

BIBLIOTECA JAVIER COY D'ESTUDIS NORD-AMERICANS

THE DIALECTICS OF DIASPORAS: MEMORY, LOCATION AND GENDER

MAR GALLEGÓ & ISABEL SOTO, EDS.



PUV

**THE DIALECTICS OF DIASPORAS:
MEMORY, LOCATION AND GENDER**

Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans

Directora
Carme Manuel

THE DIALECTICS OF DIASPORAS: MEMORY, LOCATION AND GENDER

Mar Gallego and Isabel Soto, eds.

Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans

Universitat de València

The Dialectics of Diasporas: Memory, Location and Gender

© Mar Gallego and Isabel Soto, eds., 2009

1ª edición de 2009

Reservados los derechos

Prohibida su reproducción total o parcial

ISBN: 978-84-370-8399-5

Imagen de la portada: Sophia de Vera Holtz

Diseño de la cubierta: Celso Hernández de la Figuera

Publicacions de la Universitat de València

<http://puv.uv.es>

publicacions@uv.es

Index

Acknowledgements	9
Introduction	11
PART I	
<i>ARTICULATING THE AFRICAN DIASPORA</i>	
Diasporic Memory in Toni Morrison's <i>Beloved</i> JUSTINE TALLY	21
Diasporic Consciousness in Toni Morrison's <i>Paradise</i> and Jamaica Kincaid's <i>Annie John</i> MAR GALLEGÓ	39
The Search for Wholeness in the Construction of Diasporic Identities in Contemporary African American Women's Literature SILVIA CASTRO BORREGO	53
Diasporic Discourses and Cultures: Buchi Emecheta ASUNCIÓN ARAGÓN VARO	73

PART II

DIASPORIC ENCOUNTERS ELSEWHERE

Facing Japan: Homelands, Affiliations, and Gendered Identities in North American Nikkei Authors	
PILAR CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ	89
An Alternative Diasporic Celebration in Bharati Mukherjee's <i>Jasmine</i>	
LAURA PECO GONZÁLEZ	105
Barrio Dreams: Urban Narratives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora	
ANTONIA DOMÍNGUEZ MIGUELA	115
A Cartography of the Puritan Diaspora: Mapping the New World in <i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	
FABIO VERICAT	131
Contributors	143

Acknowledgements

This project began some four years ago, when we were putting together a panel proposal for the 2005 conference of the Spanish Association for American Studies (SAAS). We both were (and remain) African Americanists and keen to propose a topic which would reflect our research and respective areas of expertise. African American Studies (AAS) began to emerge in Spain as an academic discipline in the early-to-mid-nineties—no doubt aided by the crowning of Nobel Prize laureates Derek Walcott and Toni Morrison in 1992 and 1993. AAS now hold a firm place in the Spanish academy (despite being subsumed under the overarching discipline of American Studies) and we wanted to honour both this position in our panel as well as our personal stake in the field. A third factor intervened: we wanted to combine AAS with another growing and related field, diasporic studies. The experience of diaspora is, of course, not limited to African victims of the transatlantic slave trade, and we invited contributions that reflected this somewhat universal—and hence potentially problematic—theme. We additionally sought contributions that did not narrowly, or not only, align diaspora to ethnicity but also addressed other categories—gender, sexuality, class, affiliation—and explored the mutual inflections that arose when these categories were placed alongside one another. The idea for a volume arose after the conference, as did the desire to invite contributions from scholars working in Spain who had not participated in the panel. We were extremely fortunate that Asunción Aragón Varo, Pilar Cuder Domínguez, Antonia Domínguez Miguela, and Justine Tally responded to our call. We feel that their essays, together with those of the original panelists, have produced a volume that makes a worthy contribution to the field of diasporic studies and surely stands as one of the first to emerge from the Spanish academy.

Given the duties, restraints and pressures of Spanish academic life, four years is perhaps not an excessive length of time in which to prepare a scholarly work; nevertheless we wish publicly to thank our colleagues for their patience in seeing

this project right through to its completion. In a very literal sense, we could not have done it without them!

Our partners and families, too, through their love and support, practical and otherwise, eased the passage of this enterprise. We are blessed in the knowledge that we can count on them for future similar endeavours. Stefano, Jaime, Lorenzo, Irene, and Clara—be warned!

Lastly, very special thanks are due to Carme Manuel, editor-in-chief and founder of the Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans. The Biblioteca is unique in Spanish academic publishing. Its support for emerging as well as established scholars, together with the range and the quality of its titles, has earned it a richly-deserved position of respect in American Studies in Spain. We are proud to be included in its list of publications.

Mar Gallego
Isabel Soto

Introduction

This volume grew out of a panel of papers presented at the 2005 meeting of the Spanish Association for American Studies, *Masculinities and Femininities in US Culture*. The title of that panel, “The Dialectics of Diasporic Identification: Hybridity, Gender and Affiliation,” was inspired by Afro-diasporic scholar Paul Gilroy’s pre-*Black Atlantic* essay, “It ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at: *The dialectics of diaspora [sic] identification*,” originally published in 1991. The specificity of the black demotic in Gilroy’s phrasing notwithstanding, the term diaspora has become a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, performing its own meaning over the centuries. Its etymology, as Jane Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur remind us in *Theorizing Diaspora* (2003), is derived from the Greek *diasperien*, from *dia-*, meaning ‘across,’ and *sperien*, meaning ‘to sow or scatter seeds’ (1). Historically, the term has attached itself to Jews forced to live beyond the borders of Palestine while African American and transatlantic studies invoke diaspora to reference the experience Africans forcibly displaced to the New World and the West, so much so that the history of diasporic Africans (a “people in but not necessarily of the modern, Western world” [Gilroy 1991: 120]) has been the primary object of the relatively new field of diasporic studies. This field of inquiry has expanded to include the histories of other migrant communities and in today’s globalized scenario the term speaks potentially to all displaced migrant peoples, from Mexicans to Sri Lankans, Pakistanis to Romanians, Hondurans to North Africans, and beyond.

There is a real danger, therefore, as Braziel and Mannur point out, for diaspora to be used as a short-hand term to refer to “all movements [...] all dislocations” (2003: 3), with little or no critical attempt to address the particularities of the texts and contexts of massive displacements. Theorists such as Gilroy have done much of the groundwork in mapping out the scope, vocabulary and substance of the debate along the critical lines advocated by Braziel and Mannur. Seizing on the

particularities of diasporic experiences, Gilroy argues that we must take note of the “discontinuous histories of black populations in the United States, Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Europe” (1993: 98) and the present “kaleidoscopic formations of ‘trans-racial’ cultural syncretism” (101). Thus, while Gilroy speaks to the experience and histories of Africans in the West—“the topography of black identity” (1993: 170)—his theorizing exemplifies the observation made by Braziel and Mannur, that “Diasporic traversals question the rigidities of identity itself” (3).

The following is also clear: diaspora involves a process—or dialectics—of interpellation; the individual is hailed, or summoned through location(s). This is geography at the service of subject formation. The contingency and provisionality of the arrangement is sustained by multiple variables: history, unstable or decentred affiliations, ideology, gender, and class. Theorists such as Stuart Hall, Gilroy or Lisa Lowe have all argued in favour of reading the identity of diasporic peoples—indeed, of identity itself—less as something fixed, transcendental or essentialized than as an ongoing process, forever in the making. Lowe in particular in her landmark 1991 essay “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian-American Differences,” seizes on the three terms in her title to propose that the diasporic experiences and formation of Asian-Americans should be mediated through a critical vocabulary that takes due note of “the histories of uneven and unsynthetic power relations” (1991: 138) by which these experiences are shaped. Likewise, Hall endorses cultural identity as “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’” (2003: 236). Speaking within a context of Caribbean (by definition, diasporic) culture, Hall argues in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990) that “[C]ultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made within the discourses of history.” He cautions us, however: “a politics of identity, a politics of position [...] has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin’” (237). Gilroy raises similar questions, advocating a critique that eschews “an imputed racial essence” (1993: 141), and positions diaspora as a counter-discourse of racial essentialism, indeed all essentialisms and cultural absolutism. He asks: “How are the discontinuous, plural histories of diaspora to be thought?” (120), and celebrates a diasporic identity which embraces a “pluralistic position ... [and] affirms blackness as an open signifier” (123). This anti-essentialist stance was memorably pursued and developed in *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993).

The present volume reflects the evolution in the field, with the essays observing the need to provide a critical framework within which to situate their readings. William Safran's criteria for diaspora, for example, are cited by a number of authors, as are the successive contributions of critics such as James Clifford, Robin Cohen, and Kim Butler. Overall, the essays adhere to the proposition by Safran that diaspora involves most if not all of the following:

1. Members of a group or their ancestors are dispersed from a specific original 'center' to two or more 'peripheral,' or foreign, regions;
2. They retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland;
3. They are not accepted fully by the host society and feel partly alienated and insulated from it;
4. They regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home;
5. They should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland; and
6. They continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland and maintain an ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity [...] defined by the existence of such a relationship (cited in Tally 2009: 21).

Note the foregrounding of the term 'center,' and its co-term 'homeland.' Many essays here (Cuder's in particular) make a point of exploring the potentialities, limitations and qualifications of the construct of 'home.' Another thread, both explicit and otherwise, which runs throughout several of the essays, whether focussed on the African diaspora or the diasporic experience of other peoples, other communities, is the role and significance of memory. Memory is central to the diasporic experience insofar as it is the means by which to recover what has been lost or silenced by the grand narrative of Western hegemony. Likewise, several contributions (Gallego, Castro, Aragón, Domínguez) note how diaspora productively intersects with constructs such as gender and ethnicity.

The essays have been grouped into two sections, with the first, *Articulating the African Diaspora*, taking as its object the experience(s) of Afro-diasporic individuals; the second, entitled *Diasporic Encounters Elsewhere*, casts a wider net and focuses on literary representations of diaspora ranging from that of Asian-Americans, Puerto Ricans and, yes, white Anglo-Europeans. Likewise, not the least interesting aspect of this volume is the manifold ways in which Gilroy has been re-theorized and applied to a variety of writings—from canonical African American

texts such as Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow*, to texts of a broader diasporic family: Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, among others. Indeed, the essays bear testimony to diaspora as an experience which potentially can—and does—affect all peoples, so much so that diaspora becomes metonymically representative of lived experience itself.

The essay by leading Morrison scholar, Justine Tally, “Diasporic Memory in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” argues that memory is key in any discussion of African cultural survival. Well into the twentieth-century, the received scholarly wisdom maintained that the contribution—intellectual, cultural, or otherwise—of the African diaspora to Western progress was non-existent. “Robbed of everything, inscribed in the white man’s literature, all that remained for the African slave was memory,” writes Tally. Citing Paul Ricoeur, she further reminds us that the centrality of memory to the (Afro) diasporic experience is also central to human experience as a whole: “‘we have no other resource, concerning our reference to the past, except memory itself [...]. Testimony constitutes the fundamental transitional structure between memory and history’” (22). Tally seizes on definitions of diaspora as proposed by William Safran and James Clifford to provide a reading of Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), in which diaspora not only prompts a figurative journey to the past, an act of retrieval of what is perceived to have been lost; diaspora is also a way of living in the present and configuring the future.

Also invoking William Safran’s criteria for diaspora, Mar Gallego’s essay “Diasporic Consciousness in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* and Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*,” explores the rich dynamic between the diasporic self and a sustaining community, as well as gender and related issues such as sexuality, class, religion. Gallego echoes Braziel and Mannur’s observation that “Diaspora does not [...] transcend differences of race, class, gender, and sexuality [...] nor can diaspora stand alone [...] separate and distinct from these interrelated categories” (5). Gallego’s broad net also underscores the potential dangers attached to diaspora as a meaningless “catch-all phrase to speak of and for all movements” (2003: 3) and, paradoxically, as a category able to speak to the human condition as a whole. Gilroy’s by now axiomatic construct of the Black Atlantic also contributes to Gallego’s theoretical framework, though she pointedly and usefully expands his racially-inflected reading of modernity by stressing “other factors that are equally significant and enhance Gilroy’s model: age and, especially, gender” (40). Hence,

Gallego's analysis brings in Grewal and Kaplan's premise of transnational feminism, placing both theoretical interventions in dialogue, enabling the constructs of gender and ethnicity to intersect and generate fresh insights.

Silvia Castro's essay "The Search for Wholeness in the Construction of Diasporic Identities in Contemporary African American Women's Literature" explores functional aspects of the search for wholeness as articulated in the construction of character in Tina McElroy Ansa's 1996 novel *The Hand I Fan With* and Bebe Moore Campbell's 2001 novel *What You Owe Me*. Castro traces the paradoxical search for wholeness and completion in these works, even while characters are forced to acknowledge such cultural imperatives as double consciousness, and the relationship between the material and the spiritual, among others. The focus thus is not so much, or not only, on double consciousness in the classic Duboisian sense of a conflicted identity, forever straddling both sides of perception and observing oneself being observed. Castro notes further structures of doubleness: spirituality and materiality, agency and oppression, and the desire to reconcile and place the warring elements at the service of the search for wholeness—or perhaps an uneasy *tertium quid*. Castro's analysis draws our attention to the relatedness Hall acknowledges between "the two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'" (2003: 234). Ansa's and Campbell's characters pursue on the one hand, the retrieval of and connection to "one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self,' [...] which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (ibid.). That commonality, however, as Hall cautions, is related to an unstable, fluctuating cultural identity. This second view, while not eschewing commonality, asserts "points of deep and significant *difference* ... [and] the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute" the (paradoxical) singularity of the African diasporic experience. Cultural identity, Castro's reading reminds us, is a question of "becoming" and of "being" (2003: 236).

In her essay "Diasporic Discourses and Cultures: Buchi Emecheta," Asunción Aragón is careful to historicize her analysis, filling in the necessary recent historical background to "coloured" immigration to post-World War II Britain. She records the wide spectrum of positions as espoused by arch-conservative racist politician Enoch Powell, who considered such immigration a "dreadful" invasion, to that of liberal *Times* columnist Bernard Levin, who exposed the hypocrisy and contradictions posed by the "increasing restrictions on the numbers of coloured [sic] immigrants allowed in," while simultaneously "preach[ing] racial harmony"