

# Defining the African Diaspora

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## **Introduction**

Anyone who seeks to write about the African diaspora is almost certain to get entangled in the exercise of definition. At first sight, the phrase “the African diaspora” appears to be a straightforward descriptor. Indeed, it is. Flexible and all encompassing, its very capaciousness is precisely what gives the term both its functional utility and, perversely, its analytical imprecision. We are familiar with it primarily as an historical artifact of the Atlantic slave trade that is used to refer to the forced dispersal of African peoples in the Atlantic world, especially in the western hemisphere. By extension, the term has come to be extended to similar historical processes in both the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds.<sup>1</sup> Yet the phrase is neither unproblematic nor deeply rooted

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<sup>1</sup> See, i.a., Edward A. Alpers, “The African Diaspora in the Northwestern Indian Ocean: reconsideration of an old problem, new directions for research,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa & the Middle East*, 17/2 (1997), pp. 62-81 and “Recollecting Africa: Diasporic memory in the Indian Ocean world,” *African Studies Review*, 43/1 (2000), pp. 83-99; John Hunwick, “African Slaves in the Mediterranean World: A Neglected Aspect of the African Diaspora,” in Joseph E. Harris (ed.), *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, Second Edition (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1993), pp. 289-323; “Black Slave Religious Practices in the Mediterranean World,” Paper presented to the SSHRC/UNESCO Summer Institute “Identifying Enslaved Africans: The ‘Nigerian’ Hinterland and the African Diaspora,” York University, Canada, 1997; and “The Same but different: Approaches to Slavery and the African Diaspora in the lands of Islam,” Paper presented to the Northwestern University Workshop on Slavery and the African Diaspora in the Lands of Islam, 30 April-2 May 1999. My thanks to Professor Hunwick for sharing these unpublished papers with me.

historically, having been first employed by George Shepperson in a paper presented at the International Congress of African history held at the University of Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania, in 1965.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the closer one examines the phenomenon of diaspora in the African context, the less clear it is that there is a single phenomenon that we can call “the African diaspora,” quite apart from any epistemological objections that one might raise regarding the applicability of the term itself to the African experience.

In this paper, I seek to explore the applicability of the term “diaspora” to the African diaspora as a global phenomenon. My reasons for adopting a global perspective derive from my continuing work on African diaspora in the Indian Ocean world, which regularly causes me to interrogate this phrase so embedded in the experience of and scholarly literature on the Atlantic world. Here I do so in several ways. I begin by examining the use of and debates around “diaspora” as an analytical category with respect to Africa and in the broader context of other peoples and cultures. I then discuss the different components of what we generally refer to as “the African diaspora” and ask whether, if the term itself proves to have salience, we should not instead speak of African “diasporas.” Finally, I argue for retention of the term as a method for advancing the comparative study of Black history on the continent and around the world.

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<sup>2</sup> George Shepperson, “The African Abroad or the African diaspora,” in T.O. Ranger (ed.), *Emerging Themes of African History* (Nairobi, 1968), pp. 152-176. In fact, Shepperson published his paper two years previously in *African Quarterly*, 2, 1 (1966), pp. 76-93, but virtually everyone cites the 1968 publication.

## Naming the African diaspora

As many before me have declared, “diaspora” is a largely untheorized or at least undertheorized term.<sup>3</sup> In a world in which identity politics and recourse to ethnicity are regularly invoked, it is a term that is also, as James Clifford has observed, loaded with political meaning.<sup>4</sup> Around the world, many different ethnicities, nationalities, races, and religions claim diaspora identity for themselves, while scholars who study them often use the term without much analytical precision.<sup>5</sup> What this bears witness to is that defining diaspora and deciding who gets to be regarded as belonging to a diasporic community is not a little problematic.

Because the etymology of “diaspora” and history of the term as it was originally applied in Greek translations of Deuteronomy 28:25 are both well established in the literature I will not discuss them at this time.<sup>6</sup> Suffice it to state that with the exception of

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<sup>3</sup> See, i.a., William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora*, 1, 1 (1991), pp. 83-99; Stefan Helmreich, “Kinship, Nation, and Paul Gilroy’s Concept of Diaspora,” *Diaspora*, 2, 2 (1992), pp. 243-249; Khachig Tölölyan, “Rethinking *Diaspora*(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment,” *Diaspora*, 5, 1 (1996), pp. 3-36; Brian Keith Axel, “Time and Threat: Questioning the Production of the Diaspora as an Object of Study,” *History and Anthropology*, 9, 4 (1996), pp. 415-443; Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Seattle, 1997), at p. x; Artemis Leontis, “Mediterranean Topographies before Balkanization: On Greek Diaspora, *Emporion*, and Revolution,” *Diaspora*, 6, 2 (1997), pp. 179-194, at 180-181; Steven Vertovec, “Three meanings of ‘Diaspora,’ Exemplified among South Asian Religions,” *Diaspora*, 6, 3 (1997), pp. 277-299, at 277; Jon Stratton, “(Dis)placing the Jews: Historicizing the Idea of Diaspora,” *Diaspora*, 6, 3 (1997), pp. 301-329, at 301; Martin Baumann, “Shangri-La in Exile: Portraying Tibetan Diaspora Studies and Reconsidering Diaspora(s),” *Diaspora*, 6, 3 (1997), pp. 377-404.

<sup>4</sup> James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translations in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1997), p. 244.

<sup>5</sup> For an intriguing commentary on contemporary usage of “diaspora” in the mid-1990s as reflected in the number of web sites and academic titles including that word, see Joseph Barton, “QUERY: Diaspora in Contemporary Usage,” 11 July 1995 in H-Ethnic’s July logs: [uhttp://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbr...g=JAPtemsK63k37kzttuVvcw&user=&pw=](http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbr...g=JAPtemsK63k37kzttuVvcw&user=&pw=). A further indication of this phenomenon may be seen in the theme of the 1999 Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, “Diasporas and Migrations in History.” See the report by Karen J. Winkler, “Historians Explore Questions of How People and Cultures Disperse Across the Globe,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 22 January 1999, pp. A11-12.

<sup>6</sup> For an especially perceptive discussion, see Baumann, “Shangri-La in Exile,” pp. 392-395.

its use “in Greek literature as a term for traumatic migrations,” and in some early twentieth-century journals on the Greek and Armenian diasporas,<sup>7</sup> until the 1960s its use was confined to the scholarship of the Jewish and Christian religions. Indeed, when George Shepperson first joined “African” to “diaspora” in 1965, he explicitly did so because of the close parallels he saw between the Jewish diaspora and the dispersal of Africans as a consequence of the slave trade. Shepperson argued that African American and Caribbean intellectuals themselves had for a long time recognized and articulated connections between their own people in exile and that of the Jews.<sup>8</sup> By his application of “diaspora” to the experience of “The African Abroad,” as the session at which he presented his paper was entitled and his paper makes plain, he declared as an historian and an outsider that he, too, saw such parallels. Shepperson’s achievement here was to recognize the great similarities in the comparative histories of these two great dispersions, especially the role of “slavery and imperialism” in the forced migration of both Jews and Africans, and to name the one by the term used for the other. As he notes, it as “not difficult to see why the expression ‘the African Diaspora’ has gained currency as a description of the great movement” which resulted in millions of people of African descent in the Western hemisphere.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as Martin Baumann observes, “The disciplinary application of ‘diaspora’ to non-Jewish and non-Christian peoples and their

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<sup>7</sup> Leontis, “Mediterranean Topographies,” p. 180; Barton, “QUERY.”

<sup>8</sup> Shepperson elaborates on this point in his “Introduction” to Martin L. Kilson and Robert I. Rotberg (eds.), *The African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 1-17. See also, e.g., William Miles, “Negritude and Judaism,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 21, 2 (1997), pp. 99-105.

<sup>9</sup> Shepperson, “The African Abroad,” p. 152. In his “Introduction to the African Diaspora” in Ranger’s *Emerging Themes*, p. 147, Joseph Harris indicates that the session for which Shepperson’s paper was the key text was listed in the program as “the African Diaspora, or the African Abroad,” but in a more immediate report on the Dar es Salaam congress, he notes that he was Chair of the session on “The African Abroad and African History.” See Harris, “The International Congress on African History, 1965,” *African Forum*, 1, 3 (1966), pp. 80-84 at 83. I am seeking to clarify this small point with Terry Ranger.

exile situation seems to have been undertaken first within African Studies.”<sup>10</sup> It was a brilliant bit of thumbnail comparative history.

Shepperson was determined, however, to extend the definition of the African diaspora “both in time and space” so that it could “be made of maximum value for the new African historiography.” At the same time, he was clear in his understanding that not all African migrations could be subsumed under this rubric, restricting “the concept of the African diaspora” to that “which is the study of a series of reactions to coercion, to the imposition of the economic and political rule of alien peoples in Africa, to slavery and imperialism.” He did, however, include within the African diaspora “the migration of Negro slaves and servants to Europe before the opening of the trans-Atlantic slave trade” and “the enslavement of Negroes by Muslim powers.” Nevertheless, he asserted that “the period of almost four hundred years of the European enslavement of Africans remains the heart of the African diaspora.”<sup>11</sup> Shepperson further extended his definition of what was properly within the orbit of the African diaspora to include “the dispersal of Africans . . . inside [Africa], both as a consequence of the slave trade and of imperialism. Thus, he offered “the creation of Sierra Leone,” on the one hand, and “the dispersal of Africans from Malawi” throughout eastern and southern Africa, on the other.<sup>12</sup> Finally, he spoke about pioneering Pan-African nationalist Duse Mohamed Ali, about whom he concluded: “The more we know of the complex careers of men like Duse Mohamed Ali the more we shall come to appreciate the full intricacies and influence of the African diaspora.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Baumann, “Shangri-La in Exile,” p. 386.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153, 156-157.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170. Shepperson’s identification of the Malawi (also known as the Nyasa) diaspora, rather than any number of other such examples, dates to his service with the King’s African Rifles during World War II in what was then Nyasaland, now Malawi.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

To a very large extent, whether or not one agrees with everything that he proposed in this classic paper, Shepperson had it right. Ironically, however, until very recently, historians of Africa have resisted embracing Shepperson's bold initiative, preferring to treat African history as something distinct from that of the African diaspora.<sup>14</sup> But as the combination of multiculturalism and the so-called "new" African diaspora have fueled a rising tide of interest in diaspora studies in the academy, many variations on his initiative have been proffered up. Indeed, the paths that lead from Shepperson to the present are many, and while I do not propose to follow them all, I shall explore several to see to what extent they challenge, adjust, or refute the architecture of his thesis.

### **Adopting the African diaspora**

The first scholar to apply Shepperson's idea in print to his own work was apparently R.W. Beachey, who employed the new phrase in his inaugural lecture at Makerere University.<sup>15</sup> Addressing the generally ignored East African diaspora, Beachey accepted the core of Shepperson's definition as having "chiefly to do with the dispersion of East Africans, not of their own free will, but by forcible extraction from the mainland, and their transport overseas or to other parts of Africa as slaves." He also wondered, though without being able to offer any answers, "What has happened to all these millions of slaves who have gone out from East Central Africa to Mauritius, Réunion, the Seychelles, the Makran coast and the countless thousands who were absorbed into the

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<sup>14</sup> For a set of papers that call this separation into question, see the African Studies Association's *Issue; A Journal of Opinion*, 24, 2 (1996), which is devoted to "African [Diaspora] Studies" and edited by Lisa Brock; see also Pier M. Larson, *History and Memory in the Age of Enslavement: Becoming Merina in Highland Madagascar, 1770-1822* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000), p. 270.

<sup>15</sup> R.W. Beachey, *The African Diaspora and East Africa: An inaugural lecture delivered at Makerere University College (University of East Africa), Kampala, Uganda on 31 July, 1967* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1969). Beachey no doubt attended the Dar es Salaam Congress in 1965, since Shepperson's paper was not published in the proceedings until 1968.

great areas of the Middle East.” In concluding his lecture Beachey asked, “What is the result of this great diaspora for East Africa?” and astutely observed that, in the absence of any seminal figures like Blyden, DuBois, Césaire and Garvey, “Pan Africanism and East African nationalism have drawn little or no strength from those nameless thousands who were wrenched from their homelands and transported overseas in past centuries.”<sup>16</sup> This particular challenge was taken up earliest, most seriously, and to greatest effect, however, by Joseph Harris in a book that evolved from his participation as chair of the panel at which Shepperson presented his Dar es Salaam paper. Although Harris employed the phrase “African diaspora” in his introduction, for whatever reasons he did not incorporate it into the title of his pioneering study.<sup>17</sup>

Despite Beachey’s deployment of the phrase, and Harris’ researches on “the African presence in Asia,” the concept of “the African diaspora” did not generally catch on in the scholarly literature until about a decade after Shepperson first coined it. This time-lag is what Baumann calls “the ‘ten-year adoption gap’,” since it re-occurs in the history of other disciplinary adoptions and adaptations of “diaspora.”<sup>18</sup> Edited volumes by Jacob Drachler, Martin Kilson and Robert Rotberg, and Graham Irwin each contributed to legitimating the concept within the larger field of Black Studies.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Shepperson wrote the introduction to the Kilson and Rotberg volume.<sup>20</sup> The principal intellectual contribution of these volumes was to make explicit the extension of the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pp. 2, 14-15; cf. Alpers, “Recollecting Africa,” pp. 84-85.

<sup>17</sup> Harris, *The African Presence in Asia: Consequences of the East African Slave Trade* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), pp. vii, xi-xiv and *passim*.

<sup>18</sup> Baumann, “Shangri-La in Exile,” p. 389.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Drachler (ed.), *Black Homeland, Black Diaspora: Cross Currents of the African Relationship* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975); Martin L. Kilson and Robert I. Rotberg (eds.), *The African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); Graham W. Irwin (ed.), *Africans Abroad: A Documentary History of the Black Diaspora in Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean During the Age of Slavery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

<sup>20</sup> Shepperson, “Introduction,” in Kilson and Rotberg (eds.), *The African Diaspora*, pp. 1-10.

notion to the wider dispersal of Africans across the globe that Shepperson only suggested in his initial paper. It remained once again, however, for Harris to expand the concept to encompass the widest understanding of the African diaspora in his pioneering and still exceptional edited collection of essays on the “global dimensions” of the diaspora.<sup>21</sup>

In his introduction to *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, Harris offers the following, oft-quoted definition:

The African diaspora concept subsumes the following: the global dispersion (voluntary and involuntary) of Africans throughout history; the emergence of a cultural identity abroad based on origin and social condition; and the psychological or physical return to the homeland, Africa. Thus viewed, the African diaspora assumes the character of a dynamic, continuous, and complex phenomenon stretching across time, geography, class, and gender.<sup>22</sup>

Harris’s statement constitutes the first clear attempt to define the diaspora beyond the original boundaries set forth by Shepperson in 1965. That it continues to hold a central position may be seen, for example, in Alusine Jalloh’s recent reiteration:

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<sup>21</sup> Harris (ed.), *Global Dimensions*. It is quite interesting to see how the second edition (1993) differs from the first edition (1982). Harris revised his introduction, reorganized the Table of Contents and the order of some papers, dropped several papers that were less historical in orientation, and added others that emphasized both the non-Atlantic dimensions of the diaspora and the contributions of African women in the diaspora. Another unique publication that was a direct by-product of extending the horizons of research on the African diaspora, but that does not directly take up the central themes in the developing discourse on the topic, is St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There*, 2 vols. (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, UCLA, 1987 and 1990). Drake explains his shift of emphasis from a study of “Africa and the Black Diaspora” to a deeper historical study of race and racial attitudes in the “Preface” to Vol. 1, pp. xv-xxiii.

<sup>22</sup> Harris, “Introduction,” in Harris (ed.), *Global Dimensions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 3-4.



The African diaspora was born out of the voluntary and involuntary movement of Africans to various areas of the world since ancient times, but involuntary migration through the trans-Saharan, trans-Atlantic, and Indian Ocean slave trades accounts for most of the black presence outside of Africa today. The concept of the African diaspora has also come to include the psychological and physical return of people of African descent to their homeland. Today, the historical relationship between Africans and their descendants abroad is a major subject not only in history but in other disciplines as well.<sup>23</sup>

More recently, in the wider context of shifting intellectual paradigms of the 1990s and the expanding applications of diaspora, various scholars have sought to contribute further to tightening up this definition.

### **Contending the African Diaspora**

Some of these interventions take the form of differently couched cautions about the problems inherent in the concept. A decade ago, James Walvin suggested:

While the expression [in this instance “Black Diaspora”] is a useful concept which powerfully evokes the extraordinary, far-flung experience of black life as shaped by the forces of imperial and colonial expansion, and by the effects of black slavery throughout the Atlantic economy, it runs the danger of overlooking the specific – the local and the distinctive – black experience in favor

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<sup>23</sup> Alusine Jalloh, “Introduction,” in Alusine Jalloh and Stephen E. Maizlish (eds.), *The African Diaspora* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), p. 3.

of the general. Yet the contrary danger is perhaps even more tempting (and has certainly proved more influential) namely the tendency to divorce the experience of the Black Diaspora from its roots in colonial – primarily European – policy and expansion.<sup>24</sup>

Couched in more philosophical terms, Michael Echeruo contends that “in a major sense, we have appropriated both the language and the theology of another historic discourse into our discourse, without fully addressing, much less acknowledging, the consequences of that appropriation.”<sup>25</sup> So far as I know, however, only Tony Martin argues for complete rejection of the term “diaspora” as applied to the African experience. He notes that the semantics of the term was debated at the First African Diaspora Studies Institute held at Howard University in 1979 that gave rise to the first edition of *Global Dimensions* and stakes out his position forthrightly, declaring

that the term *diaspora* be deleted from our vocabulary, because the term *African diaspora* reinforces a tendency among those writing our history to see the history of African people always in terms of parallels in white history. . . . we should do away with the expression *African diaspora* because we are not Jews. Let us use some other terminology. Let us speak of the African dispersion, or uprooted Africa as somebody suggested, or scattered Africa.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> James Walvin, “Black slavery in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries: the historical implications for the Black Diaspora,” in Aubrey W. Bonnett and G. Llewellyn Watson (eds.), *Emerging Perspectives on the Black Diaspora* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> Michael J. C. Echeruo, “An African Diaspora: The Ontological Project,” in Isidore Ekpewho, Carole Boyce Davies, and Ali A. Mazrui (eds.), *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 3-18, quoted at 3.

<sup>26</sup> Tony Martin, “Garvey and Scattered Africa,” in Harris (ed.), *Global Dimensions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 441.

While Martin's suggested alternatives are perfectly adequate as descriptors – indeed, in his 1966 report on the Dar es Salaam Congress, Harris uses both the term “diaspora” and Africa's “scattered children” – scholars of the African diaspora have clearly not responded to his call.<sup>27</sup> One reason may be that it is precisely the implicit theoretical and comparative dimensions of “diaspora,” however challenging these may be in practice, that argue for its application to Africa.

If, then, scholars have embraced the concept of an African diaspora, what, exactly, are its theoretical dimensions? There are, I think, two principal strands in the debate. One involves the notion embedded in Shepperson's opening gambit that the study of the diaspora is inherently comparative. This is not to suggest that the African diaspora must be seen as being parallel to other diasporas (now that the term has been extended well beyond that of the Jews), as Martin disputes, but that as Philip Curtin observed more than two decades ago, “The African diaspora may have been unique, but aspects of it clearly belong to other aggregates of human experience that should be studied comparatively.”<sup>28</sup> This current has been elaborated upon by a number of other scholars. Elliott Skinner, for example, argued in an important contribution to the initial *Global Dimensions* collection that scholars of the African diaspora needed to situate their analyses in an explicitly comparative framework, taking as his focus the question of return and relations between those people in diasporas and those who remain in their places of origin.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Harris specifically called for a comparative approach in an analysis of the different streams of return to Africa movements over time, that is, looking

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<sup>27</sup> Harris, “The International Congress.”

<sup>28</sup> Philip Curtin, “The African Diaspora,” in Michael Craton (ed.), *Roots and Branches: Current Directions in Slave Studies* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 1-17, quoted at p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Elliott P. Skinner, “The Dialectic between Diasporas and Homelands,” in Harris (ed.), *Global Dimensions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 11-40; cf.

within the African diaspora for his comparisons.<sup>30</sup> Thomas Holt articulates this idea perhaps more effectively than anyone to date when he writes:

For students of the black diaspora it is the differences among the experiences of differently situated black peoples that is important as well as, or perhaps even more than, the unities or commonalities that define their peoplehood. In other words, invoking a framework of “a diaspora” presupposes that through a comparative analysis there is something to be learned from experiences that unfolded for *different* black peoples in *different* places and times. There is, of course, an obvious tension between these two frameworks - a *sameness* of experiences suggested by the political requirements of diaspora and peoplehood, and the *difference* of experience which any analysis and understanding of those experiences requires.<sup>31</sup>

In the same vein, but again more broadly, Colin Palmer emphasizes that New fields require new methodologies, and it is unacceptable for scholars to see the modern African diaspora as a replica of other diasporas or as black American, black British, or Caribbean history writ large. The field must embrace disciplinary and

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<sup>30</sup> Harris, “A Comparative Approach to the Study of the African Diaspora,” *The African Dispersal* (Boston: Afro-American Studies Program, Boston University, 1979), Occasional Paper No. 5, pp. 52-55. Revised and expanded versions appeared subsequently as “A Comparative Approach to the Study of the African Diaspora,” in Harris (ed.), *Global Dimensions*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., pp. 112-124, and “Return Movements to West and East Africa: A Comparative Approach,” in Harris (ed.), *Global Dimensions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 51-64.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas C. Holt, “Slavery and Freedom in the Atlantic World: Reflections on the Diasporan Framework,” in Darlene Clark Hine and Jacqueline McLeod (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 33-44, quoted at 36.

interdisciplinary orientations and must, perforce, be comparative in its methodological dimensions.<sup>32</sup>

The attention regularly paid by scholars of the African diaspora to the wider literature on comparative diasporas is clear evidence that this tendency has been enthusiastically embraced. No better example of the power of this idea exists than the Comparative Black History program at Michigan State University, our hosts for this conference.

Still another variation on the idea of adopting a comparative perspective on the diaspora emerges from situating the African diaspora in global and transnational contexts.

Lisa Brock articulates this position with particular vigor and coherence:

If we shape our thinking about the African Diaspora as but one international circle with a history and map of consciousness (the conductance of Africanisms is the circle's most resilient cultural manifestation and Pan Africanism the maps' most notable political one) that overlap and co-exist with other circles and world-views – such as Pan-Americanism, the international Left, international feminism, anti-colonialism, the movement for native rights and environmental justice, for example – we begin to better understand today's world *and* the concomitant consciousness evolved among peoples commonly drawn into it. . . . Greater conceptualization of the African Diaspora, then, should stimulate more scholars to look

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<sup>32</sup> Colin Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," *Perspectives: American Historical Association Newsletter*, 36, 6 (September 1998), pp. 1, 22-25, quoted at 25.

beyond the frame of the nation-state into other ties that bind people  
into the world.<sup>33</sup>

At about the same time and in a different context, Earl Lewis powerfully advocated the idea of “overlap” in an important paper on the historiography on the African American experience. Seeking to break away from earlier conceptions that marginalized African Americans from the central trajectories of American history, Lewis argues that we need to understand the African American experience in the context of “overlapping diasporas” so that peoples of African descent are not conceived of simply as the “other” but as central - “pivotal” in his terms - to the forging of American culture and history.<sup>34</sup> Like Brock’s intervention, Lewis’ notion of “overlapping diasporas” is also acknowledged as an important influence on the stimulating work of Dwayne Williams, writing about Cabo Verdian identities, and the provocative lead article by Tiffany Patterson and Robin Kelley in a special issue devoted to the African diaspora in the *African Studies Review*.<sup>35</sup>

With Brock, Lewis, and Patterson and Kelley we see how this first strand interweaves with the second major thread in discourse around the African diaspora,

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<sup>33</sup> Lisa Brock, “Questioning the Diaspora: Hegemony, Black Intellectuals and Doing International History from Below,” *Issue*, 24, 2 (1996), p. 10. This passage is also quoted and endorsed with equal enthusiasm to my own by Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley in “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World,” *African Studies Review*, 43, 1 (2000), pp. 11-45, at 26-27. Cf. Holt, “Slavery and Freedom.”

<sup>34</sup> Earl Lewis, “To Turn as on a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas,” *American Historical Review*, 100, 3 (1995), pp. 765-787, reprinted in Darlene Clark Hine and Jacqueline McLeod (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 3-32, where it speaks to a different audience than that of the *AHR*. For a Caribbean evocation of the idea of overlapping diasporas without actually utilizing that phrase, see Maureen Warner-Lewis, “Cultural Reconfigurations in the African Caribbean,” in Okpewho, Davies and Mazrui (eds.), *The African Diaspora*, pp. 19-27, especially 23-24.

<sup>35</sup> Dwayne E. Williams, “Rethinking the African Diaspora: A Comparative Look at Race and Identity in a Transatlantic Community, 1878-1921,” in Hine and McLeod (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries*, pp. 105-120; Patterson and Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations,” p. 45, n. 7. On overlapping diasporas see also Judith Byfield, “Introduction: Rethinking the African Diaspora,” *African Studies Review*, 43, 1 (2000), pp. 5-6.

It is worth noting here that with the theme of the 44<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association in 2001 being “Africa and the African Diaspora: Past, Present, Future,” the diaspora appears to have been integrated into African studies at the institutional level as well as that of individual scholars.

namely, the impact of cultural studies and broader theorizing about diasporas, in general. Here the influence of Stuart Hall's seminal paper on "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," with its emphasis on continuity and discontinuity, similarity and dissimilarity, is especially significant. In it Hall declares, "The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*."<sup>36</sup> Coming to grips with the concept of hybridity and placing it in a meaningful global context, both historically and contemporaneously, has occupied the thinking of most students of diasporas for the past decade. No less influential has been James Clifford's essay on diaspora, which incorporates a dialogue with Paul Gilroy's formulations of diaspora in *The Black Atlantic*, that were themselves partly inspired by Clifford's work on traveling cultures.<sup>37</sup>

Clifford proposes that "it is not possible to define 'diaspora' sharply, either by recourse to essential features or to privative oppositions. But it is possible to perceive a loosely coherent, adaptive constellation of responses to dwelling-in-displacement."<sup>38</sup> He suggests that "Diaspora cultures ... mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place."<sup>39</sup> Clifford contends, moreover, that

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<sup>36</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 222-237.

<sup>37</sup> See James Clifford, *Routes*, pp. 17-46 for "Traveling Cultures" [1992 ] and 244-277 for "Diasporas" [1994]; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> Clifford, *Routes*, p. 254.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

Diaspora consciousness is . . . constituted both negatively and positively. It is constituted negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion. . . .

Diaspora consciousness is produced positively through identification with world-historical cultural/political forces, such as “Africa” or “China.” The process may not be as much about being African or Chinese as about being American or British or wherever one has settled, differently. . . . diasporic consciousness “makes the best of a bad situation.” Experiences of loss, marginality, and exile (differentially cushioned by class) are often reinforced by systematic exploitation and blocked advancement.<sup>40</sup>

Clifford adds that “diasporic cultures work to maintain community, selectively preserving and recovering traditions, ‘customizing’ and ‘versioning’ them in novel, hybrid, and often antagonistic situations.”<sup>41</sup> He further qualifies his thinking by arguing that “Diaspora cultures are, to varying degrees, produced by regimes of political domination and economic inequality. But these violent processes of displacement do not strip people of their ability to sustain distinctive political communities and cultures of resistance.”<sup>42</sup> Addressing himself specifically to Gilroy, he states pointedly that “There is no reason his privileging of the black Atlantic . . . should necessarily silence other diasporic perspectives” and that “If diaspora is to be something about which one could write a

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 256-257.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 265.



history . . . it must be something more than the name for a site of multiple displacements and reconstitutions of identity.” It must be “a historically produced social formation.”<sup>43</sup>

Clifford also engages William Safran’s influential statement on diaspora, which causes him to worry “about the extent to which diaspora, defined as dispersal, presupposed a center.” Indeed, he argues vigorously that

The centering of diasporas around an axis of origin and return overrides the specific local interactions (identifications and ruptures, both constructive and defensive) necessary for the maintenance of diasporic social forms. The empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling *here* assumes a solidarity and connection *there*. But *there* is not necessarily a single place or an exclusive nation.

How is the connection (elsewhere) that makes a difference (here) remembered and rearticulated?<sup>44</sup>

Clifford finds an answer in the anti-Zionist perspective on the Jewish diaspora of Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, who contend: “‘Diasporic cultural identity teaches us that cultures are not preserved by being protected from ‘mixing’ but probably can only continue to exist as a product of such mixing. Cultures, as well as identities, are constantly being remade. . . . diasporic identity is a disaggregated identity’.”<sup>45</sup> Here we return to Hall’s formulation.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>45</sup> Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generational Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Inquiry*, 19/4 (1993), p. 721, as cited by Clifford, *Routes*, pp. 270-271. See Safran, “Diasporas in modern societies.”

As a basis for understanding the African diaspora - whether in the world of the Indian, Atlantic, or Mediterranean Oceans - I find Clifford's a much more suggestive and potentially rewarding comparative framework than that of most other writers on the subject. In particular, with my attention generally focused on the less well known and possibly even asymptomatic examples of the African diaspora in the non-Atlantic worlds of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds, I appreciate his lack of interest in establishing categories of diasporic characteristics, since despite qualifications which indicate that not all features must be present for a people's experience to be considered a diaspora by those scholars who do so, the mere act of listing tends to reify these categories and to inhibit creative thinking.<sup>46</sup> But since definitions require categorization, far better is the less categorical identification of characteristics proposed by Colin Palmer as he seeks to arrive at a definition of what he calls "the modern African diaspora":

Diasporic communities, generally speaking, possess a number of characteristics. Regardless of their location, members of a diaspora share an emotional attachment to their ancestral land, are cognizant of their dispersal and, if conditions warrant, of their oppression and alienation in the countries in which they reside. Members of diasporic communities also tend to possess a sense of "racial," ethnic, or religious identity that transcends geographic boundaries, to share broad cultural similarities, and sometimes to articulate a desire to return to their original homeland. No diasporic community manifests all of these characteristics or shares with the same intensity an identity with its scattered ancestral kin. In many respects, diasporas are not actual but imaginary and

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<sup>46</sup> Apart from their many other virtues in advancing the discourse on diaspora, I include here Safran, "Diasporas in modern societies," pp. 83-84, Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, p. 26, Table 1.1, and Tölölyan, "Rethinking *Diaspora(s)*," pp. 20-27.

symbolic communities and political constructs; it is we who often call them into being.<sup>47</sup>

Even here, however, we encounter definitional problems when we shift our gaze to the non-Atlantic world. As I have asked elsewhere,

Do the descendants of Africans in the Indian Ocean world consider themselves to be African in any sense at all? Do they have collective memories of Africa as their homeland? Do they harbor irredentist aspirations? At first glance, our responses would seem to be negative; but a complete answer is more complicated, both less than an African American or “Black Atlantic” projection of the meaning of “diaspora” onto the African presence in the region and more than an Asian or Islamic assimilation of African peoples that negates race and culture.<sup>48</sup>

How we get at the answers to these questions and then integrate those answers into a global perspective on the African diaspora returns us to the critical contribution of Patterson and Kelley. In their essay, they ask “to what degree are New World black people ‘African’ and what does that mean?”<sup>49</sup> Part of their answer is that “diasporic identities are socially and historically constituted, reconstituted, and reproduced; and that any sense of a collective identity among black peoples in the New World, Europe, and

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<sup>47</sup> Palmer, “Defining and Studying,” pp. 22-23. Palmer’s last remark reminds one of the last point made by Tölölyan, “Rethinking *Diaspora(s)*,” pp. 26-27 about the role of American universities in creating a diasporic discourse.

<sup>48</sup> Alpers, “The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean: A Comparative Perspective,” forthcoming in Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst (eds.), *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001).

<sup>49</sup> Patterson and Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations,” p. 15.

Africa is contingent and constantly shifting,” as are the linkages among them.<sup>50</sup> They contend further that “Diaspora has always been employed (invoked) in such a way as to hide the differences and discontinuities,” urging us to extend our vision of the African diaspora to “the specific experiences of people” beyond the narrowly-defined locus of either the African American or English-speaking Caribbean. They point to work by Michael Hanchard and Kim Butler on different aspects of Afro-Brazilian experience as being exemplary of what needs to be undertaken, as they also identify the pioneering work of Michael Gomez, a trained Africanist writing about the American South.<sup>51</sup> To these examples from the Atlantic world one might add Helene Basu’s important studies of Sidi (Afro-Indian) communities in Gujarat or Francesca Declich’s fascinating articles on the Zigua communities of southern Somalia.<sup>52</sup> Each of these studies emphasizes complexity, agency, and creativity in the context of larger world forces.

Although Patterson and Kelley’s perspective encompasses the globe and makes a case for the centrality of Africa and African people in the making of the modern world, they miss an opportunity to provide a more global definition of the diaspora by restricting their detailed analysis to the Atlantic world, as several of the commentators on their paper

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 19, 20.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 21-23, 16-17, quoted at 20 and 21. See Michael Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945-1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) and *Racial Politics in Contemporary Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Kim Butler, *Freedoms Given, Freedoms on: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition São Paulo and Salvador* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>52</sup> Helene Basu, *Habshi-Sklaven, Sidi-Fakire. Muslimische Heiligenverehrung im westlichen Indien* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1995) and “Theatre of Memory: Performances of Ritual Kinship of the African Diaspora in Sind/Pakistan,” in Monika Böck and Aparna Rao(eds.), *Culture, Creation and Procreation in South Asia* (New York: Berghahn, 2000); Francesca Declich, “Gendered Narratives,” *History, and Identity: Two Centuries along the Juba River among the Zigula and Shanbara,* *History in Africa*, 22 (1995), pp. 93-122 and “Identity, Dance and Islam among People with Bantu Origins in Riverine Areas of Somalia,” in Ali Jimale Ahmed (ed.), *The Invention of Somalia* (Lawrenceville, N.J., 1995), pp. 191-222.

point out.<sup>53</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, in particular, urges us to think more ambitiously about a notion that Kelley has elsewhere employed, “‘the world the diaspora made,’ a phrase that points to the full implications of the African diaspora as a framework: it allows us to consider the complexity and influence of black universalist discourses, black articulations of the globe.”<sup>54</sup> This is an attractive framework, but I wonder if the phrases “universalist discourses” and “black articulations of the globe,” however all-encompassing they may be, could be misread as embodying implicit bias towards literate expression. If my concerns are valid, Edwards’ proposition runs the risk of inadvertently overlooking the millions of diasporic Africans who were not literate or able to express themselves through modern media. After all, Kelley’s phrase occurs in an article about the towering internationalist figure of C. L. R. James.<sup>55</sup>

### **Towards a working definition**

This last point brings me back to my own interests in the earlier history of the diaspora. Let me be clear that I do not mean to include in my definition of the diaspora either the pre-historical dispersion of humankind from its evolutionary home in eastern Africa to the rest of the world or migrations of African populations within the continent, such as the settlement of the southern half of the continent by Bantu-speaking people over the past several millennia. Including these developments in human history as diasporic “streams,” as Palmer does, stretches the African diaspora beyond any meaningful definition. I do, however, consider that Palmer’s last three “streams” must be

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<sup>53</sup> See under the section on “‘Unfinished Migrations’: Commentary and Response” the remarks by Brent Hayes Edwards (pp. 47-50) and Michael O. West (pp. 61-64) and the positive response of Patterson and Kelley to these criticisms, among others (pp. 65-68).

<sup>54</sup> Edwards, pp. 49-50.

<sup>55</sup> Kelley, “The World the Diaspora Made: C. L. R. James and the Politics of History,” in Grant Darred (ed.), *Rethinking C. L. R. James* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 103-130.

included, although here again I would not define his third stream, which for him “involved the movement of traders, merchants, slaves, soldiers, and others to parts of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia beginning around the fifth century B.C.E.,” as “a trading diaspora,” which I believe has a much more historically specific meaning in the literature and does not, in any case, adequately cover the range of voluntary and involuntary movements exemplified in the non-Atlantic diaspora. Equally, what Palmer calls “the modern African diaspora,” including both the stream that “associated with the Atlantic trade in African slaves” and that following “slavery’s demise in the Americas and continues to our own times,” fails to satisfy a global perspective of the diaspora.<sup>56</sup> Why? Because even this conceptualization of the modern African diaspora remains Atlantic-centered, since it overlooks the very important extensions of the Atlantic world – that is, the evolving Euro-American capitalist world system, in short, the modern world – into the Indian Ocean world. For example, the development of sugar plantations economies from the mid-eighteenth century on in the Mascarene Islands intimately connected the southwest Indian Ocean to the Caribbean through the medium of French capital and the slave trade.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, restriction of the slave trade to south of the Equator and removal of the Portuguese court to Rio de Janeiro during the Peninsular Campaign in the early nineteenth century gave rise to two decades of intensive slave trading from Mozambique to Brazil.<sup>58</sup> To take one final example, it is difficult to comprehend the larger forces affecting the diaspora in the Northwestern Indian Ocean

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<sup>56</sup> Palmer, “Defining and Studying,” p. 22.

<sup>57</sup> The literature is vast, but see, e.g., Alpers, “The French Slave Trade in East Africa (1721-1810),” *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 10/37 (1970), 80-124; Richard Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Labourers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>58</sup> See Alpers, “‘Mozambiques’ in Brazil: Another Dimension of the African Diaspora in the Atlantic World,” forthcoming in José C. Curto and Renée Souloudre-LaFrance (eds.), *Africa and the Americas: Interconnections during the Slave Trade*.

during the nineteenth century without accounting for the expanding British Indian empire and its implications for the capitalization of the slave trade to the Gulf and the rise of a plantation economy at Zanzibar.<sup>59</sup>

Quite apart from these generally ignored features of the ways in which the evolving modern world intruded into that of the Islamic Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds, any global perspective on the African diaspora must allow for a definition that places less emphasis on conceptualizations of the diaspora by Africans in the diaspora, since there were precious few figures like Duse Mohamed Ali and certainly no diasporic intellectual tradition such as marks the Atlantic world from the time of Equiano and his generation to this day. As I have argued elsewhere, one needs to look to popular culture for clues about how Africa was remembered and, therefore, diasporic consciousness may have evolved.<sup>60</sup>

If I may return to previously cited pleas for recognition of diversity and complexity, for sensitivity to overlapping diasporas in our study of the African diaspora, I believe we need also to incorporate into my evolving definition of the African diaspora an astute observation made by Ibrahim Sundiata with reference to the presence of tens of millions of African-descended people in Latin America. Commenting that “Many of these persons may not even consider themselves members of a Black Atlantic community,” a reflection that could apply with equal force to their counterparts elsewhere in the diaspora, he suggests: “We must speak of not one, but many Diasporas,

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<sup>59</sup> See Abdul Sheriff, *Slave, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873* (London: James Currey, 1987) and M. Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: Roots of British Domination* (London, 1992).

<sup>60</sup> Alpers, “Recollecting Africa: Diasporic Memory in the Indian Ocean World,” *African Studies Review*, 43, 1 (2000), pp. 83-99, and “Becoming ‘Mozambique’: Diaspora and Identity in Mauritius,” in Vijayalakshmi Teelock and Edward A. Alpers (eds.), *History, Memory and Identity* (Port-Louis: Nelson Mandela Centre for African Culture and the University of Mauritius, 2001), pp. 117-155.

recognizing that each creates its own history and each projects this backwards as ‘the’ Diasporic experience.”<sup>61</sup> Not only does this idea complement Lewis’ advocacy for the significance of overlapping diasporas, and Holt’s recommendation that we address the tension between sameness and difference in the African diaspora, but it also opens the door to a synthesis that recognizes overlapping diasporas within the broader rubric of the African diaspora itself. Examples abound, but among others they include the forging of new, “African” identities by captured Africans from different parts of the continent in both the New and Old Worlds during the eras of active slave trading from Africa, their continuing renegotiation of identity over time with already creolized African descendants, the movement of bonded Africans from the Caribbean to North America, the encounter of liberated Africans and African-descended people with recently emancipated Africans in places like nineteenth-century Trinidad and Mauritius, and more recently the interactions between older communities of diasporic Africans and those who are part of what is called the “new” African diaspora. Adopting a definition of multiple and overlapping African diasporas within the more generalized concept of “African diaspora” (as opposed to an or the African diaspora) will allow us to address the differences, as well as the similarities, over time and space, in both global and local contexts, that most scholars of the diaspora agree are part of the historical and contemporary record.

A further wrinkle in my definition of African diaspora invokes a return to Shepperson’s desire to include internal African diasporas. In addition to Shepperson’s two examples, let me suggest two others that ought to be included in how we think about

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<sup>61</sup> Ibrahim Sundiata, “Africanity, Identity and Culture,” *Issue*, 24, 2 (1996), pp. 13-17, quoted at 13. Cf. Donna R. Gabaccia, *Italy's many diasporas* (Seattle : University of Washington Press, 2000).



the African diaspora. Although I have already rejected Palmer's application of the concept of a trading diaspora to his third stream, the fact remains that there is a rich body of literature on trading diasporas within the African continent that probably should be included under the Africa diaspora umbrella for its insights on how Africans in non-slave trade contexts have addressed related questions of being dispersed from their original homelands. The work of anthropologist Abner Cohen on the Hausa commercial diaspora is seminal as is that of Curtin among historians; more recently, both Alusine Jalloh and Richard Roberts have included African trading diasporas within the broader concept of African diaspora.<sup>62</sup> More closely related to the central place of the overseas slave trade in diaspora studies, however, is the inclusion of what Pier Larson calls "intracontinental forced migrations." As Larson notes:

Long neglected in diaspora studies (although not in African history), intracontinental African population movements and transformations in source societies for slaves accent the similarities and differences of human experience across the global dispersion of African people. To be sure, Africans forced to cross the ocean and adapt to life in the Americas and in the Indian Ocean underwent different experiences from those internally exiled among foreign peoples or remaining in source societies on the

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<sup>62</sup> Abner Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1969); Philip Curtin, *Cross-cultural trade in world history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 14-59; Jalloh, "Introduction," pp. 3-4 and "The Fula Trading Diaspora in Colonial Sierra Leone," in Jalloh and Maizlish (eds.), *The African Diaspora*, pp. 22-38; Richard Roberts, "The Construction of Cultures in Diaspora: African and African New World Experiences," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 98, 1-2 (1999), Special Issue on "Diaspora and Immigration," ed. V.Y. Mudimbe with Sabine Engel, pp. 177-190, at 179-182. See also François Manchuelle, *Willing migrants : Soninke labor diasporas, 1848-1960* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997).

African continent. Yet there are sufficient similarities across the diaspora . . . to merit fruitful comparisons.<sup>63</sup>

I believe that inclusion of each of these examples of internal African diasporas opens up the scope of what may legitimately be included within the orbit of African diaspora studies without extenuating the significance of applying the term “diaspora” to Africa. In fact, I would argue that their inclusion makes possible deeper engagement with the general diaspora literature while concomitantly reinforcing the centrality of Africa to discussions of the diaspora.

This brings me to my final point, which is that while we must pay close attention to the wider international contexts in which these African diasporas are situated, we must also not forget the African context. For if it is true that diaspora consciousness has its origins among the scattered communities who have been dispersed from any particular homeland, real or imagined, it is no less true that in order to appreciate what is indeed African in the diaspora we must begin with Africa. This is a point that has been made most consistently among historians of Africa by Paul Lovejoy, but is also echoed by Palmer.<sup>64</sup> Lovejoy is an important figure in the UNESCO Slave Routes project that is truly global in its scope and is putting this perspective into scholarly practice as numerous conferences and publications bear witness. Writing in the context of the Atlantic slave trade and diaspora, but in terms that apply with comparable vigor to African presence in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds, he posits:

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<sup>63</sup> Larson, *History and Memory*, pp. 274-275. The elided text is a reference to my own work on the Indian Ocean diaspora.

<sup>64</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, “The African Diaspora: Revisionist Interpretations of Ethnicity, Culture and Religion under Slavery,” *Studies in the World History of Slavery, Abolition, and Emancipation*, II, 1 (1997) at <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~slavery/essays/esy9701love.html> and “Identifying Enslaved Africans in the African Diaspora,” in Paul E. Lovejoy (ed.), *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000), pp. 1-29; Palmer, “Defining and Studying,” p. 24.

An “African-centered” focus, in contrast to one centered in Europe or the Americas, reveals the often neglected and misunderstood impact of the African background upon the societies of the Americas and hence the relationship of slavery to modernity itself. It challenges the assumptions that not much African history is relevant to the study of the Atlantic because the enslaved population was too diverse in its origins to sustain the continuities of history; or the corollary that the enslaved population, newly arrived from Africa, as comprised of autonomous individuals with such mixed experiences that they rapidly assimilated into the “new” societies of the New World, whether characterized as “American” or “Creole”. The shift in focus renders evidence confirming complex links across and around the Atlantic that are surprising, mostly because of the degree to which they have been ignored or denied.<sup>65</sup>

To sum up, I would define African diaspora in the following terms: When we speak of African diaspora we must recognize that we are really speaking of multiple, frequently overlapping diasporas. Furthermore, we must include in our definition a comparative dimension that looks both within that of the African experience and beyond to those of other global diasporic communities. Part of this comparative dimension should also recognize the differences among different African diasporas as well as the similarities between them. No less fundamental is acknowledgement that there can be no serious appreciation of African diaspora without locating it within a number of larger global processes of change from ancient to modern to contemporary times. In addition, while this definition recognizes the critical role that diasporic intellectuals have played in defining the idea of being in diaspora, particularly within the experience of the Atlantic

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<sup>65</sup> Lovejoy, “Identifying Enslaved Africans,” pp. 1-2.

diaspora, it places equal significance on popular, non-elite traditions that link dispersed communities of Africans to notions of Africa or locally defined categories of being different and “African” that might otherwise fall outside of more self-conscious identifications of being part of an African diaspora. Although I have no illusions that the process of definition in which I have engaged will either satisfy everyone or exhaust every epistemological possibility, I find that it works for me at this stage in my own research and hope that it will further stimulate the very lively debate that continues among students of African diaspora and diaspora studies.