1 The Concept of the African Diaspora and the Notion of Difference

Introduction

In academic discourse in general and cultural studies in particular, the Greek term diaspora has emerged as a key analytical concept to shed light on different processes of (violent) dispersal and resettlement of groups, often caused by a collective traumatic event that continues to haunt later generations. Closely linked to the complex history and fate of the Jewish people, diaspora was first used in the so-called Septuagint, a translated version of the Hebrew scriptures. In this Greek text, which was created in the third and second centuries B.C.E., the word did not refer to a specific historical event of displacement, such as the Babylonian captivity. Rather, it was introduced in a more general sense to describe the situation of Jews living in a foreign place outside the region of Palestine. While there were many successful Jewish individuals in the diaspora, this experience was perceived as negative and tragic.[1] In its original usage in the Septuagint, Martin Baumann contends, diaspora was interpreted "as a preparation, an intermediate situation until the final divine gathering in Jerusalem."[2] In other words, in this early conception of diaspora, there was a distinct theological and spiritual dimension and a strong focus on an eventual return to Palestine.[3]

Throughout history, black artists, writers and intellectuals have explored the similarities and differences between Jewish and black experiences. They have focused on a wide range of diasporic themes, such as the scattering of black communities in the context of the transatlantic slave trade or the role of

1 | See Martin Baumann, "Diaspora: Genealogies of Semantics and Transcultural Comparison," *Numen* 47.3 (2000): 313-18.

2 | Ibid. 317.

3 | Ibid.

the African mother continent.[4] However, as sociologist Robin Cohen emphasizes, over the centuries, "the classical use of the term, usually capitalized as Diaspora and used only in the singular, was mainly confined to the study of the Jewish experience."[5] It was only in the second half of the twentieth century, in the context of decolonization movements in Africa and the Civil Rights movement in the United States, that historians and intellectuals started to employ the term African diaspora to address "the status and prospects of persons of African descent around the world as well as at home."[6] Since then, in the academic world and in popular discourse, diaspora has become a widely used concept to reflect on questions of black identity, home and belonging and to analyze power structures, processes of exclusion and forms of black resistance. In particular, in many studies and discussions, it is employed as a framework to shed light on aspects that connect black individuals and groups across national and cultural borders.[7] As the historian Tina M. Campt notes, given its popularity, diaspora is often seen as "*the* requisite approach or theoretical model through which one should (or perhaps must) understand all formations of Black community, regardless of historical, geographical, or cultural context."[8] Of course, this development is problematic: As a mere buzzword without paying attention to the specificity of a given black group, the notion of the African diaspora has no analytical value.

Without doubt, the frequent use of the phrase with regard to black social formations is closely connected with a more general and rapid proliferation of the term diaspora in the humanities and social sciences. Especially since the 1980s, it is no longer primarily used for an analysis of Jewish, Armenian, Irish, Greek and black communities.[9] In a 1996 essay, Khachig Tölölyan, a prominent expert in the field and editor of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, observes that, over the last years, the centuries-old concept of diaspora—once mainly associated with grief, misery, hopelessness and displacement—has been

4 | George Shepperson, "African Diaspora: Concept and Context," *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, ed. Joseph E. Harris, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1993) 46; Edwards 45; Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World," *African Studies Review* 43.1 (2000): 14.

5 | Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas*: *An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008) 1.

6 | Shepperson 41.

7 | Campt, *Other Germans* 171-72; Edwards 45.

8 | Campt, *Other Germans* 174; italics in the original.

9 | Baumann 322; Rogers Brubaker, "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28.1 (2005): 1-2; Khachig Tölölyan, "The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27.3 (2007): 648.

refashioned and transformed to celebrate migration and mobility[10] and to refer to a wide variety of dispersed formations, such as "exile groups, overseas communities, ethnic and racial minorities."[11] The risk is, Tölölyan argues, that diaspora is turned into "a promiscuously capacious category that is taken to include all the adjacent phenomena to which it is linked."[12] In a similar vein, in a paper called "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora" (2005), Rogers Brubaker reflects on the problematic overuse of the word, which "loses its discriminating power—its ability to pick out phenomena, to make distinctions."[13] The fact that diaspora becomes a universalized concept, "paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora."[14]

While it is true that the concept is not without its flaws, especially if it is employed in an all-embracing sense and ahistorical manner, my study is based on the conviction that the notion of the African diaspora provides a useful framework for a critical analysis and illuminating comparison of second-generation neo-slave narratives. In the following, I will focus on recent diaspora theories, especially on postmodern concepts from the field of cultural studies that attempt to analyze the complexity of diasporic experience by adopting a transnational perspective. In particular, I will show that the theories under discussion give very different answers to the key question as to what can be regarded as points of connection between members and groups of a diaspora.[15] Following theorists like Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, Brent Hayes Edwards and Tina M. Campt, this chapter offers a vibrant interpretation of the African diaspora that is based on "difference." Such a conceptualization attends to the specificity of a given black community without losing sight of the larger framework of the African diaspora.

Dispersal, Loss and the Static Idea of Return

In recent scholarly discourse on diasporic formations, there have been several attempts to identify characteristics that serve as unifying links between members of a diaspora group. One prominent example of such an approach is William Safran's paper "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" (1991), which provides us with a precise definition of the concept of diaspora based on the history of the Jewish people. Safran, a political scientist, argues that diasporic groups are "expatriate minority communities whose

10 | Khachig Tölölyan, "Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 5.1 (1996): 3, 8-9, 28.

11 | Ibid. 3.

12 | Ibid. 8.

13 | Brubaker 3.

14 | Ibid.

15 | For similiar concerns, see Campt, *Other Germans* 171-72.

members share"[16] a number of essential features: They (or their forbears) have been shaped by an event of dispersal from their homeland to unfamiliar locations, where they suffer from a sense of loss and displacement. In the diaspora, they keep alive memories of their ancestral—and often idealized—home and are dedicated "to the maintenance or restoration"[17] of their mother country. In Safran's view, members of a diaspora are united by the idea or desire to go back to their place of origin.[18] Since this model of diaspora highlights "the permanence of community through time and space,"[19] to quote Christine Chivallon, it can be described as static. Referring to the Jewish diaspora, it primarily focuses on "the afflictions, isolation and insecurity of living in a foreign place."[20] Diasporic subjects are primarily seen as victims of displacement rather than as active agents shaping their own lives.[21]

In his seminal essay "Diasporas" (1994), a survey of contemporary theories, James Clifford offers an important and often-cited response to Safran's approach and criticizes his decision to define the diaspora concept "by recourse to an 'ideal type.'"[22] According to Clifford, Safran's interpretation is too restrictive because it is "oriented by continuous cultural connections to a source and by a teleology of 'return.'"[23] A closer look at the history of the Jewish people, Clifford contends, reveals a much more complex story than the one indicated in Safran's list. Moreover, his interpretation does not apply to the heterogeneous experiences of African, Caribbean or South Asian diasporic formations. In many cases, "the transnational connections linking diasporas need not be

16 | William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1 (1991): 83.

17 | Ibid. 84.

18 | Ibid. 83-84. See also James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9.3 (1994): 304-05; Cohen 6.

19 | Christine Chivallon, "Beyond Gilroy's Black Atlantic: The Experience of the African Diaspora," trans. Karen E. Fields, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 11.3 (2002): 360.

20 | Cohen 22.

21 | In 2010/2011, I was actively involved in writing the research proposal for the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Initial Training Program "Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging" (CoHaB), offering a short overview of the paradigm shift from a static view of diaspora (associated with scholars like William Safran) to a dynamic interpretation (proposed by scholars like Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, James Clifford and Avtar Brah). See Florian Kläger and Klaus Stierstorfer, "Introduction," *Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging*, eds. Kläger and Stierstorfer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015) 1-7.

22 | Clifford 306.

23 | Ibid.

articulated primarily through a real or symbolic homeland."[24] Clifford urges us "to recognize the strong entailment of Jewish history on the language of diaspora without making that history a definitive model."[25]

Diaspora as Articulation and Difference

It is the work of the cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall that has paved the way for a paradigm shift within (African) diaspora studies[26] by focusing our attention to difference, the theory of articulation and the concept of hybridity. His essay "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance" (1980) is not directly concerned with questions of diaspora but an important theoretical starting point for a conception of diaspora as articulation.[27] The text, a complex engagement with theories by Karl Marx, Ernesto Laclau and Louis Althusser, seeks to address a number of problems in current scholarship on "racially structured social formations."[28] In particular, Hall criticizes one-sided scholarly approaches that deal solely with economic aspects and ignore the complexity as well as the "historical specificity"[29] of a given social structure. What is important for our purpose here is that Hall traces "the emergence of a new theoretical paradigm"[30] for the study of social formations: it takes its inspiration from Marx's understanding of the American plantation system as "an articulation between different modes of production."[31]

Determined to move beyond (economic) reductionism, Hall urges us to think of a social formation "as a complex articulated structure."[32] In this theoretical context, the term "articulation" refers to a possible but not necessary linkage between dissimilar elements (of a specific society). It evokes, Hall explains in an interview with Lawrence Grossberg, a connection that can be made, unmade and remade.[33] As an illustration, Hall uses the image of a truck

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24 | Ibid.

25 | Ibid. For an overview of Clifford's critique, see also Ruth Mayer, *Diaspora: Eine kritische Begriffsbestimmung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2005) 10-12.

26 | See also footnote 21 in this chapter.

27 | See, for instance, Edwards 59-60; Campt, *Image Matters* 37.

28 | Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance" 16.

29 | Ibid. 50.

30 | Ibid.

31 | Ibid. 33.

32 | Ibid.

33 | Lawrence Grossberg, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996) 141.

"where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be"[34] articulated with each other. According to Hall, the concept of articulation helps us to see "how specific ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse."[35] What is crucial for our discussion is Hall's claim that such an articulated structure is inevitably a unity "in which things are related, as much through their differences as through their similarities."[36] It is this idea of the complexity of social groups that Hall takes up in his theoretical work on diasporic formations.[37]

In his seminal text "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), Hall refers to two conceptualizations of cultural identity that, paradoxically, stand in opposition to each other but are also interrelated. The first one, which has influenced black representatives of the Négritude and Pan-African movements, is based on the notions of continuity, similarity and authenticity. In this static interpretation, members of a specific cultural group are linked by collective experiences and codes; they share an essential (authentic) identity that does not change over time and that can be unearthed or articulated through artistic practices.[38] The second understanding of cultural identity introduces the ideas of discontinuity and difference. It is grounded on the insight that cultural identities are not stable and resistant to changes but rather "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power."[39] As a result, this dynamic view acknowledges that there are important similarities between individuals of the same culture as well as "critical points of deep and significant *difference*."[40]

According to Hall, it is precisely the tension between continuity and discontinuity, similarity and difference that characterizes diasporic life. He illustrates this point by exploring the dynamics of Caribbean diasporic identity, which he understands as a creative fusion of African, European, Asian and American influences, as a dynamic process of "being" and "becoming."[41] The transatlantic slave trade united a heterogeneous group of Africans with different ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds: they created a unique culture in the so-called "New World" based on established traditions and new forms as well as on shared experiences and/or memories of slavery, forced migration, anti-black violence and colonialism. In Hall's view, the Caribbean experience of diaspora is not defined by the existence of, and the wish to return to, a common home-

34 | Ibid.

35 | Ibid.

36 | Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance" 38.

37 | Edwards 60.

38 | Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 223.

39 | Ibid. 225.

40 | Ibid.; italics in the original.

41 | Ibid.

land associated with authenticity. It is rather characterized by a shared history of forced deportation and racial oppression as well as "by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*."[42]

Continuity and Innovation: Gilroy's Transnational Paradigm of the Black Atlantic

In its emphasis on hybridity and on the fluidity of identities, Hall's essay shares important concerns with Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).[43] Gilroy argues against the view "that cultures always flow into patterns congruent with the borders of essentially homogeneous nation states."[44] Such a nation-centered perspective does not capture the complex experiences of black diasporic individuals and groups. Adopting a transnational approach, his study uses the image of the Atlantic Ocean in a metaphorical way to refer to a hybrid system of interactions between black people from different cultural and national backgrounds. The ocean image, in turn, is closely linked with that of the ship "in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean."[45] A powerful symbol of black agency, the image of the ship illustrates the exchange of thoughts, concepts and cultural products as well as the various journeys of black intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright. However, in its evocation of the slave vessel and the transatlantic slave trade, it is also a reminder of the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage, focusing our attention to the complex entanglement of racial slavery and Western modernity.[46]

In Gilroy's work, the transnational network of the black Atlantic is conceptualized as a vibrant "counterculture of modernity."[47] There is the powerful argument that, throughout history, black intellectuals and writers have not only been engaged in Western intellectual discourse. They have also contributed to a rethinking of well-established views articulated by European philosophers like Hegel. Determined to challenge any simplistic distinction between center and periphery, Gilroy contends that members of the black Atlantic "stand simulta-

42 | Ibid. 235; italics in the original.

43 | See Chivallon 359-60; Mayer 84.

44 | Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) 5.

45 | Ibid. 4.

46 | See ibid. 4, 17.

47 | Ibid. 5.

neously both inside and outside the western culture."[48] In order to illustrate this claim, Gilroy offers a reading of the writings of black intellectuals like Frederick Douglass. He argues that Douglass's depiction of his fight with the slave-breaker Edward Covey can be interpreted as a revisionary account of Hegel's famous master-slave dialectic. In contrast to Hegel's text, Douglass's narrative deals with a slave who is no longer willing to accept the authority of his master. At the risk of death, he decides to revolt against the white man and, after a violent fight, emerges as a self-confident subject.[49] For Gilroy, this passage has a larger philosophical meaning in that the slave's orientation towards "death rather than bondage articulates a principle of negativity that is opposed to the formal logic and rational calculation characteristic of modern western thinking."[50] By exploring the past from the perspective of the enslaved, Gilroy seeks to deconstruct the vision of "history as progress"[51] and to highlight the conjunction of civilization and inhumanity on which Western modernity is based.[52]

What unites the members of the counterculture of the black Atlantic is not only a shared history and collective memory of suffering, oppression and anti-black violence, which is epitomized by "the catastrophic rupture of the middle passage,"[53] but also a long tradition of resistance and struggle for black liberation and citizenship across national borders. It is a unique history that has resulted in a rich and diverse artistic and literary heritage. As a hybrid cultural product, black music plays an essential part in Gilroy's concept. Created at the intersection of different black cultures, it serves to demonstrate that black "identity can be understood neither as a fixed essence nor as a vague and utterly contingent construction."[54] In other words, it can be regarded as a model that allows us to move beyond a static opposition between an essentialist view of black identity based on tradition and a pluralist perspective, which rests on the conviction that "the pursuit of any unifying dynamic or underlying structure of feeling in contemporary black cultures is utterly misplaced."[55] According to Gilroy, the history of the black Atlantic is marked by both continuity and innovation. In emphasizing the complex relationship between "roots" and "routes" (to use Gilroy's play on words), *The Black Atlantic* offers a critical perspective on the ideology of Afrocentrism and its belief in the purity of black culture.

48 | Ibid. 48-49.
49 | See ibid. 60-71.
50 | Ibid. 68.
51 | Ibid. 55.
52 | Ibid. 55, 63.
53 | Ibid. 197.
54 | Ibid. 102.
55 | Ibid. 80.

Reflecting a larger trend in contemporary academic discourse to challenge concepts like authenticity, nationality and tradition, *The Black Atlantic* has been widely celebrated as a seminal text within the field of (African) diaspora studies.[56] Focusing our attention to different forms of black agency, it provides a powerful alternative "to the older tales of unrelenting diasporic victimization,"[57] to quote Paul Tiyambe Zeleza. In terms of terminology, many experts in the field agree that the phrase black Atlantic appropriately captures the idea of a dynamic contact zone between black people without emphasizing a close and stable connection to a specific national or cultural origin.[58]

(Power) Differences and Gaps: Rethinking the Concept of the Black Atlantic

While it is still considered a highly influential study of black diasporic life, increasing numbers of scholars are arguing for a rethinking of *The Black Atlantic*. A major point of critique is that, despite its transnational perspective, Gilroy's text focuses primarily on African American history and culture, taking the experiences of a selected number of African American male artists or intellectuals as the norm and the trauma of the Middle Passage as a unifying concept within the black world.[59] Using the framework of the Atlantic, it is not concerned with interactions and links between groups and members of the African diaspora outside Western contexts and the Anglophone sphere.[60] While Europe serves as an inspiring and transformative place for African Americans, there are hardly any references to the role of Africa within the counterculture of the black Atlantic or to exchanges between Africans and other black individuals.[61] Furthermore, as black feminist scholars like Michelle M. Wright contend, Gilroy does not reflect on the specific experience of black women in the diaspora, failing to take into account that "the category of race can never be fully divorced from the related categories of gender and sexuality."[62]

Turning to questions of hegemony within the formation of the African diaspora, anthropologist Jacqueline Nassy Brown is one of the first to warn against an uncritical celebration of Gilroy's paradigm. As she argues in "Black

56 | Mayer 83; see also Chivallon 359.

57 | Zeleza 35.

58 | Mayer 81.

59 | Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004) 2-6; Zeleza 37; Mayer 110.

60 | Zeleza 37; Edwards 63.

61 | Mayer 110-11; Zeleza 37.

62 | Wright, *Becoming Black* 6.

Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space" (1998), the hybrid cultural formation of the black Atlantic is constructed as an ideal community without hierarchical structures or exclusion. Centered on the idea of "universal participation across national divides,"[63] it fails to pay attention to power differences and inequalities between and within black diasporic groups. In particular, Gilroy's work does not reflect on "the way American hegemony has determined the lopsided nature of transatlantic exchanges, forging as a result relations of antagonism among blacks transnationally."[64] In Brown's view, *The Black Atlantic* emphasizes the positive aspects of intercultural interactions without considering and problematizing the dominance of African American culture and the (potential) marginalization of other black diasporic groups.

In his thoughtful essay "The Uses of Diaspora" (2001), Brent Hayes Edwards criticizes the tendency within current (U.S.-American) academic discourse to equate diaspora with the transnational paradigm of the black Atlantic, although this conflation of concepts is not suggested by Gilroy.[65] Edwards urges us to reflect on the multifaceted dimension of the concept of the African diaspora by considering the origin of the use of the term in black academic circles in the middle of the twentieth century. Paying special attention to the work of the historian George Shepperson (who is generally considered one of the first intellectuals to employ the phrase in black scholarship), Edwards shows that the orientation towards diaspora as an analytical concept is an important intervention and epistemological contribution to the discourse of black internationalism in the 1960s. In particular, it has to be regarded as a critical reflection on Pan-Africanism and its focus "on vanguardist collaboration toward a unified articulation of the interests of 'African peoples' at the level of international policy."[66] According to Edwards, the word African diaspora is introduced to take account of ideological differences and linguistic divisions existing between and within different groups of African descent in different parts of the world. It is taken up "to break with a depoliticizing emphasis on 'unity' and unidirectional return"[67] to Africa and "forces us to consider discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference."[68] Diaspora is a perfect choice because it "has none of the 'overtones' that make a term like *Pan-Africanism* already contested terrain."[69]

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63 | Jacqueline Nassy Brown, "Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space," *Cultural Anthropology* 13.3 (1998): 296.

64 | Ibid. 297.

65 | Edwards 45.

66 | Ibid. 46.

67 | Ibid. 55.

68 | Ibid. 64.

69 | Ibid. 54; italics in the original.

Taking inspiration from an essay by Léopold Senghor, Edwards uses the term *décalage* to reflect on the complex structure of the African diaspora and the concept of difference. "[O]ne of the many French words that resists translation into English,"[70] *décalage* refers to an incongruity, a fissure in time or a gap in space. In Edwards's concept, it serves as a model to focus our attention to points of disagreement and untranslatability that are inevitably part of any interaction between black diasporic groups:[71] "*[D]écalage* is the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged, the received biases that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water."[72] In a paradoxical way, for Edwards, it is precisely the fact that there are such striking differences or insurmountable gaps between black communities which "allows the African diaspora to 'step' and 'move' in various articulations."[73] In order to illustrate this intricate view of diaspora, which recalls Hall's theory of articulation, Edwards draws on the image of a joint of the body. It is a place of connection, where different parts of the body are joined together, but also a place of separation. Ultimately, "it is *only* difference—the separation between bones or members—that allows movement."[74]

"The Dynamics of Difference:" Campt's Model of the African Diaspora

Combining fieldwork in Germany with theoretical analysis, the historian Tina M. Campt has written a groundbreaking study that moves beyond an exclusive focus on similarities between black diasporic formations and illuminates the idea of difference. Adopting an interdisciplinary and transnational perspective, her work *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* (2004) is situated in the fields and intersections of Holocaust studies, German studies, African diaspora studies and memory studies. Focusing on conceptions of national identity and the complex interplay between race and gender, it addresses the history and diverse experiences of Germans of African descent during the Nazi era. In her close reading of the oral accounts of two Afro-Germans who were born in the 1920s, Campt sheds light on the emergence and articulation of black subjectivity in the "Third Reich." Emphasizing the significance of local contexts and everyday practices, she directs our attention not only to processes of exclusion and discrimination against Afro-Germans; she also identifies forms of inclusion and black resistance. By

70 | Ibid. 65.

71 | See also Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 239, 244.

72 | Edwards 65; italics in the original.

73 | Ibid. 66.

74 | Ibid.; italics in the original.

placing the memories of black individuals at the center of analysis, Campt provides more than a new perspective on the Holocaust and the Nazi regime: she draws on her interview partners' narratives to engage in a critical rethinking of dominant understandings of the African diaspora.[75]

Influenced by the work of Brown and Edwards, Campt observes that "scholarship theorizing Black community and cultural formations often relies on a discourse of diasporic relation in which similarity and commonality are privileged."[76] Most notably, in many discussions of diaspora, there is a tendency to explore the history of black diasporic groups through the eyes of black British or African American culture. According to Campt, this is a manifestation of power differences and hierarchies between black communities around the world that are the result of "different histories of racialization, colonization, and imperialism."[77] The recurrent reference to African America, in particular, "may be read as a discourse that refers not so much to a relation of equity than of hegemony."[78] Moreover, this development directs our attention to the avant-garde role of African American authors, scholars and intellectuals: Over decades, they have been at the forefront of exploring the development and nature of the African diaspora and the complexity of black life. Primarily focused on the American context, their ideas and explanations have become dominant concepts used to describe and interpret the experiences of other black individuals and groups, without considering local specificities.

Examining the complex relation between Afro-German history and that of other black diasporic societies, Campt highlights the heterogeneity of black experiences. Warning against generalizations, she urges us to approach diaspora "with an awareness and articulation of its limits in regard to those Black communities whose histories do not necessarily or comfortably conform to dominant models,"[79] especially to Gilroy's influential paradigm. Unlike members of the black Atlantic, Afro-Germans are not necessarily linked by a common history of transatlantic movement, collective displacement and enslavement. In many cases, they do not share the same ideas of home and belonging and concepts of community. Moreover, their experiences of resistance differ from those of other people of African descent.[80] And yet, in academic contexts and popular discourse, black Germans are frequently "assumed to identify with histories of

75 | Campt, *Other Germans* 1-23.
76 | Ibid. 169.
77 | Ibid. 178.
78 | Ibid.
79 | Ibid. 174.
80 | Ibid. 180-81.

struggle (most often those of Africans, Caribbeans, or African-Americans) in which Afro-Germans are not seen as active participants."[81]

In *Other Germans*, Campt offers a more constructive view of black diasporic relations. In her analysis of her interviews with Afro-Germans, she turns our attention to "moments of difference, discrepancy, and translation"[82] that are at the heart of transnational interactions between different black diasporic communities. Focusing on the negotiation of black identity, she calls for an understanding of the African diaspora as a dynamic "set of relations constructed actively by communities for specific purposes."[83] Campt emphasizes that there are significant differences between black groups (based on different histories of racial oppression and resistance, experiences of belonging and processes of subject formation) which cannot be ignored and should not be translated. To sum up, what emerges from Campt's explorations on the history of Afro-Germans is the insight that the African diaspora has to be conceptualized "as a formation that is not solely or even primarily about relations of unity and similarity, but more often and quite profoundly about the dynamics of *difference*."[84] In Campt's view, it is essential to contextualize the history of a particular black diasporic group and to consider the tension between the local specificity of a given community and the larger framework of the African diaspora.

81 | Ibid. 180.

82 | Ibid. 23.

83 | Ibid. 173. This view echoes Jacqueline Nassy Brown's understanding of diaspora "as a *counter/part* relation built on cultural and historical equivalences." As Brown explains: "To posit *equivalences* is to put meaningful differences (such as distinct colonial histories) on the same analytical plane at the start, in order to then expose the ways they come to bear in social practice. The backslash in *counter/part* and the stress that may be put on either side of it index shifting relations of antagonism and affinity; these latter terms depend equally on *difference* while highlighting two possibilities for what people can do with it." Jacqueline Nassy Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005) 99-100; italics in the original.

84 | Campt, *Other Germans* 169; italics in the original.

Negotiations of Power at the Local Level: Brah's Concept of "Diaspora Space"

The concept of diaspora, Campt's work suggests, not only refers to forms of migration and displacement but also, and essentially, to processes of arrival, dwelling and home-making in specific local contexts.[85] While it is essential to focus on the complex relationship between different groups of the African diaspora, it is also of utmost importance to shed light on internal power differences and tensions at the local level.[86] Avtar Brah's concept of "diaspora space" offers a framework for an analysis of such fissures and negotiations of power. In her influential study *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), Brah urges scholars of diaspora studies to consider the precise circumstances of dispersion from a center, to think about the following questions when analyzing diasporic journeys, "What socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions mark the trajectories of these journeys? What regimes of power inscribe the formation of a specific diaspora?"[87] Furthermore, like Campt, she asks us to pay attention to the conditions of arrival and the power structures that exist or emerge within a given diasporic community and between different diasporic and indigenous groups.[88] Brah argues for "a multi-axial understanding of power"[89] based on a number of categories like gender, race, class, sexuality and religion.

Such a conceptualization calls into question a static distinction between "minority" and "majority;" Brah's theory points to the "ways in which a group constituted as a 'minority' along one dimension of differentiation may be constructed as a 'majority' along another."[90] In a similar way, depending on the category under consideration, an individual may at the same time belong to a "majority" group and a "minority" community. Putting a strong emphasis on diasporic agency, Brah highlights the interactions that occur between different diasporic groups without the intervention of the supposed dominant group. Through such exchanges, diasporic groups "continually challenge the minoritising and peripheralising impulses of the cultures of dominance."[91]

In addition to deconstructing the distinction between "minority" and "majority," Brah is particularly interested in exploring the meaning of home for diasporic subjects. As she contends, "home" is not only "a mythic place of desire

85 | Ibid. 7; see also Campt, *Image Matters* 25, 54.

86 | Campt and Thomas, "Gendering Diaspora: Transnational Feminism, Diaspora and Its Hegemonies" 3.

87 | Brah 182.

88 | Ibid. 182-86.

89 | Ibid. 189.

90 | Ibid.

91 | Ibid. 210.

in the diasporic imagination."[92] It is also the physical and psychological experience of a particular place at a particular moment, a place in the diaspora where identities are negotiated and transformed. In other words, for Brah, the diaspora experience is not only about memories of the past or a sense of displacement and dislocation; it is also closely linked to the idea of location.[93] Expanding on this idea, in a 2013 interview, Campt emphasizes the dialogic character of the African diaspora, arguing that "diaspora is what happens when you're in one place and still have to connect to and utilize the resources of other black communities to make sense of your own."[94] In Campt's view, it is essential to explore the connections and differences between different black diasporic groups in different locations.

In *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Brah shows that a diasporic place can be charged with different connotations, depending on generational and individual differences. Potentially, it is a place where possibilities emerge. In many cases, however, borders play a prominent role in the diaspora. Drawing on Gloria Anzaldua's work, Brah uses the term "border" in a literal sense (a line that divides geographical areas) and in a metaphorical way to address social, cultural, racial and sexual lines of division.[95] "Diaspora space" as proposed by Brah, then, is the place where the concepts of "diaspora, border, and dis/location" intersect, where "boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them', are contested."[96]

To conclude, in Brah's theory, "diaspora space" is a hybrid formation that consists of diasporic[97] and non-diasporic groups (such as indigenous communities) engaged in interactions that challenge static interpretations of diasporic identity and that subvert the hegemony of the supposed dominant culture. However, given the hierarchies and power structures that exist between and within these different groups, it is not a "postmodern playground of 'anything goes', where all kinds of identities are equally valuable and available as if in a 'multicultural supermarket',[98] to quote John McLeod, but a space where diasporic members are confronted with discourses of exclusion and oppression.

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92 | Ibid. 192.

93 | Ibid. 192-93.

94 | Campt, "Imagining Ourselves."

95 | Brah 198.

96 | Ibid. 208, 209.

97 | Noteworthy, Brah's theory of "diaspora space" is not restricted to the study of a specific diasporic group, such as African Americans in the United States.

98 | John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 260.

The Concept of the African Diaspora as a Conceptual Framework and Analytical Tool

Transnational Black Dialogues is based on the conviction that the concept of the African diaspora offers an intricate framework in which to situate second-generation neo-slave narratives. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, Brent Hayes Edwards and Tina M. Campt, it argues for a dynamic understanding of diaspora that stresses the idea of "'difference within unity.'"[99] With Campt, this study contends that the African diaspora is a complex transnational network of groups characterized by internal and external hierarchies; a social, cultural and political "formation that is not solely or even primarily about relations of unity and similarity, but more often and quite profoundly about the dynamics of *difference*."[100]

Morrison's *A Mercy*, Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, Christiansë's *Unconfessed*, Hill's *The Book of Negroes* and James's *The Book of Night Women* are set in different geographical locations and historical periods, e.g. in late seventeenth-century mainland North America, in late eighteenth-century Jamaica and in early nineteenth-century South Africa. Taken together, as a heterogeneous body of texts, these second-generation neo-slave narratives foreground the diversity of the African diaspora and explore the transnational dimension of the history of slavery. At the same time, focusing on different spaces with specific social power structures, they pay close attention to the particularities of local contexts and histories. In *Transnational Black Dialogues*, I show that these twenty-first-century literary texts engage in a dynamic dialogue with contemporary African diaspora theory, participating in and contributing to current debates on the relationship between the local and the global, on the meaning of home, on the complex interplay between "roots" and "routes," on (power) differences and hierarchies within and between black diasporic groups as well as on the enduring legacy of slavery.

Following Campt, this study argues that it is essential to contextualize the specific history of a given black community (e.g. African Canadians, African Caribbeans and South Africans) as well as to examine the complex relation between local contexts and the larger framework of the African diaspora. Characterized by similarities, differences and hierarchies between and within black communities around the world, the African diaspora is, to use Campt's words, "a vibrant site of analysis, investment, and aspiration."[101] In my study, this vibrant understanding of diaspora is both a conceptual framework and an analytical tool for my analysis of Morrison's *A Mercy*, Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, Christiansë's *Unconfessed*, Hill's *The Book of Negroes* and James's *The Book of Night Women*.

99 | Edwards 59.

100 | Campt, *Other Germans* 169; italics in the original.

101 | Ibid. 23.