BLACK IS THE COLOR OF THE COSMOS
OR CALLALOO AND THE CULTURES OF THE
DIASPORA NOW

by Ivy G. Wilson and Ayo A. Coly

To employ the term diaspora in black cultural studies now is equal parts imperative and elusive. In the wake of recent forceful critiques of nationalism, the diaspora has increasingly come to be understood as a concept—indeed, almost a discourse formation unto itself—that allows for, if not mandates, modes of analysis that are comparative, transnational, global in their perspective. And Callaloo, as a journal of African Diaspora arts and letters, might justly be understood to have a particular relationship to this mandate. For this special issue, we have tried to assemble pieces where the phrase diaspora can find little refuge as a self-reflexive term—a maneuver that seeks to destabilize the facile prefigurations of the word in our current critical vocabulary, where its invocation has too often become idiomatic. More critically, we selected essays that collectively examine the meanings of the Black Diaspora as forms of experiential subjectivity when they intersect with the registers of everyday life through their quotidian engagements with, for example, dance and music, sex and sexuality, and nostalgia and melancholia. With essays on Patricia Powell and Dionne Brand and poetry by Ronald Augusto and Edimilson de Almeida Pereira, this issue underscores the wide canvas of the Americas as a site of the Black Diaspora, taking us through the geographies of this panorama including Brazil, Cuba, Jamaica, and the Sea Islands off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina. Taken as a whole, these pieces approach the phrase diaspora self-consciously, as a concept that insists on interrogating blackness as an intricate confluence of multiple histories and cultures.

Given the many typologies of diaspora—including the religious, labor, imperial, and mercantile, among others—it becomes urgent to ask what is historically specific or even ontological about the Black Diaspora. The two epiphenomena most responsible for engendering the modern Black Diaspora—the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism—produced a polymath of circuits of contiguous political association, uneven modes of sociality, and new forms of cultural expression. In his editorial note for the twenty-fifth-anniversary issue of Callaloo, Charles Rowell documents the broadening scope of the journal from its initial focus on black literature of the U.S. South to its more panoramic expansion, by 1980, into a critical forum for the Black Diaspora. This internationalization, writes Rowell, raised some theoretical considerations: “That there is much diversity among African Diaspora writers is not a subject that this issue of Callaloo debates, and yet it does raise a question whose answer we once thought was obvious: beyond a history beginning in African slave trade, what do these writers share? What, other than the impulse to create, binds them together?” (ix–x). These legitimate yet unanswered questions notwithstanding,
Rowell pursues that *Callaloo*, in its present diasporic orientation, is a “journal of necessity” because it provides a “continuing site from which writers of African descent may hold conversations among themselves” (x).

The insistence on the “necessity” of a diasporic forum foregrounds the current centrality, perhaps even indispensability, of the concept of diaspora in discussions of cultural productions by people of African descent. The concept has indeed gained critical canonicity as the foremost theoretical handle for reading the experiences of black transnational communities as well as the discursive attempts to mediate their encounters, exchanges, and conversations. Yet the “necessity” of mapping such discursive spaces in *Callaloo*, among other Black Diaspora-oriented venues, suggests an anxiety about the ontological viability of the Black Diaspora in the face of competing (non-racial) solidarities and spaces/forums of identity. Why do we need to hang on to diaspora? Is diaspora an affective, intellectual, and/or ideological imperative borne out of the materialities of certain past historical conditions, or can it be thought of as a kind of proleptic cultural, if not political, articulation of a future spatiality?

Nearly all articulations of diasporas share a set of common identifications, including dispersal from a homeland and marginalization in a host location as well as memorialization of and a desire to return to that homeland. The diaspora, then, is as much a material condition or discernible system as it is a process of sociality that threads the ethereal sentiments of belonging into a kind of known world. Such a recognition allows us to limn distinctions between “the Black Diaspora” and “the African diaspora” by coming to terms with whether these systems of being primarily demarcate relations between displaced persons themselves or signify their relationships—political, cultural, psychological, or otherwise—to the continent. Thus, although they might be said to occupy the same diaspora, there are significant differences between, for example, U.S.-born blacks, Nigerian migrants, and Ethiopian exiles in Los Angeles and between their conceptualization of what constitutes a “homeland.” In fact, a real or symbolic homeland does not have to even be maintained as the central connection that binds transnational black communities within the same diasporic system, especially when, for example, cultural expressions of blackness such as hip hop not only function as a kind of lingua franca but become the basis of (at least) provisional interstitial communities.

Thinking through the questions of scale reveals the varying strata within the forms of diasporic consciousness between black peoples that, simultaneously, underline the differences as much as the similarities of their socio-cultural positions. Additionally, given current patterns in global migration structures, wherein women constitute a majority of those on the move—whether as political refugees or itinerant laborers on the circuits of global capital—the fact of blackness cannot be overdetermined to such a degree that, as Carol Boyce Davies has argued, a teleology of the Black Diaspora fails to come to terms with questions of gender, patriarchy, and sexuality, among other aspects which affect the political conceptualizations and cultural meanings of blackness.

The diachronic reading of the term advocated by Brent Hayes Edwards in *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003) engages many of these concerns. For Edwards, “the question is why it becomes necessary at certain historical conjuncture to employ the term diaspora in black intellectual work” (53). He argues that an intellectual history of the term is important in order to understand the ways that diaspora has been deployed at specific historical
conjunctures to perform specific functions. The adoption in the late 1950s of the term *diaspora* into the intellectual and ideological lexicon of black internationalism responded, at least in part, to the dissatisfaction with certain over-pronounced political overtones of Pan-Africanism. Africa itself was in a historical moment of transition from colonial to postcolonial, and Pan-Africanism, as a cultural movement, became almost exclusively absorbed in and by these crucial political developments. At that historical conjuncture, the grafting of diaspora onto the multiple experiences of black subjects around the globe signaled a forceful and necessary turn towards conceptualizing transnational black communities as political correlatives.

Holding on to the diachronic approach is a useful critical standpoint, because the notion of diaspora as a response to a historical moment allows us to both probe the theoretical considerations highlighted by Rowell and foreground questions about the relevance and function of the Black Diaspora as a position of political existence and as a location of cultural belonging. Almost as a corrective to the absolutist postures of identity sustained by some Pan-Africanist discourses, the framework of diaspora ushered in a new moment of identity. But this periodization of diaspora begs the question of the timeframe of this moment and theoretically projects the eventual end of the diasporic epoch, as various events traverse—or, intrude into—diasporic time and force a renegotiation of its core foundation and its ethno-racial and temporal boundaries.

At the current historical conjuncture, it becomes legitimate to ask, with Kobena Mercer, "whether the diaspora concept is now due for some interruption of its own" (233). The gradual recession of Africa in diasporic discourses underscores the urgency of this question. The conceptual turn towards black transnational formations in early and relatively recent diaspora discourses nonetheless pursues Africa as "the point of entanglement" (Glissant 26). This discursive engagement with Africa also emerges in the works of Stuart Hall, despite his insistence, alongside Mercer and Paul Gilroy, on hybridity. And Hall maintains the African thread throughout his scholarship on diaspora, from his 1975 *Africa is Alive and Well and Living in the Diaspora* to his thesis in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in 1990, that three "presences" mediate Caribbean identities: "Présence Africaine," "Présence Européène," and "Présence Américaine."

The new discourse of diaspora, with its emphasis on rhizomes, displacement, fluidity, and provisional identities, has not thus far accommodated the presence of Africans, instead accentuating the coded "Africanist presence" in transformed cultural forms. The relative absence of Africa in Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, for example, is only one indication among others in recent years of a turning point in the discourses of the diaspora and their conceptual formulations. Although one of its cartographic coordinates, Africa is only sometimes now seen as the epicenter of the Black Diaspora, figured as a kind of aporia whereby the formation of the diaspora might have less to do with their connections to the continent than with the cultural relations and negotiations between transnational black communities themselves.

One way to think about the Black Diaspora, or diasporas in general, is as a kind of cosmogram, as a system of points that constitute a constellation. When distinctions within the Black Diaspora are delineated, former colonial regimes are often understood as the common denominators that thread a given constituency such that, for example, Québec,
Paris, and Fort-de-France or Lagos, London, and Kingston form a particular matrix. To be sure, these networks are precisely what might allow Haitians and Senegalese to converse through French rather than through some combination of Kreyòl, Pulaar, or Wolof.

But to approach the Black Diaspora through the world-system of its former colonial structures risks eliding certain historical and cultural continuities between different black populations spread near and far. Perhaps nowhere is this more stark than with Haiti, where to be linked immediately with Guadeloupe and Martinique obfuscates a more complicated and vexed genealogy, one that is ineluctably entwined with the Dominican Republic. The border zone of the island, depicted with such visceral imagination in Edwidge Danticat’s now-famous novel The Farming of Bones, symbolizes the limits and possibilities of thinking through the meanings of the Black Diaspora. For, is it possible to approach Haiti (or, earlier, French St. Domingue) without at least approaching the Dominican Republic (or Spanish Santo Domingo)? Although just one example, the case of Haiti and the Dominican Republic brings to the fore what the Black Diaspora might mean as a unit of analysis. A turn, then, to what Earl Lewis has termed “overlapping diasporas” might reveal similar points of aesthetic sensibilities, confluences of cultures, and syncretisms of religious practices that bind black folk across the globe together. In the case of the Caribbean, as Edouard Glissant notes, “colonization has divided into English, Dutch, Spanish territories a region where the majority of the population is African: making strangers out of people who are not” (5).

With writings from José Alcántara Almánzar, M. Nourbese Philip, and Wilson Harris, as well as Percival Everett, Natasha Trethewey, and Yusef Komunyakaa, among many others, Callaloo has, for thirty years under the direction of Charles Rowell, attempted to make black writers and artists—and their audiences—something much less than strangers, something like an ever-present coming community. Along with the continuities within the literature and art produced by these various black folk spread around the globe, the journal has always insisted that this richness is as much a product of the multitudinous styles, forms, approaches, and visions of black writers and artists symbolized by the very name of the journal itself. Callaloo, a dish especially popular in Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Jamaica, is immediately recognizable by nearly everyone in the Caribbean. But callaloo, or variants of it—including calulu in Puerto Rico and caruru in Brasil—also symbolically carries a reminder of Africa with its okra, a memento of a past place and time made present in the here and now. This is equally true of the Ifá divination system of West Africa that was brought to the Americas during the slave trade and can be found in the Candomblé of Brasil, the Santería of Cuba, and the Orisha tradition of Trinidad. Callaloo embodies this remembrance of things past, as much as it is a harbinger of things to come. And like its namesake, which is a mélange to no small degree in whatever variation from Guyana to Puerto Rico, Callaloo is both synecdochic and metonymic of the cultures and letters of the Black Diaspora.

WORKS CITED


Lewis, Earl. “‘To Turn as on a Pivot’: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas.” American Historical Review 100 (June 1997): 765–87.