

Being on the Move: Formations of the Black Atlantic

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Movements of people, ideas and goods have shaped and influenced the history of the Atlantic world, while at the same time the Atlantic itself has shaped the history of its people and their political cultural and economic movements. Within these histories, black actors have played a central role, both as individuals who moved across the Atlantic and as agents who were involved in political and cultural movements.

The articles brought together in this issue are inspired by the conference „Being on the Move: Transfers, Emancipation and Formations of the Black Atlantic“ held at Erfurt University in July 2010.¹ At this conference, we addressed movements between the U.S., the Caribbean and beyond and how they contributed to shaping the Black Atlantic.

Made popular by Paul Gilroy's 1993 highly influential text of the same name, the term Black Atlantic has been used to address the cultural and historical linkages connecting black people within the Atlantic region. It stresses that, as a result of the transatlantic slave trade between Africa, the Americas and Europe, the cultures involved in this exchange developed strong interdependencies. In his book, Gilroy himself traces some of these linkages along the lines of historical narratives of the Middle Passage, black music, and transatlantic journeys of black male travellers.²

In recent years, various critical yet productive questions have been raised, for example the racially re-essentializing nature of the term Black Atlantic, its seeming lack of spatial flexibility, or its missing consideration of hierarchies structuring the network.³ However,

1 We would like to thank Maria Neuhauss and Jürgen Martschukat for their support in bringing together this issue.

2 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge (MA) 1993.

3 Judith Anne-Marie Byfield, La Ray Denzer et al. (eds.), *Gendering the African Diaspora: Women, Culture, and Historical Change in the Caribbean and Nigerian Hinterland*, Bloomington (IN) 2010; Ruth Mayer, *Diaspora. Eine*

the Black Atlantic points to the often neglected fact that transnational and transregional networks matter.

Gilroy's conception of the Black Atlantic offers an alternative narrative to national histories and cultures that can be understood as powerful constructs that overlook transatlantic interdependencies in favour of their own narrow coherence. The Black Atlantic provides a conceptual frame in which movements across regions, national territories, or other socially defined boundaries take center stage in the analyses. Simultaneously, it allows for the examination of articulations of affinities, affiliations, or differentiations aside from the national and raises the opportunity to acknowledge power relationships that structured belongings, borders, and border crossings in 19th and 20th century history. Movements and transfers themselves become the issues of historic scrutiny, leading to a rethinking of notions of peripheries and metropolis, and blurring their allegedly distinct definitions and separations.

At the same time, the Black Atlantic can be employed as an analytical tool to criticize and deconstruct notions of an essentialist global black community, which is often referred to as a Black or African diaspora. Both in the past and the present, diaspora has corresponded with the idea that black people are naturally connected and culturally rooted in Africa. The Black Atlantic opens the possibility to consider the diaspora as the result of a continuing production. In this formation, notions of community are constructed and result from historic, as well as ongoing ascriptions, prejudices, and acts of self-fashioning. Or to say it in the words of Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D.G. Kelley who have revisited the concept in their influential article "Unfinished migrations": "... linkages that tie the diaspora together must be articulated and are not inevitable, and ... the diaspora is both process and condition."⁴ While diaspora is often centered on Africa, Gilroy locates its coming into being within a "rhizomorphic structure".⁵

Based on these considerations, this issue takes the Black Atlantic as a starting point to bring together various histories connecting places and people across the Atlantic and beyond. The contributions will scrutinize various forms and practices of networking, such as the exchange of people, the transfer of knowledge, the trading of goods (such as tobacco or chocolate) and their culturally specific resignifications. In examining the formation of such networks and multiple movements and exchanges, this issue seeks to show how structures, narratives and spaces are created, appropriated, challenged, and changed, and, thus, rethink the concept of the Black Atlantic. A spatial focus is placed on the Caribbean, a region that has often been neglected in studies on the Black Atlantic. The articles will be concerned with networks in and around the Caribbean stretching to

kritische Begriffsbestimmung, Bielefeld 2005; Sandra Gunning, Tera Hunter et al. (eds.), *Dialogues of Dispersal: Gender, Sexuality, and African Diasporas*, Malden (MA) 2004; Robin D.G. Kelley, Tiffany Ruby Patterson, *Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World*, in: *African Studies Review*, 43 (2000) 1, pp. 11-45.

4 Kelley, Patterson, *Unfinished Migrations* (footnote 2), p. 1.

5 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (footnote 1), p. 28.

the U.S., Europe, Africa, and also to Asia: In which ways and for whom do networks⁶ matter? How are they created and formed? How do they operate and become visible? Who is participating and shaping these networks? How do we as scholars approach, define and describe them and explore their cultural and historic meanings?

Entangled cultural practices of dance are the focus of Sonjah Stanley Niaah's contribution „Beyond the Slave Ship: Theorizing the Limbo Imagination and Black Atlantic Performance Geographies“. She traces the linkages from the Middle Passage slave ship dance Limbo to ghettos where the Blues, Kingston's Dancehall and South African Kwaito emerged and, thereby, points to the rhizomorphic structures of transatlantic transfers. As Niaah shows, these art forms did not cross the Atlantic in a linear direction, coming from Africa to the „New World“ but instead moved back and forth, thereby informing each other.

Silke Hackenesch and Jean Stubbs address the circulation of commodities and point to their material, as well as cultural significances. Chocolate moved across the Atlantic both as a commodity and a signifier for Blackness, as Hackenesch shows in her article „Chocolate, Race, and the Atlantic World: A Bittersweet History“. In looking at advertisements for chocolate, she reflects on its various symbolic meanings. She also considers the modes of production of chocolate by referring to a specific example from Portuguese West Africa around 1900 and contrasts the politics of labor with visual representations in advertisement. From the exploitive aspects of chocolate, she moves to its possibly emancipatory appropriations by African Americans in the 1960s.

El Habano, the Havana Cigar, and its manifold Atlantic crossings are the topic of Jean Stubbs' analysis „Beyond the Black Atlantic: Understanding Race, Gender and Labour in the Global Havana Cigar“. She outlines what she terms the „Havana Cigar Universe“ that stretches from Cuba to Florida, Connecticut, and Indonesia. In charting these spaces, Stubbs demonstrates how each location has been shaped by specific modes of production that, in turn, shaped the cultural meanings of the cigar. The journeys of the cigar as traced by Stubbs exemplify that the Black Atlantic can be used to look beyond the geographic borders of the Atlantic Ocean and to incorporate regions in Asia.

Christine Hatzky and Patricia Wiegmann focus their analysis on people on the move. Hatzky's article „Cuban Teachers in Angola: South-South Cooperation, Transfers of Knowledge and Mutual Perceptions“ deals with an example of a transatlantic cooperation between two former colonial countries, Cuba and Angola. From 1975 to 1991 Cuba sent about 10.000 teachers to Angola to support the development of the Angolan educational system. Hatzky outlines the racialized ideological contexts of the exchange. By using statistical data, as well as oral history interviews, she examines how the teachers were perceived by the local population and vice versa. Her example shows how the Black Atlantic is informed by colonial structures that transcend into the postcolonial era.

6 Our use of the term „network“ does not refer to Systems theory but to Paul Gilroy's understanding who perceives the Black Atlantic as a webbed network. See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (footnote 1), p. 29

In her article “Amy Jacques Garvey ‘On A Trip from Coast to Coast’: Roots, Routes, and Emancipation”, Wiegmann looks at the Jamaican traveler Amy Jacques Garvey, who toured the United States in 1923. As a member of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, she recorded her experiences in a series of travel accounts that were published in the organization’s newspaper. By employing a close reading of the articles, Wiegmann discusses how travel writing can be seen as practice of identification, community building and emancipation. Thereby, her article points to hierarchies within the Black Atlantic emanating from gender and class structures.

In their variety, the articles draw a broad picture of how the Black Atlantic concept can be applied in order to highlight entanglements within the Atlantic region and beyond. With their different methodological approaches, the articles illuminate culture, politics, and economy as interdependent fields forming the Black Atlantic in past and present.