997).

the first anecdote with a second. While the story around Perry Miller illustrates the need for a transatlantic perspective, what follows elucidates some of the dangers inherent in contemporary theories of transnationality and diasporic identity.

When Miller was looking for a job on a ship which would bring him to Africa in the early 1920s, he might have crossed paths with another young man, who was just as eager to leave the USA behind and who also had dropped out of school (Columbia University, New York City). Langston Hughes felt that real life was somewhere else, and he, too, sailed to Africa in the early 1920s, as a member of the crew on a merchant steamer. Yet the incentive and outcome of his travels were quite different: the African-American poet claimed to have gone on the voyage in order to get in touch with his own roots. This time the journey seems to have been more satisfactory - in fact, Hughes seems to have experienced an epiphany of his own, a kind of pan-Africanist vision to counter Miller's culture-shocked fantasy of retreat. This is how Hughes recorded his first sightings of Africa in his autobiography:

> And finally, when I saw the dust-green hills in the sunlight, something took hold of me inside. My Africa, Motherland of the Negro peoples! And me a Negro! Africa! The real thing to be touched and seen, not merely read about in a book.[7]

His experience while travelling down the west coast of Africa seems to be in keeping with this first impression; in his autobiography he revels in memories of a "wild and lovely" country, with "dark and beautiful" people, "the palm trees tall, the sun bright, and the rivers deep."[8] All these were clichés of africanity which hardly allow for more of a sense of the actual place than Miller's vague allusion to the "edge of a jungle in central Africa."[9] Yet, while Miller registered indifference and alienation, Hughes seems to have relished the difference of the African experience. The only drawback he jots down is: "The Africans looked at me, and would not believe I was a Negro."[10]

7 Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940; New York: Hill & Wang, 1963): 10.

8 Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 11.

9 Miller, *Errand*, viii. For a more detailed discussion of the workings of 'africanity', see my *Artificial Africas: Images of Colonialism in the Times of Globalization* (Lebanon OH: UP of New England, 2002).

10 Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 11.

Writings such as these made critics such as David Chioni Moore argue that Hughes' career "enmeshed itself within the broader Black Atlantic" and thus requires something other than nationalist paradigms of analysis.[11] Yet while Hughes was indubitably an internationally relevant writer whose many travels and whose political activism makes him an important figure not only in the USA, but also in African and European literary and cultural debates, I am not quite sure that I agree to the statement that his writing on Africa testifies to a Black Atlantic sensitivity. Things are more complicated than that. Hughes's autobiographical text was written in 1940, at a time when he felt it more important than ever before to express his critique of colonialist and neocolonialist business ventures, as well as to present a perfect continent in the exploitative grip of European and American imperialism. This imperative did not quite chime with the ambivalences of the actual 'first encounter' of the young American with West Africa and made him purge the autobiographical text of almost all indications of culture-shock or alienation. Thus, a piece which he published in the New York magazine *Crisis* shortly after he returned allows for a considerably greater sense of difference and distance. Here, Hughes describes his impressions of Matadi, hence of the very same place that triggered Perry Miller's revelation, where Hughes, too, was engaged in the activity of supervising African workers unloading the ship. Where Miller remembers only the jungle, Hughes focused on the workers. He admits to be horrified by the "dirtiest, saddest lot of Negro workers seen in Africa,"[12] where no communication and no bonding took place.

While the horror of this sight is mediated by colonial critique in the *Crisis* piece, Hughes is even more explicit in his private notes about a feeling of alienation, mixed uneasily with a sense of cultural superiority. "Hughes's first impression [of Africa] was of crudeness and absurdity," claims his biographer Arnold Rampersad on the basis of the letters that the young poet wrote home. "I have laughed until I can't," Hughes wrote to his mother about the local dress code, and concludes: "It's a scream."[13]

11 David Chioni Moore, "Local Color, Global 'Color': Langston Hughes, The Black Atlantic and Soviet Central Asia, 1932," *Research in African Literatures* 27.4 (1996): 50.

12 Langston Hughes, "Ships, Sea and Africa: Random Impressions of a Sailor on His First Trip Down the West Coast of the Motherland," *Crisis* 27 (December 1923), 70, quoted in Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford UP, 1986): 76-77.

13 Langston Hughes, Letter to Carrie M. Clark, July 3, 1923, quoted in Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 73-74.

In these letters, the impression of a noble country with regal inhabitants and classical scenery communicated in the autobiography collapses, and gives way to a much more realistic sense of distance. This is, after all, Hughes' very first transatlantic trip, and journeys do have a tendency to run counter to pre-formulated programmes and projections. Yet, in Hughes' poetry of the period, the ambivalent experience did not register at all; he continued to celebrate Africa precisely along the lines he had laid out for its celebration quite some time before he travelled there. In fact, his celebratory stance became even more pronounced after 1923. The backdrop to a reinvigorated project of promoting afficanity in America, however, is definitely not constituted by Hughes' trip to Africa, but by another transatlantic trip he undertook, less than a year after returning from Africa - this time to Europe. In Rotterdam, he jumped ship and made his way to Paris, where he lived for several months in 1924. He mentions, in particular, the chance to "see the famous collection of African sculpture belonging to [the collector] Paul Guillaume,"[14] and thus seems to confirm Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s insight that the "route to Africa [...], for black as well as white Americans and Europeans, is by way of the Trocadéro [i.e. the Ethnographic Museum with its huge African collection in Paris]."[15]

It was on these grounds, those of expressionist Primitivism, that Hughes celebrated Africa in the years to follow. With this, his response to Africa doubtless differs glaringly from Perry Miller's response. In his manifesto of black art, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" of 1926, he conjures up the "eternal tomtom beating in the Negro soul" to defy and disclaim everything that Miller cherished - an established culture of "white teachers [...], white books, pictures, and papers, and white manners, morals and Puritan standards."[16] Yet if Hughes, in contrast to Miller, acknowledges the 'africanism' at the heart of American culture, his africanism still has little to do with Africa - or even a diasporic consciousness at that.

For Hughes and for many other black travellers in the twentieth century, the Atlantic was indeed an important site of identification, and it was

14 Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 186.

15 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Europe, African Art and the Uncanny," in *Africa: Art of a Continent*, ed. Tom Philipps (Munich: Prestel, 1995): 30.

16 Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. & Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Norton, 1997): 1270.

certainly no accident that Hughes chose to entitle his autobiography *The Big Sea*, indicating a transatlantic dimension and thrust in his life. Yet the blackness of this Atlantic is often a marked construct rather than a reliable framework or alternative 'public sphere', as Gilroy has it. A case in point is the following anecdote from *The Big Sea* about an encounter of Caribbean and American blacks in Lagos Africa. A fight broke out between a British freighter and Hughes' ship, the *S.S. Malone*:

> The main thing I remember was that crew-solidarity outweighed race that day, because there were on the British ship quite a few Negroes - West Indian Negroes, and on our ship, George and I and the two Puerto Ricans were definitely colored. But when the white boys on our boat yelled: "Get them limeys [slang for British sailors]! Get them niggers!" and we met the British crew on the dock head on, George and the Puerto Ricans and I yelled, too: "Get them niggers! Get them limeys!" And after them we went. In the heat of the fight, we forgot we didn't like the word nigger applied to ourselves.[17]

The fight that ensues is more a matter of entertainment, depicted in largely comical terms, than of serious conflict. But the alliances opening up (or, rather, not opening up) here, indicate that categories such as 'diasporic identities' or 'transcultural communities' do not really apply. To take the notion of a 'black Atlantic' too seriously is to miss much of the dynamic and flexibility involved in identification.

Hence, although it is to be conceded that for an analysis of literary and cultural processes of exchange, the concept of the 'black Atlantic' has proven immensely productive in the last decade, its impact on more basic, less immaterial forms of exchange is worrying. I am thus of the view that this concept threatens to deflect from the central problems of the black diaspora in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, given the fact that heterogeneity, discrepancy, and glaring differences are so much more pervasive between the different groups of 'Africans' worldwide than a common basis, be it as evanescent and floating as the imagery of the sea. Whenever we concentrate on concrete instances of encounter and exchange, problems arise which studies such as Gilroy's and many other contemporary accounts of diasporic culture hardly allow for. I do not share Joan Dayan's very basic and very categorical critique of Gilroy's book, but she has a point when she writes:

17 Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 116.

> In Gilroy's potent images of the 'diasporic cultural innovation', in what he calls 'the black Atlantic network', he never once considers how political realities a chaos of instrumentalisation and greed merge with a destructive syncretism.[18]

Indeed, one tends to forget these days, now that hybridity and syncretism have become concepts with generally positive connotations and seem to have completely replaced the older values of purity and homogeneity, that the appropriations and adaptations, the mergings and mixings that arise from uneven cultural encounters are not always positive for everybody involved. Especially when the encounter at stake is among black people, rather than one between black and white people, we are prone to lose sight of very basic economic and political realities, and to see new communities, alliances, and solidarity, where often enough projection, suspicion, and misunderstandings evolve on both sides. Thus it is all the more important to look closely at who is appropriating what for which purpose.

Let me give another example of this discrepant and variegated history. Almost thirty years after Langston Hughes was there, Paris was still a much-favoured metropolis for white and black Americans. In the 1950s, it became the chosen city of two other famous black American writers - Richard Wright and James Baldwin. And Baldwin tells us of another instance of black Atlantic reality which took place in this city. In a magazine piece written in 1950 for the American journal *The Reporter*, he relates his encounter with North African students in Paris, an encounter which could have taken the guise of a diasporic union of the marginalized. Yet Baldwin reaches quite bleak conclusions with regard to the prospect of a diasporic political mobilization:

> They face each other, the Negro and the African, over a gulf of three hundred years an alienation too vast to be conquered in an evening's good-will, too heavy and too double-edged ever to be trapped in speech. This alienation causes the Negro to recognize that he is a hybrid.[19]

18 Joan Dayan, "Paul Gilroy's Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as a Metaphor," *Research in African Literatures* 27.4 (1996): 11. For an interesting critical take on Gilroy's approach, sec also Laura Chrisman, "Journeying to Death: Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*," in Chrisman, *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperial- ism and Transnationalism* (Manchester: Manchester U P, 2003): 73 88.

19 James Baldwin, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," in Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955; Boston MA : Beacon, 1984): 122.

For Baldwin, the identity of the 'Negro', the African American, configures itself in stark contrast to a 'European' and an 'African' sense of selfhood, and just like Perry Miller - if with very different implications - he ends up evoking an America very much at variance with the rest of the world, an exceptional America with very specific problems and people, especially when it comes to its minorities.

Ironically, at exactly the same time that Baldwin formulated these thoughts, Frantz Fanon approached the issue from another angle in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), demarcating the situation of postcolonial Africans as no less 'hybrid' and artificial than that of African Americans, if definitely laid out along different lines. Yet the fact that similar projects of reconceptualization went on in North Africa, in Paris, and in the USA does not mean that easy alliances open up between the aggrieved communities involved. Frantz Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961):

> The Negroes of Chicago only resemble the Nigerians or Tanganyikans in so far as they were all defined in relation to the whites. But once the first comparisons had been made and subjective feelings were assuaged, the American Negroes realized that the objective problems were fundamentally heterogeneous. The test cases of civil liberty whereby both whites and blacks in America try to drive back racial discrimination have very little in common in their principles and objectives with the heroic fight of the Angolan people against the detestable Portuguese colonialism.[20]

Obviously, this is not to say that transnational alliances cannot be forged and put to use for minority purposes worldwide. But it is a reminder that often enough such alliances are illusory, based on projections and false ascriptions, and that to take them for granted is to ignore the very complexity of the problems at stake. One last example may illustrate this danger.

I have focused on the experience of African Americans abroad - in Africa and in Europe - up to now. Let us now invert this perspective and cast a glance at the situation of Africans in the USA. As Rosemary J. Coombe and Paul Stoller have shown in their analysis of the contact zone constituted by Harlem, New York, things are just as complicated for the Songhay men from the Niger, who sell all kinds of consumer goods in Harlem, as they were for the young Langston Hughes in Matadi. Increasingly, Coombe and Stoller

20 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington, preface by Jean Paul Sartre (*Les damnés de la terre*, 1961; New York: Grove, 1963)' 216.

found, these African vendors offer paraphernalia of africanity in the streets of Harlem:

> Knowing something about the history and plight of African Americans, a few Songhay speaking migrants accept the fact that the 'Africa' African Americans 'need' is not the Africa they know. In the Harlem market context they are prepared to renounce recognition of the complexities of the Africa from which they come, and make a gift of the more unencumbered significance it has acquired in the local community. Most of them easily engage in marketing the fetishes of an imaginary Africa and the signs of an utopian America - learning to read their market, media culture, and the marks of fame that appeal to African Americans.[21]

If Coombe and Stoller end on a conciliatory note, focusing on the "few" Songhay traders who might have an insight into the intricacies of the needs and desires evident in their business, the predominant feeling of these sellers most likely is not understanding but rather puzzlement, amusement, or in- difference. The Songhay vendors and their African-American clients live in different worlds, even though they live in one city; their paths cross daily, but to think of them as part of the same social group - an imaginary 'diasporic' culture - would mean to resort to racial categorization.

Thus this phenomenon, like the phenomena discussed before, warrants a warning: not to take the metaphors of the Black Atlantic and of diasporic identity at face value and not to focus too strongly on them. While there may be links between blacks in the UK, in the USA, in the Caribbean, and in Africa, there are also numerous ruptures, and in many respects these ruptures are more important than the commonalities. To insist otherwise is to fall prey to an illusion which Benedict Anderson has commented on with respect to contemporary identity politics and the myth of "'diasporic' collective subjectivities." The advocates of such models of thought, Anderson argues, confuse a "certain contemporary vision of cosmopolitanism" with historical reality - thus seeing 'members' of groups where historically and culturally all sorts of identificatory categories may have been relevant.[22] To come back to the

21 Rosemary J. Coombe & Paul Stoller, "X Marks the Spot: The Ambiguities of African Trading in the Commerce of the Black Public Sphere," in *The Black Public Sphere*, ed. Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995): 269-70.

22 Benedict Anderson, "Nationalism, Identity, and the World-in-Motion: On the Logics of Seriality," in *Cosmopolitics*, ed. Pheng Cheah & Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991): 131.

examples at hand: the Africans did not acknowledge Hughes' blackness, and James Baldwin did not conceive of himself as part of a global black community, either. We should be aware of the danger of essentializing and reifying the very categories brought into discursive circulation to provide a way out of essentialist structures of identification. If care is not taken, the very terminology of diasporic identities and cultures will come dangerously close to the essentialist notion of a national tradition laid out in Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness* - if translated onto a global scale. The very complexities of modernity and its global networks of people and resources call for a vocabulary which reflects rather than distracts from material conflicts, cultural hierarchies, and the subtle and not so subtle shadings that organize and differentiate ethnic groups worldwide.

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